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TAKEHAN, COKERULLE, AND MUTEMAMAQUE

Naming collective action in the later medieval Low Countries

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After 1280, the year in which a general wave of revolts struck the textile-producing cities of the Southern Low Countries and Northern France, two enigmatic and colourful proper nouns suddenly appear in the sources: Cokerulle and Moerlemaye. They refer to instances of collective action in Ypres and Bruges respectively. Although historians and linguists have reached a consensus neither on the precise meanings of these names nor on their etymology, the most plausible explanation seems to be that they were derived from the shouts and gestures collectively produced by rebels during their turbulent meetings, strikes, and demonstrations. A comital inquiry, held on 3 April 1281, used the term fait d’Ippe (the event of Ypres), and the more general terms li esmuete (the mutiny) and le meskeanche (the bad handling), to refer to the Cokerulle rising, while in a letter written by the count dated two days earlier it was again described more generally as mout de grief chas et de fais oribles ki selonc Dieu et raison ne doivent demorer sans etre amendei (many serious cases and horrible facts which according to God and reason cannot remain unpunished). In a charter dated October 1283, however, Count Guy de Dampierre of Flanders refers to the revolt as lequeil grief fait on apela et apele là meismes Cokerulle (the grave event which was and is called Cokerulle in the place itself). ‘Cokerulle’ was supposedly a cry the rebels uttered as they were running through the streets, although the first source to state this explicitly is the jurist Filips Wielant’s Recueil des Antiquitez de Flandre, a text written two centuries later. It has been suggested that the word was related to the verb kokerillen, translated by the sixteenth-century linguist Cornelis Kiliaan as celebare hilaria (cheerfully celebrating) which implies a sort of popular revelry possibly associated with Shrove Tuesday. Other philologists, however, have claimed either that the term was a bastardisation of Kyrie Eleison, meant to denote a popular song, which would also imply some sort of connection with carnivalesque behaviour and popular processions or, in our view less credibly, that it was derived from cotereus, meaning ‘ruffian’ or ‘evildoer’.

The term Moerlemaye, Mourlemai, or Muerlemaye makes only two appearances within Middle French documents, in 1296 and 1297, and there is only one reference in Middle Dutch, in the form of a 1331 charter from Bruges itself. Contemporary city accounts simply refer to it as a editio (sedition) while the first comital inquiry of 1281 called it the fait de Bruges (the event of Bruges). Charters from 1280, the year of the rebellion itself, speak in general terms about griefs, outrages, conspiracions, alliances (griefs, outrages, conspiracies, and alliances) and meffais (misdeeds).
It seems plausible, however, that the name Moerlemaeye, like Cokerulle, also dates from the time of the event and was used either by those who participated in the revolt or by their adversaries. According to one historian it may be derived from the combination of moerlen or moerelen (shouting out loud) and mayen (fiercely waving one’s arms), invoking the image of an agitated and noisy mob. Another scholar, however, interpreted moerlen or morrelen as a frequentative of morren (to mutter) while maye (or mye in a variant spelling) was supposedly a suffix to substantivise this verb. According to that etymology Moerlemaye would mean ‘the muttering’, as a pas pro toto for the entire revolt. Indeed, from an etymological point of view, the most plausible option seems to be that the Dutch murmelen (to mutter) was substantivised into murmelye (the muttering) and subsequently resulted in murlemye as a result of ‘adjacent metathesis’ (a linguistic phenomenon in which two contiguous sounds are switched).

Moreover, the proper noun Moerlemaeye, which originally only referred to the Bruges rising of 1280–1, later clearly evolved into a common noun to denote popular collective action in general. Thus a fifteenth-century copy of a charter dealing with a revolt in Bruges in 1319–20 has the word Moerlemaye as its title, and the early fifteenth-century chronicle Flandria Generosa C, referring to the peasant rising of Cassel in 1429, uses the groot moorlemay (a Middle Dutch expression within this Latin chronicle) as a synonym for ‘revolt’ in general, while a Dutch elaboration of this Latin chronicle calls the revolt of Geraardsbergen in 1430 vele moerlemayes (many moerlemaeys). Interestingly, there is no mention in this chronicle tradition of the Bruges Moerlemaeye of 1280–1 itself, suggesting that the name was remembered better than the event it originally denoted. But its origins were also not entirely forgotten two centuries later. In the early sixteenth century, Wielant, who gives an otherwise confused account of the Bruges revolt and wrongly dates it to 1282, also uses the name Mutlamay (or in another manuscript of the text: Moerlamay). By now however, moerlemaeye (and its variants) had also become a generic term, and perhaps this was also the case for cockarulle, as suggested by an early sixteenth-century satirical text called ‘The Confession of the Fool of Ypres’, in which the word seems to denote a carnivalesque or ‘charivari’-like procession of fools. Even if, as a result of the infrequency of their attestations, full philological clarity eludes us with regard to these two fascinating terms they clearly appear to have a ‘popular’ origin. The words suggest links with the gestures, movements, and verbal utterances produced by an unruly urban populace, and perhaps also with the carnivalesque sentiment of ‘the world turned upside down’, features obviously not uncommon to medieval popular collective action in general.

