

Popular Protest and Ideals of Democracy in Late Renaissance Italy.

Samuel K. Cohn Jr.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. xx + 260 pp. \$100.

As Samuel Cohn rightly points out in the introduction to this insightful and helpful book, the study of popular revolt, rebellion, and rioting in early modern Europe has established itself as a key area of enquiry since the days of the protests against the war in Vietnam, thanks to the pioneering studies of scholars such as Natalie Z. Davis, E. P. Thompson, Yves-Marie Bercé, William Beik, Peter Blickle, and others. Most studies nevertheless—albeit not only—focused on Britain and France. A comparable research field has not developed regarding early modern Italy, in particular for the early sixteenth century, for which we mostly have case studies (Aubert; De Benedictis), with the fundamental exception of the research surrounding Masaniello's revolt in 1647. It is Rosario Villari's work, masterful on the politics of the Baroque age and the Neapolitan revolt, that Cohn's new research stems from and builds on. This book therefore fills a gap, and for the first time tries to offer a general overview of the phenomenon of popular protest with a thematic rather than case-study approach.

The volume—structured in three parts (“Differences,” “Convergences,” “Democracy”)—revolves primarily around the years of the Italian wars (1494–1559). It begins by usefully engaging with slippery and much-debated concepts such as revolt/revolution and *popolo*, offering a clear take that serves as a guide to proceed through the book. Chapters are devoted to the forms and expressions of revolt (chants, flags), to its causes (from price rises to anti-feudal rioting, to grain scarcity), and to its protagonists (soldiers and shopkeepers first and foremost). A significant chapter is devoted to the role of women, who for a long time were overlooked in this scholarship, especially by the Italian historiography.

The third section, on “Democracy,” is the most conceptually stimulating. Using the term as a conscious anachronism, the author employs the concept to sound out the ideological underpinnings of early modern revolts. The many facets of representation are therefore examined—for example, the issue of the “cultures of voting” to which Serena Ferente, Lovro Kunčević, and Miles Pattenden have recently devoted a collection of essays. Attention is also given to the *Parlamenti*, with their many ambivalences. Here, some further discussion of factionalism and an engagement with a more recent historiography on the Italian states of the Quattrocento might have helped in expanding the implications of the argument. Overall, the thesis is that many of the Italian early modern popular revolts were “permeated by ideals of democracy.” And Cohn gives quite a stimulating suggestion for what a democratic ambition in a nondemocratic age might have looked like: desire for representation and a push for socioeconomic equality. In some respect, the author feels that centralization and what used to be called early modern “state building” went directly against such democratic instincts. Here the book leaves itself open to a wider discussion of political theory (direct democracy, role of



the State, etc.). We may agree or not with the author's stance—perhaps living in a populist age gives one less certainty on the intrinsic value of the *popolo* construct—but for sure, the book is a major contribution in rethinking early modern Italian politics.

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Reason and Experience in Renaissance Italy. Christine Shaw.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. viii + 362 pp. \$120.

In the last decades, plenty of books on the political thought of the Italian Renaissance have been published. Christine Shaw's monograph tries to deal with this widely explored subject from a slightly different and original perspective, looking not at the political theory but at the practiced governance of several Italian republics in the second half of the fifteenth and first half of the sixteenth century. In so doing, the author highlights two concepts that were fundamental in practice, even if they did not have a particularly strong definition in Renaissance political theory—that is, experience, the leading notion for political governors who handled political affairs and grounded their actions on expertise about contemporary political matters and on evidence of the past, and reason, the ability to face political problems by finding an ad hoc solution without relying on predetermined rules.

The cases taken into account are those of the Republic of Florence, the most articulated and complex republic at the time, in which political changes were frequent thanks to the role of the Medicis; Venice, the steadiest model of republican government in early modern Europe; Genoa, exactly the opposite of Venice, governed by a system of factions that exhibited internal conflict among parties; Siena, another unstable republic; and Lucca, a small republic, almost politically isolated.

Shaw's work, founded more on primary sources than on secondary literature, is impressive for the size and quality of its archival work, which allows the author to give fresh insight on the practice of republican government. Her aim is not to explore how the political concepts established in the celebrated theoretical treatises of the time were concretely adopted, but, on the contrary, to investigate to what extent political practice stimulated new approaches to political thought and influenced the development of political theory, sometimes even in a deductive way. Still, the author usefully remarks on the fact that the governors of Italian republics were not interested in developing a systematic theory of the nature of state, but just wanted to solve concrete problems linked to the political functioning of their policies.

Chapters are devoted to key concepts of the Renaissance republican thought, such as the idea of *unione*, opposed to that of division into factions; the limits of the freedom of speech; participation in the government, conceived in certain cases as an honor based on