For Milan, as for many other northern Italian cities, the 12th century was a period of rapid change, a kind of historical rush hour. Milan's transformation from an episcopal city to a commune has been the subject of much research, and there has long been a debate about the classification of these changes: Liberation of 'the citizens' from aristocratic-clerical rule? Removal of imperial power?

Firstly, the presentation follows a line of research on Milan that describes the newly emerging commune as primarily dominated and governed by an aristocracy. Going beyond this description, it is suggested that the changes in the city should be understood as part of typical pre-modern processes. In essence, what we see in Milan (and elsewhere) was about creating ever-new relationships between different individuals and groups in an estate-based hierarchical order. Striving for power and even economic advantage also played a role, of course. In contrast to today, however, the strive for power and economy advantage were not pursued for their own sake, but were used as a means of status generation.

Going one step further, and with all due caution, the thesis can perhaps be generalized: With the need for actors to constantly communicate, secure and possibly improve their status, pre-modern society has its own dynamic, its own self-propelled processes (Eigendynamik) built into its structures that constantly drive change. However, no path to modernity can be derived from these processes; on the contrary: The typically pre-modern, self-propelled processes analysed for Milan were aimed at the further refinement and expansion of an estate based hierarchical society. How modernity could have emerged in the first place thus becomes an even more puzzling question.