These two specific names do not stand alone. Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, in the Southern Low Countries, a great variety of common nouns or ‘generic terms’ (muete, roeringhe . . .) were used to denote various forms of collective action, as were proper nouns, or ‘personal names’, for specific events (as well as Cockerulle and Moerlemaeye there was also Good Friday, Hard Monday, Good Tuesday, the Terrible Wednesday of Pentecost, the Mal Saint-Martin . . .). Some of these signifiers described subversive speech acts and illegal gatherings (murmuracie, onghoeroofde verghaderinghe . . .), others denoted types of public mobilisation (loepe, wapeninghe . . .), while others still derive from the context of labour conflicts (takehan, ledichganck . . .). Of course, the Low Countries are not the only regions where specific collective actions were sometimes given proper names. In England and Wales, for instance, insurgency was sometimes remembered by its leaders, as in the so-called ‘Jack Cade rebellion’ or the ‘revolt of Owain Glyn Dŵr’, both in the fifteenth century. For France, Challet has shown that three revolts which took place at the same time around 1382 were named in different ways: in one the name of the rebel group itself provided a pejorative (the ‘Tuchins’ in the South), another evoked the popular cries (‘La Harelle’ in Rouen, but this term was also used elsewhere, derived from the rallying cry ‘Haro’), and a third was named after the main weapons of the rebels (the
‘Maillotins’, in fact originally the ‘Maillets’ or mauls). Lyon was known for its Rebeynes (apparently directly derived from rebellionem) and Angers for the Tricoterie (from tricot or ‘club’). In 1477 a revolt in Dijon was named the Mutemaque, a term, interestingly, derived from the Middle Dutch mute maecken or ‘to set up a mutiny’. Rioting in the German-speaking world would also often be remembered by the names of participants, such as the Knochenhauer rebellion in Lübeck in the 1380s, which made reference to the butchers rising against the aldermen, and even the shabby shoes they wore, such as the Bandschuh in Baden and its surroundings around 1500.

These signifiers, denoting popular collective action, are onomastic, etymological, and historical-anthropological sources in themselves. In many cases they can provide insight not only into how rebels experienced such events, how they distinguished between different types of mobilisation, and how they were judged by elites, but also into how they were later remembered in official memories and counter-memories. Most modern terms, such as rebellion (derived from bellum or war) or revolt (a ‘turnover’), do not adequately reflect the actions and motives of medieval protesters. Yet if we consider terms such as ‘revolt’ and ‘rebellion’ to be part of social-scientific discourse, deprived of bias or connotations, these words can still be used to refer to political conflict. There are perhaps, however, better alternatives in the contemporary social sciences. In the context of medieval Europe, the term ‘contentious politics’, in the sense given to it by Charles Tilly and others, encompasses both violent protest, such as ‘rebellions’ or ‘riots’, and other ‘collective actions’, such as labour strikes or indeed any popular social and political action considered by the authorities as illegal. Even so, there remains an inevitably artificial distinction between such categories on the one hand and the peaceful assembly of citizens and the legal or semi-legal utterance of grievances, such as petitioning, on the other. All protests, whether unlawful or authorised, were part of the same process of claim-making which the authorities may or may not have considered to be justified on any given occasion. The ‘legitimacy’ of any collective action ultimately depended upon the balance of forces, the willingness of rulers to give in, the deliberations taking place during the events or afterwards, the final result of the action, and the ideas and memories of those who composed the available sources.

Even if we agree to use ‘collective action’ or ‘contentious politics’ in their broadest senses, as contemporary terms for that which we are dealing with in the present contribution, there still remain additional methodological problems in discussing the ‘original’ words and names for collective actions. Many of the proper names given to revolts are later inventions, like the so-called English ‘Peasants Revolt’ of 1381 which, as is now generally acknowledged, certainly did not only include peasants. The term itself is a product of Victorian historiography but earlier chronicle descriptions of the great rising had also referred to carnivalesque behaviour and ‘rumours’. Thus, many names or terms used to denote collective action clearly changed over time, modified by the mechanisms of oral transmission, by the more literarily inspired interventions of chroniclers and copyists, or sometimes also consciously to reframe the events by using terms with different connotations serving contemporary ideological purposes. The ‘Bruges Matins’ of 18 May 1302, for example, during which the Bruges rebels drove out the French occupying troops and killed many of them, received this name during the Romantic period in analogy with the name given to the so-called ‘Sicilian Vespers’ and was actually originally called the ‘Good Friday’ revolt. Other names, including perhaps the most famous one, the Jacquerie, developed from a proper noun into a common noun, itself in all likelihood derived from ‘Jacques Bonhomme’, the archetypal peasant. It became a generic term for a rebellion, in this case any ‘peasant revolt’ (even though the Jacquerie was also not only a ‘peasant revolt’).

Here we will prioritise names and terms found in documents which are contemporary with the events they describe, or in sources written shortly afterwards, but we shall also consider how
changing names might offer some insight into the meaning of popular contentious politics. We focus on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century documents written in the vernacular (Dutch and French), but of course we realise that some of these terms are derived from a wide range of Latin words already present in the Bible, juridical documents, and clerical texts from earlier days. For instance, when writing about social upheaval, clerical authors in the High Middle Ages used words such as *commotio*, *seditio*, and *tribulatio*, often also referring to an existing discourse on disease (plague and epidemics), meteorological phenomena or natural disasters (storm, inundation, eruptions...), or biblical stories (on the Sins or the Devil). Also treatises in the vernacular contained a more learned discourse, sometimes based on Latin manuscripts. For instance, by the late fourteenth century Jean Boutillier, a clerk of the city of Tournai, compiled the first custumal in the Low Countries which systematically listed and distinguished forms of political conflict: *séditation* involved violently plotting with others against a lord or his people, *monopole* concerned assemblies and strikes amongst the people themselves, and *conspiration* happened when similar such assemblies were organised in opposition to a prince. Revealingly, the son of one of the insurgents in Tournai in 1423 (Tassart Savary) owned a copy of this manuscript. Yet our survey makes clear that far from all expressions were lent from learned discourse. Urban elites in the Low Countries developed a language on social conflict of their own, while the rebels themselves were also very creative in naming seditious events, as was true in other regions and languages. We will start with an analysis of the discursive register used by urban authorities to describe political protest in some of the main principalities of the Southern Low Countries. These are the counties of Flanders, Hainaut, Loon, Namur; the duchies of Brabant, Limburg, Luxemburg; the prince-bishopric of Liège; and the cities (and surroundings) of Mechelen and Tournai. The remarkable nomenclature of rebellion in these regions mostly had a pejorative connotation because the protest was described as harmful to the urban community in general and the ruling elite in particular. However, as we have shown in other publications, the popular classes of the late medieval Low Countries also maintained a lively memorial culture of rebellion that praised the subversive deeds of the past. This ‘counter-memory’ of political subversion was used to legitimise rebellion, define group solidarity, and people identified with rebel heroes. So, both a pejorative and a euphemist discourse on collective action can be distinguished; much depended of course on the reason which the author of a source had for writing about the event.

