CHAPTER 5

Social Networks

Ulf Christian Ewert and Stephan Selzer

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to give an overview of the appearance and function of social networks in the Hanseatic world during the late Middle Ages, as well as to discuss the methods used to reconstruct them. After a brief introduction to the sociological approach of network analysis, several examples will be given of social networks that emerged in Hanseatic regions. These examples will show that the social networks of the late Middle Ages can still be grasped by modern historiography, and these cases will also focus on the availability and validity of the sources used to reconstruct social networks. The two points that will finally be addressed are the importance of network formation for business purposes of Hanseatic merchants and the impact of social networks on the development of the Hanse in general.

The Paradigm: Network Analysis as a Method to Describe Social Structure

The Theoretical Concept of Social Networks

To understand social networks in the Hanse, one must understand the concepts underlying the network analysis approach.1 Similarly to “system” and “social capital,” the term “network” is very popular and widely as “social network”

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used in the social sciences and in history. Although because of this popularity it appears to be a well-defined and clear concept, a broad range of meanings is attributed to it. But what exactly is a social network? How can it be described? Which methods can be used to analyze it?

The social network approach claims to be both a theoretical and methodological concept. Social network theory deals with the definition and meaning of networks as being specific social configurations. Network methodology develops techniques and provides tools for the analysis of such units. First of all, a network in the exact sense of the word is a complex system of crossing lines. Within a social network these crossing “lines” are relationships because they consist of “a finite set or sets of actors and the relation or relations defined on them.” Social networks are nonetheless distinct from groups and organizations, although these two forms could be described much the same way. However, the way the membership and relationship are defined makes the difference. An organization has formal criteria of membership, whereas social networks do not. In organizations, relationships between members are formally defined, but in social networks, relationships are informal. However, it is not informality alone that distinguishes social networks from other social units. Although in groups all members interact with everyone else, in social networks, interaction can be indirect and mediated by other members.

The beginning of social network analysis as a defined approach of social sciences dates back only to the 1970s, and it is marked by an increasing number of studies on modern networks and on the methodology of network analysis. However, social network analysis follows the traditions of sociometric research and social anthropology, and the understanding of such networks is based on sociological concepts like social relationships, closeness, and interdependence. These sociological concepts had been formulated much earlier in the writings of Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and George C. Homans. For the historical sciences,

3 Wassermann and Faust, Social Network Analysis (see footnote 1), 20.