Terms relating to legal repression and moral condemnation

Unsurprisingly, contemporary elite sources employ a consistently negative discourse in relation to collective action. This was inspired both by legal discourse and by a general medieval political ideology informed by theology, Aristotelian philosophy, ‘mirrors for princes’, and other normative texts. These elite discourses looked down upon the lower social orders who had to know their place in society and were denied political agency. One interesting term, used in a Flemish literary source from the end of the fourteenth century, is *Kerels* (Churls). The Bruges song ‘We want to sing of the Churls’ depicts these men as primitive and dangerous ruffians who must be slain by the *ruters*, the mounted soldiers (as in the Middle French *routiers*). At first it was presumed that the term *Kerels* referred to the peasant rebels of the revolt of Maritime Flanders of 1323–8, in a similar fashion to the French *Jacques*. It has recently been suggested, however, that Kerels instead referred to urban rebels during the later revolt of 1379–85. At any rate, in the song the rebels are also mocked as people who eat ‘curd, whey, bread and cheese’ (*wronglen, wey, broot ende caas*), the diet of the common people. This stereotype brings to mind the name of another revolt in the Netherlands, which took place in Haarlem, other smaller towns, and their
surrounding area in Holland in 1491–2, during which the ‘People of Cheese and Bread’ (Kasenbroots volck, commocie van Casenbroot, rebellichheyt genoeniet taes ende broot) carried with them depictions of these foodstuffs, protesting against their declining standard of living. They could now eat only bread, and no longer the dairy product essential to the diet of the working class.22

In examining the terminology used to denote collective action in chronicles and archival sources, we find that some terms have a moral as well as a legal dimension. ‘Uproar’ is one such (the English term is in fact a loan translation from the Middle Dutch oproer), while ‘tumult’ (Ghent, 1340)23 ‘troubles’ (broerten: Leuven, 1477),24 and ‘slander, discontent and sorrow’ (s-Hertogenbosch, 1450) all also emphasise the alleged bad intentions of the people and their unwillingness to behave properly.25 A revolt in Limburg (the main city of the eponymous duchy to the east of Liège) in 1446 was called an ‘insubordination’, en grant desrision de ceulx de la dicte loy (in great contempt of the magistrate).26 A document condemning the rising of the weavers of Bruges in 1360 manages to mention no fewer than ten terms which criminalised their deeds.27 These terms all had the same purpose: justifying punishment and criminalising subversive or rebellious behaviour. Rebellious actions of this kind were ‘misdeeds’ (as they were called in Antwerp in 1435), ‘bad adventures’ (Brussels, 1306), or ‘excesses and abuses against the highness and lordship’ of the duke of Brabant (again in Brussels, 1446).28 The meetings of the apprentices of Mechelen in 1361 and 1379 were denoted as a ‘bad upset or quarrel’ (quaet opset ochte werringhe).29 A conspiration, another typical term, took place in Ypres in 1369, while commocion and monopole were also commonly used by chroniclers to describe protests or other collective actions against decisions made by urban or higher authorities which were considered to be unjust.30 In short, there existed an extensive generic vocabulary to denote conflict, troubles, disobedience, and riots, terms which in many cases also developed a clear legal meaning, though with great variations in time and place rather than as a well-defined legal terminology. Of course, this is a widespread pattern in late medieval Europe.31

The predominant political ideal of medieval society was always one of harmony and unanimity under a just ruler while the political reality was often one of division and conflict between lords, social groups, factions, and parties, a phenomenon often closely intertwined with popular collective action.32 For instance, typical terms in Flanders to describe factions included convenances (agreements), bendes (bands), sects (sections), or partijlchede (partiality), while general states of political discord were often described as ghesiclle (differences, conflicts), weringhen (feuds), hayne (hatred), divisions et parcialitez or rancunes et divisions (ill-will and divisions).33 Also in other regions in the Low Countries, they spoke of ‘unrest and factionalism’ (onvast ende partijscap),34 feuds (feden),35 or ‘wars of friends’ (gueres d’amys) when factions took up weapons to fight each other.36 In 1459 in the County of Hainaut, the Burgundian duke promulgated an ordinance forbidding the wearing of factional clothing. Unruly armed bands in the service of noblemen robbing and killing the people were also considered to be guilty of meutemacquerie or mutemaque (literally ‘making mutiny’), the same Middle Dutch term as used in Dijon in 1477 and in some other French-speaking towns, who must clearly have been inspired to adopt this name by the frequency of collective actions in the Dutch-speaking cities of Flanders.37 The terminology which described rebellion and factionalism was indeed quite similar and both were also close to the vocabulary of war. The violent factional struggle between the noble lineages of the Amans and the Waroux in Liège at the beginning of the fourteenth century, for instance, was described as ‘the time of wars’, or ‘the time of feuds’ (le temps des werra) by chronicler Jacques de Hemricourt. The term werra is derived from the Latinised Germanic word werra (also the root of the French guerre and English ‘war’), and the distinction between the private feuds which took place between clans and families and the more ‘political’ factional struggles was a fine one.38 Other chroniclers spoke about the partialitatés between these partes dissidentes who
fought each other with their ‘friends and kin’ (primes et amis, amicus et consanguinei). This discourse, which identified rebellion with warfare and hatred, is perhaps most prominent between 1465 and 1467, when the future duke of Burgundy, Charles the Bold, faced violent opposition following his interference in the County of Loon and the Prince Bishopric of Liège. He described the military opposition to his reign as a ‘war and rebellion’ (oorloghe ende rebelheden), as one chronicler noted. Similarly, in December 1465, 13 cities under the authority of Liège had to hand over their privileges because of the guerres, divisions, et debatz (wars, divisions, and conflicts) which had taken place par l’ennort et seduction d’aucunes gens de mauvaise voulenté (at the instigation and by the seduction of some ill-willed people). The cities were warned not ‘to arm themselves or to incite to war’ against the prince any longer. Likewise in 1478 the citizens of Luxembourg who refused to accept the Burgundian dynasty as rightful heirs of the title of ‘Duke of Luxemburg’ were called rebelles and the ennemis du pays (enemies of the country). The term rebell in Middle Dutch is less frequent, although it was, for instance, used in Bruges in 1360 to denote the weavers who had risen against the city government.

Terms relating to dangerous speech acts, sounds, and bodily movements

As the proper nouns Cokerulle and certainly Moerlemaye would tend to suggest, many common nouns used for subversive political actions could also refer to speech acts. Verbal violence and rebellious speech were general features of the politics of the towns in the Low Countries. A narrative on the Ghent revolt of 1452, for instance, mentions ‘rumours’ and ‘agitation’ which were ‘produced among the people every day’ as the craft guilds publicly questioned the policy of Duke Philip the Good. Likewise, chronicler Wein van Cotthem, the continuator of the Brabantsche Yeesten chronicle, commented (around 1430, so some time after the event) that in the Brabantine city of ’s-Hertogenbosch in 1386 the ‘commonality started to mutter’ (murmuren), as ‘commoners within a city rarely remain calm for a long time’. In Liège, chroniclers regularly complained about the murmures and rumores of the people, and the revolt in Bruges of 1488 was accompanied with ‘shouting and crying in all the streets’ (roepinghen ende crijsschingen . . . in allen straten). In 1477 in Leuven, rebels were punished because they ‘had spoken out against those who had the regiment in the town’. Fourteenth-century urban ordinances in Bruges and Antwerp forbade citizens to ‘speak badly’ about the governors and mention ‘calumnies’ which should not take place between members of guild communities. A similar by-law was promulgated in Liège after the repression of a revolt by Bishop Adolphe de la Marck in 1331. The people called it the Loi de Murmure as it forbade any inhabitant to ‘move people to sedition by acts or words’. Guilds were still allowed to meet and to discuss their business during their meetings, but no longer without prior consent of the urban authorities.

Meetings where ordinary people communicated on matters of public interest in more organised or institutionalised ways were also often considered to be immoral and illegal. In fifteenth-century Hainaut, ‘alliances’ (alliancez), ‘oath-swearing’ (sermens), ‘assemblies’ (assamblees, verghaderinge), and, as we have seen above, wearing factional liveries which could divide the community, were not allowed. Of course, the fact that such restrictions were regularly repeated outlines that their effect was only limited. Illicit ‘gathering’ was also a common term to describe unlawful meetings of artisans. In 1415, because of the recent upheaval which had taken place in Geraardsbergen, Duke John the Fearless forbade the inhabitants of this small textile centre, and its craftsmen in particular, to organise aucunes assemblees ou convocacions quelconques (whatever kind of assemblies or meetings) without the consent of the authorities. Similarly, any group of people organising for political objectives without the permission of the authorities could be accused of ‘making alliances’. The Moerlemaye rebels of Bruges in 1280 were punished because
'they had made an alliance against the honour of the lord', and again in Bruges in 1386, the weaver Jan Groeninc was sentenced to death because, undoubtedly with some exaggeration, he ‘had made an alliance, congregation and meeting in order to form an army to destroy all the good people’.54 Aggravating circumstances included being armed or organising a meeting with a high level of secrecy. The revolt of the town of Limburg in 1446 was described as a ‘bond’ or ‘league’, set up by a ‘gathering of a big commonality’, which had not been disbanded after an initial warning by the authorities. The league had allegedly formed ‘by force’ and ‘with violence’ and this political crime was punished severely by the prince.55 There were also other terms with the same meaning. Some of these implied an ‘out in the open’ character while others seem to have been of a more conspiratorial nature. In 1379 the weavers of Ghent had made a ‘league and ratification’ (tverbind ende bezeghelte), indicating a typical oath sworn to engage in political action.56 While they were planning to go on strike in 1524, ‘deliberated upset and illicit meetings’ of the fullers and the weavers of Mechelen (gedelibereerden opstel ende onbehoorlicke vergaderinge) were prohibited. An earlier but similar ‘secret conspiracy’ (heimelijc opset) by the craftsmen of Leuven in 1360 was also strongly denounced by Wein van Cotthem in his above mentioned continuation of the history of Brabant.57

Justifying collective action

In contrast, in the letters, petitions, and occasional small chronicle fragments composed by the artisans or their guilds themselves, gatherings of craftsmen were considered to be legitimate actions. Their own vocabulary to describe meetings and rallies, although often overlapping with that of the authorities, always referred to customary law and to the rights and privileges they had obtained earlier. In a petition of 1378, for instance, the guildsmen of Leuven asked the duke of Brabant for the ratification of their ‘right to gather’ because it had been questioned by the urban elite after a rising. Just as they had done in a letter of alliance composed in 1360, the craftsmen called their actions simply a ‘gathering’ (verghaderinghe), unaccompanied by adjectives with a pejorative meaning such as ‘illicit’.58 Indeed, ‘to assemble’ seems to have been the most common verb by which protesters defined their collective actions, and in their own discourse this practice was often closely associated with notions like ‘common consent’ and ‘unity’. In Ghent, in 1449, for instance, the assembled artisans stated that they had ‘advised, deliberated and concluded unitedly’ to hand over certain petitions to the authorities.59 Also in Ypres (1369) and Bruges (1436) rebels focused on the fact that they had organised legitimate collective meetings and deliberations before complaining about the government of their cities.60

Another non-violent collective action undertaken by the guildsmen of the Low Countries which frightened the authorities was the so-called ‘run’ (loop, gheloop, lapingehe, or uploop or oploep doen in Middle Dutch, and course and its variants in Middle French). This action was one of bodily movement rather than subversive speech; ‘running through the town’ or ‘organising a run’ meant demonstrating in order to reclaim urban space and its central symbolic places, whether in an orderly fashion similar to a procession or entry ceremony or in the more unruly manner of carnivalesque revellers.61 Thus, as a pars pro toto, the revolt in Limburg in 1446 was referred to as the lapingehe.62 During the so-called ‘Bad Wednesday’ (Quade Woensdach) of 4 August 1311, several craftsmen organised such a ‘run’ in Ghent, ending in a fight killing sympathisers of the Count. The comital charter which followed the event forbade the people from Ghent to organise a ‘run with or without banners’ again (gheloep dat nu gheweest hevet met banieren of sonder banieren).63 Banners were a common feature of popular collective action throughout medieval Europe, and in Ypres in 1380 they were unfolded everywhere as craftsmen ran towards the market square ‘with open banners’ (met opener banieren).64 In 1401 a much smaller-scale
attempt was made to cause a riot, but it was nevertheless considered dangerous. Antwerp citizen Lippyn de Keysere was forced to go on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella because he had ‘behaved badly in a tavern and elsewhere, and had run against the good men of town with fierce words’. In this context it is worth remembering that ‘mutiny’ or ‘commotion’, and hence also typical medieval terms like esmeute in French or meute in Dutch, contain a strong element of ‘movement’ in their etymology as well as their ‘emotional’ component of ‘stirring up the people’. These variants are among the most common terms for collective action. For instance moyeterien took place in Mechelen in 1389, while the Brussels revolt of the weavers and butchers in 1360 was again described as a meutemaquerie by the fifteenth-century court chronicler Jean de Wauquelin.

The terms used for more specific types of collective action usually referred to certain characteristics, such as the use of banners, the armaments of guild militias, the ringing of bells, or the way in which a labour strike was organised. The act of gathering in the central square of the city was known as an ‘armament’ (a wapeninghe). These armed gatherings in which rebel artisans would occupy a central place within their city, usually an important market square, normally started with a shout (a roep or roepinghe), as in the case of the wapeninghe at the Corn Market in the city of Ghent in 1353. Sound was also an important element of this armed assembly, with the rebels shouting ‘Down with the thirteen aldermen’, and ‘Abolish the tax on the Ghent beer’. The related term auweet, from the French au guet (‘stand guard’) was also used in Ghent, Bruges, and other cities to refer to episodes in the turbulent history of the town in which craftsmen had assembled in arms. Terms like ‘bell ringing’ (clockenslagen) in Veurne in 1324, beckergeslach (hitting on cymbals) in a Leuven revolt in 1360, or ‘running with the banner’ in Ghent in 1479 were all words and expressions associated with popular sounds and movements, each again serving as a pars pro toto to denote an uprising.

Strikes and takehans

The leechganc or ledichganck, which literally means ‘going idle’ in the sense of collectively withholding productive labour from the community, was a general term used to describe a strike action, such as that in Bruges in 1344, or in Ghent in 1366. Workers collectively leaving the city was even more serious. This type of action was called an uutganck, literally a ‘walkout’. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, for instance, such walkouts were organised by the fullers in Mechelen and Hasselt in response to the introduction of fulling mills in these cities. In Mechelen, they typically assembled in taverns outside the city to discuss further plans. Labour strikes, however, were already a common feature of urban politics by the mid-thirteenth century, when artisan and guild actions are first clearly recorded in the Southern Low Countries and Northern France. In this context, undoubtedly the most intriguing term is the word takehan, alternatively spelt taskehem, taquehein, taquehan, or taquehain. It first appears in Douai (1244), and shortly afterwards in other industrial cities like Arras and Abbeville; it is mentioned in Paris (1286), Rouen (1290), and during the fourteenth century is also found in the Champagne region, apparently spreading towards other regions in France. This rather mysterious term has traditionally been thought to describe a tumultuous and illegal assembly of workers, a conspiracy against their employers and the city government. Du Cange also understood it as a conventus illicitus, conspiratio, or turba (illicit meeting, conspiracy, or turmoil). In this sense a takehan is a secret meeting or any gathering during which the artisans collectively decided to stop working until the authorities gave in. A conspirationem sive taquehanum against the aldermen and mayors of Arras in 1285 was described in the registers of the Parlement de Paris, the central royal court of France. The guilds, which from 1253 onwards had lost the right autonomously to organise
themselves, defied the authorities and their bad management of the city, and ran through the
town with their standards, a forbidden act of self-organisation as they had no right to use these
banners without the town government’s authorisation. They also symbolically seized a reliquary
chest in which a candle of the Blessed Mary was kept. With good reason, Carol Symes has
emphasised the principles of equal association and mutual support displayed in this type of col-
lective action.74 A takehan was clearly not a spontaneous riot; it was a well-organised action of
artisans who asserted their material and symbolic power within the town.

But how should the word itself be explained? The internal letter -h- suggests a Germanic
origin of the word but it has not been preserved in any Middle Dutch texts. The earlier explana-
tion by Von Wartburg, according to which takehan refers to the gesture and sound of clapping
one’s hands (the related French word taquin means frappeur), may be considered colourful but
far-fetched. In a later contribution Wartburg suggested that it was instead derived from the Ger-
manic form taken (to take something violently) and Han for ‘John’, giving a comic name for a
man of the lower classes, similar to Jaques Bonhomme.75 More careful analysis of the historical
documents in which this word appears may shed new light upon the philological debate.
Although the origins of the term remain obscure, most historians implicitly agree that takehan
means a ‘labour strike’, as this is clearly the context in which it appears. In his Coutumes de Beau-
vaisis (1283), the contemporary Northern French jurist Philippe de Beaumanoir describes such
aliances fêtes contre seigneur ou contre le commun pourfit (alliances made against the lord or against the
common profit). Participants in this alliance agreed no longer to work for lower salaries than
they had had before, trying instead to increase their wages, and yet the term takehan, although
a contemporary one, is not employed in this text.76 In January 1245, the city government of
Douai mandated a fine of 60 pounds and one year’s banishment from the city for whoever face
takehan, be it a man or a woman. Furthermore, it was also forbidden to organise an asanlée encon-
tre le vile, de quel mestier ke ce fust (an assembly against the city, by whichever craft guild).77 In
another urban ordinance of Douai, dated around 1250, a distinction was made between [faire]
takehan, [faire] asanlée and someone who laisse oevre or impedes the work of others, in other
words someone who strikes.78 Finally, another ordinance by the aldermen of Douai strictly
outlawed the giving of help or advice to people who organised a takehan or an asanlée ki fust
contre le vile, or to those who obstructed or disturbed the work of others. Perpetrators would be
fined 50 pounds and banished for a year.79

These juxtapositions seem to imply that a takehan was something other than merely an una-
thorised gathering or a labour strike. All scholars who have mentioned the takehan seem to
agree that this word, which is first used in sources from the French-speaking area of Flanders
and its neighbouring regions, seems to have spread from there to Northern and Central France
generally, and is of Germanic, probably Dutch origin. Indeed, there is an Old Dutch verb takan
which means ‘to take’. Similarly, a later Middle Dutch form taecke means a measure, a part, or
portion which one takes, as in a ‘tax’. A taecke can also be a measure of wine, and a takecanne
is a jug which contains such a measure.80 A fourteenth-century bylaw enacted by the aldermen of
Béthune forbids the textile workers que nul ne faiche ban ne taskehem ne autre assise de sen mesthier
(so nobody would organise a levy, or a takehan or any other taxation of his craft guild).81 This
passage suggests that a taskehem was a kind of assise or tax. A charter from Charles V of France,
in 1375, confirms earlier rights given to the communes of Meulan and Les Mureaux (on the
Seine, near Paris). These towns had abandoned their commune to their lord, the Count of
Evreux, in exchange for payment of their debts, but they still explicitly retained many privileges,
among which was the right to se pourront assembler pour eulx conseiller et tailler sensz ce quil puistestre
dit Taquehan (assemble in order to consult among themselves and gather money, without this
being called a takehan).82
Within the context of thirteenth-century textile workers, such a contribution was probably an internal tax to build up a charity fund or ‘box’. In later Middle Dutch sources these ‘mutuality boxes’ belonging to the craft guilds are called *bussen* and it is clear that they were also used as potential strike funds. This was the reason that urban governments were always very suspicious of this practice. An ordinance issued by the so-called *huit hommes* or *eswardeurs* of the Douai weavers, dated between 1261 and 1287, does not explicitly mention the term *takehan* but it does forbid *assanler le kemun ne por rouver deniers ne por prendre deniers* (to assemble the commoners neither to ask for money nor to take it) without the permission of the aldermen.83 This document also points to the practice of making voluntary or forced contributions to a strike fund, or at least to that of gathering money in preparation for any potential collective action. All the evidence considered, it seems right to conclude that the *take* in *takehan* means exactly that: a tax within a trade, agreed by an alliance, from which everyone contributed his ‘portion’ of the solidarity fund. But the word can also refer to socio-economic collective action in general. In addition to the sources associated with workers in the artisanal industries, the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* also includes references to merchants, who *eusissent fait taquehan ensemble* (made takehan together), suggesting a meaning related to *monopole*, in the sense of a cartel to agree on prices. This is something both artisans and merchants could establish.84 Meetings of the innkeepers of Lille in 1434 were also called ‘monopoles’. The latter had met and taken advice on the procedure for handing over a petition, when in fact they were prohibited from doing so.85 Yet another etymological possibility (in the *lectio difficilior*-principle in textual criticism according to which the most difficult reading is the strongest one) is that *takehan* is a composed word from both Romanesque and Germanic origin. The Old Picard *tasque* (later *take* and modern French *tâche*) is the amount of work someone needs to carry out, literally one’s ‘task’ and thus can also be associated with a ‘working class organisation’ while the Germanic root *hemmen*, common to different old Germanic languages, means ‘to obstruct’. *Takehan* would thus be a hybrid form alluding to a strike.86 The term *takehan* should perhaps be simultaneously associated both with an illegal gathering, ‘alliance’, or ‘monopoly’ and with the money gathered in such meetings. Or is there another explanation for the suffix -*han*? Could this be derived, as Wartburg suggested, from the given name *Han* (Jan or John) which was the most common forename in the medieval Low Countries and perhaps denoted ‘a common man’, in a connection similar to that between the French name Jacques and the *Jacquerie* rising? Were Pirenne and Espinas right in associating it with ‘hands’? Or does -*han* only denote a derived meaning, as in ‘the gathering of the tax’? At any rate, the evidence and the various etymological hypotheses seem to suggest that ‘takehan’ refers to any ‘alliance’, any collective action with a primarily socio-economic goal, including setting up strikes, other forms of workers’ solidarity, and gathering money for that purpose. By the fourteenth century it had become a general French term but after that it again disappeared.

Parallels can be drawn here with the word ‘guild’, which is derived from the West Germanic *geld* – the sum paid to join the guild – and also with the merchant *hanse* or *hansa*, which can mean both the subscription fee and the organisation itself. Such associations emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the Low Countries, such as the *Hanse* of Bruges, or the *Gilde* of Leuven and Mechelen, three associations of cloth merchants trading on long distance.87 Though these were elites gathering for economic purposes, these associations can also be considered as conspiracies (in the meaning of *conjuratio*), referring to the names given to the twelfth-century communes on the one hand, and rebel gatherings in the later Middle Ages on the other. Indeed, each of these movements had the same purpose: assembling people with a common background and collective claims. Unsurprisingly, fourteenth-century urban craftsmen would
use the same linguistic register to describe their associations in the decades of their political awareness. Just as their fellow citizens some centuries earlier, they used words as *gild* when referring to practices of money gathering for collective purposes. For instance, in 1255, the *decani guldarum*, the deans of the guilds, took over the urban government in Sint- Truiden (a town in the prince-bishopric of Liège) in a successful attempt to destroy the political and economic monopoly of the wealthy merchants. The fullers, shearers, and weavers clearly assembled money within these *guldes* since 1237, which they spent for charity though not without interference of the main abbey in the town. The rebellion of 1255 freed them of this paternalism. 88 In 1280, the Bruges aldermen had ordered ‘all citizens who had collected money in commonality’ to hand these sums over to the authorities. 89 Clearly, the ordinance referred to the artisans who had participated in the Moerlemaye, mentioned earlier in this text. The Dutch word which the artisans used for ‘commonality’ was *meentucht*, a loan translation of the Latin *communitas*. Indeed, in the 1280s but also in the centuries to come, the craftsmen regularly would use the terminology of *meentucht* and *gemeente* to describe themselves. As we have shown elsewhere, on such occasions the ‘commoners’ used the discourse on the ‘commune’ with the aim to participate in the government of town. 90

**Conclusion**

The history of medieval contentious politics cannot be reduced to political quarrels or armed confrontations; it is also a history of discursive conflicts. To paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, naming and classifying social upheaval is always a permanent struggle between groups who are unequally equipped to attain absolute vision. The symbolic power of naming creates social and even legal power; it either maintains the social order or subverts it. 91 The discursive struggles between ‘rebels’ and the authorities about the name of a collective action was not only a struggle about definitions, but also one about political recognition and dominance. Perhaps, gaining the upper hand in such a conflict was as important as a military victory, because those who were victorious could decide the name given to the event. The denotations and connotations of these common and proper nouns would influence opinions and memories in the near future, and indirectly either justified and inspired collective action in the following centuries or condemned it as illegal and immoral. Naming conflicts was an essential feature of late medieval popular politics. As a result, names and words referring to collective actions were certainly not chosen arbitrarily. They were coloured by the opinion and beliefs of the people participating in the rebellion or the authorities suppressing it. Yet, both the authorities and their opponents used a common discursive register to legitimise their respective political actions. ‘Takehan’, ‘guild’, ‘gathering’ etc. referred to the associations which both elite citizens and the urban commoners made to express wishes and claims, while names like Cokerulle and Moerlemaye or a term like ‘loepe’ seem to have denoted the speech acts and bodily movements they used in mobilising for action. Surely, both the rebels as well as the authorities had a very different opinion on the nomenclature of these forms of collective action. While the latter would describe an armed assembly of artisans as ‘mutiny’, the ‘mutineers’ themselves would speak of a ‘gathering’ and would certainly not consider their political action ‘illegal’. A more linguistically oriented history of medieval revolts to a large degree remains to be written. This short overview of names and terms used to denote revolts in the Low Countries should perhaps be geographically extended to come to a general comparative overview for medieval Europe to analyse if, apart from the names and terms imposed ‘from above’, similar patterns occur whereby specific names refer to particular speech acts or bodily movements or to forms of solidarity and organisation from below.
Notes

1 We dedicate this chapter to Daniel Lievois (1940–2014), historian of medieval Ghent. We thank Claire Hawes for correcting our English, professor emeritus Luc De Grauwe for his very helpful etymological suggestions, and Justine Femhaber-Baker and Dirk Schoenaers for their very useful comments on the first version of this chapter.


4 The adjacent-metathesis hypothesis seems to be the most credible one. We thank Luc De Grauwe for his expert opinion on this matter.


7 We will elaborate on these names which specifically denote revolts by using chronological and liturgical elements in a forthcoming publication.


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14 See the chapter by Andrew Prescott in the present volume.
15 A. Viaene, ‘De Brugse Metten als historieaan’, Biekorf, 53, 1952, pp. 90–2: it was J. Kervyn de Lettenhove, Histoire de Flandre, Brussels: Beyaert-Defoort, 1847, vol. 2, pp. 448, 454, who invented this term which has, unjustifiably, become the standard name for the event in the historiography.
18 A discussion of the text in P. Lantschner, The Logic of Political Conflict in Medieval Cities: Italy and the Southern Low Countries, 1370–1440, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 25–7. The text of Jean Boutillier (Somme rurale ou le grand coustumier général de pratique civil et canon) was printed in 1603; see G. Van Dievoet, Johan Boutillier en de Somme rurale, Leuven: Leuvenese Universitaire Uitgeverij, 1951. Furthermore, Boutillier’s text was printed in Bruges by Colard Mansion in 1479 (during a period of turmoil).
20 See on this the introduction to J. Dumolyn, J. Haemers, H. R. Oliva Herrer, and V. Challet (eds), The Voices of the People in Late Medieval Europe: Communication and Popular Politics, Turnhout: Brepols, 2014.
23 N. De Pauw (ed.), De voorgeboden der stad Gent in de XIVe eeuw (1337–1382), Ghent: Annoot-Braeckman, 1885, p. 35.
26 Wederpenige and ‘berwerte, ongehorsamheid ende hanteringe (Godding (ed.), Ordonnances de Philippe le Bon, pp. 254 and 257).
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34 Brussels in the 1440s (Godding (ed.), Ordonnances de Philippe le Bon, pp. 190, 241, 280).
36 Namur, 1477 (C. Douxchamps-Lefèvre, ‘Le privilège de Marie de Bourgogne pour le comté de Namur (mai 1477)’, in Blockmans (ed.), 1477, p. 239); Tournai, 1424 (Lantschner, ‘Revolts and the political order’, p. 39).
37 Plusieurs graus seigneurs s’eﬀorçoient ou dit pays de avoir grant cantité de compagnions portans leurs robes de livres et devises, et tellement que par manière de grant compagnie et meutenacquier, les dis compagnions se assamblant en festes et en ducasses, attoient et decoppoient gens. (J.-M. Cauchies, La Legislation princière pour le Hainaut, ducs de Bourgogne et premiers Habsbourg (1427–1506), Brussels: Service public fédéral justice, 1982, p. 497).
38 For concrete examples, see the publication quoted in n. 33. A similar consideration can be found in the introduction of J. B. Netterstrom and B. Poulsen (eds), Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2007.
40 Dits die Excellentre Cronike van Vlaenderen, Antwerp: W. Vorsterman, 1531, fol. 216r.
41 Iten, que lesdis de Liège et pays ne pourront jamais cuix armer ne mouvoir guerre . . . a l’encontre de mon dit seig- neur. This concerned the cities of Tongeren, Sint-Truiden, Thuin, Fosses, Couvin, Borgloon, Hasselt, Herk-de-Stad, Maaseik, Bree, Bilzen, Beringen, and Dilsen-Stokkem (S. Bormans (ed.), Recueil des ordonnances de la principauté de Liège, Brussels: Gobbaerts, 1878, pp. 591 and 594).
47 Der gemeuten woorde te spreken jegrohene die dbeuyndt hadden (Van Uytven, ‘1477 in Brabant’, p. 264).
48 Die enen andren oploep dade met worden ende quale tospreke omme eeneghe saken die hi vorne den here socthe ochte begherde in rechtes (C. Serrure, Dit zijn de ooren van der stad Antwerpen, Ghent: Annoot-Braeckman, 1852, p. 7); Dat . . . sy clanrend pasible laten zullen zonder eeneghe upspreke of uploep te doene in eenigher manieren (Gilliodts–Van Severen, Inventaire des archives, vol. 2, p. 330).
50 Quiaques metterat le communallteit delle citeit de Liège ensemblez sens mandement especial ou commandement exprez dez mestiers ou dez conseilhiers deseur dis, parlerat d‘autre chose que cheu pour quoy on l’arat assemblee, et ilhe ne se taise tantoist (Bormans (ed.), Recueil des ordonnances, p. 219).
52 Such ordinances were promulgated in 1435, 1437, 1440, 1442, 1447, and 1463 (J.-M. Cauchies (ed.), Ordonnances de Philippe le Bon pour le comté de Hainaut, 1425–1467, Brussels: Service public fédéral justice, 2010, pp. 138, 156, 176, 203, 246, 368).
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55 *Berner ende versamlingen van groten menichen van hen, verbonde ende opsetten om bij makanderen te bliven ende nyet se schuyden makende, forche, nit gewalt* (Godding (ed.), *Ordonnances de Philippe le Bon*, pp. 254–5).


62 Godding (ed.), *Ordonnances de Philippe le Bon*, p. 256.


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77 Espinas and Pirenne (eds), Recueil des documents, vol. 1, p. 22.

78 Ibid., pp. 92–3.

79 Ibid., p. 109.

80 See the lemmas ‘takan’ and ‘taken’ in both dictionaries, available online on http://gtb.inl.nl.

81 Espinas and Pirenne (eds), Recueil des documents, vol. 1, p. 315.


83 Espinas and Pirenne (eds), Recueil des documents, vol. 1, p. 104.


86 This is the opinion of Professor emeritus Luc De Grauwe whom we again thank for his advice.


88 In 1237, the fullers and shearers already gathered money for charity in Sint-Truiden (for this and the revolt of 1255, see J. Charles, La ville de Saint-Trond au Moyen Âge: Des origines à la fin du XIVe siècle, Paris: Belles Lettres, 1965, pp. 228, 296). Similar examples for other towns of the Low Countries can be found in C. Wyffels, De oorsprong der ambachten in Vlaanderen en Brabant, Brussels: Koninklijke Vlaamse academie voor wetenschappen, letteren en schone kunsten van België, 1951, pp. 97–9.

89 Lieden die ghelt ghegadert hebben in meentuchten (Wyffels, ‘Nieuwe gegevens’, p. 103).
