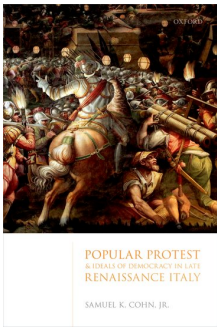


VI, 2023/2

Samuel K. Cohn

Popular Protest and Ideals of Democracy in Late Renaissance Italy

Review by: Brian Maxson



Authors: Samuel K. Cohn

Title: Popular Protest and Ideals of Democracy in Late Renaissance Italy

Place: Oxford

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Year: 2022

ISBN: 9780192849472

URL: [link to the title](#)

REVIEWER Brian Maxson - East Tennessee State University

Citation

B. Maxson, review of Samuel K. Cohn, *Popular Protest and Ideals of Democracy in Late Renaissance Italy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022, in: ARO, VI, 2023, 2, URL <https://aro-isig.fbk.eu/issues/2023/2/popular-protest-and-ideals-of-democracy-in-late-renaissance-italy-brian-maxson/>

Samuel Cohn's new monograph offers a comprehensive study of popular revolts across the Italian peninsula between roughly 1494 and 1559. The book is the first of its kind and offers a sequel of sorts to Cohn's earlier monograph *Lust for Liberty*, which had covered similar topics up to the first decades of the fifteenth century. Cohn argues that the hundreds of instances of popular revolt on the Italian peninsula and parts of the Venetian Empire identified during the Italian Wars defy social scientific classifications like «premodern» or «modern». They also show clear changes from late medieval revolts, particularly in their new promotion of different democratic values.

This well-organized book uses an introduction and eight chapters to lay out its arguments. In the introduction, Cohn argues that the historiography has usually studied revolt through specific examples rather than taking a broader, comparative approach. In addition, previous studies have tended to assume characteristics about «premodern» and «modern» revolts rather than to inquire into whether those classifications correlate with the evidence. Cohn defines his terms and introduces the evidentiary basis that he uses in the chapters that follow. Specifically, he defines revolt as a collective action, usually with some planning, that could be violent or non-violent and that made or implied demands. He defines the sixteenth-century *popolo* as a lower class that included formerly demarcated groups, like the «*popolo minuto*», and that was divided off from the elite. With these terms, he presents a database of 751 revolts by the *popolo* drawn from period diaries, chronicles, and archival records. Next, Cohn uses a *Prologue* to briefly connect the chronological reach of his previous synthesis, *Lust for Liberty*, with the beginning date for *Popular Protest*. Cohn claims that the fifteenth century

marked a significant decrease in the number of popular revolts. He suggests that a combination of the replacement of guild ties by patronage, the consolidation of political power, and the long-term positive economic gains from the Black Death may explain the decline.

Part I of the book, *Differences*, includes four chapters to show various ways that revolts between 1494 and 1559 revealed changes from late medieval examples. Chapter One shows that people after 1494 did not call out «*popolo*» or «*libertà*». They rarely unfurled flags professing their loyalty to a local guild or some other new power. Instead, people called out ties and flew the flags of different external rulers. In chapter two, Cohn argues that early modern popular revolts were more tied to periods of food scarcity than late medieval ones had been. However, he is careful to note that revolts still happened at times of plenty and even when revolts seem tied to grain shortages those revolts quickly turned into calls for political reform. The role of women in revolts changed from the late medieval to the early modern period, as Cohn shows in chapter three. Women had been almost invisible in accounts of late medieval revolts. However, between 1494 and 1559, women were described as playing active and supporting roles including serving as field nurses, repairing walls, healing soldiers, and even leading their own «squadrons» (p. 88). Nevertheless, Cohn points out that women still remained far less prevalent in the sources than men. In the last chapter of the section, Cohn argues that, unlike in late medieval protests, shopkeepers closed their doors as an act of peaceful protest, people from different classes united in protest processions, and soldiers successfully mutinied to enact changes among their captains.

The final two sections of the book continue the analysis. In part 2, *Convergences*, Cohn argues for ways that early modern protests were similar to late medieval ones. Chapter five demonstrates that wide-spread revolts in the countryside or alliances between rural areas and cities remained uncommon between 1494 and 1559, just as they had been in Italy in the late medieval period. Fewer revolts based on religion, antisemitism or led by members of the religious made Italian protests different than those happening across the Alps and even different than the situation had been during the *Quattrocento*, but largely conformed to the situation in Italy up to about 1420. In chapter six, Cohn introduces several other aspects of popular protest between 1494 and 1559 to compare geographically, temporally, and against prevailing scholarly conceptions. Cohn argues that revolts during these years featured leaders drawn from the urban *popolo*; revolts rarely if ever spiraled into a widespread wave of anti-foreigner slaughter or hatred; tended to focus on political ideas and rights; and brought together lower- and middle-class people. In the final section of the book, *Democracy*, Cohn turns to the sorts of ideas and demands articulated by early modern protestors. Chapter seven claims that these protestors looked for new and revised elections, the passage of specific laws, and an increased voice in government affairs. In the final chapter, Cohn argues that explicit and implicit calls for greater equality were present in sources from this period. People between 1494 and 1559 diverged from their late medieval predecessors by claiming rights to «democratic principles» (p. 226) such as representation and participating in political processes. They did so despite the increasing hold of centralized, absolutist rulers during the same period.

Cohn convincingly shows that popular protests in Italy during the Italian Wars possessed key similarities to and notable differences from similar actions in previous periods and across the Alps. He also successfully problematizes concepts like «premodern» and «modern» popular revolts commonly used by both historians and social scientists. Cohn's final conclusion that new democratic principles emerged and continued in a period of increasingly centralized absolutist rule is particularly striking. At times the need to rely on records like Sanudo's diaries might skew some of the book's results, but Cohn is open about these potential issues in his evidence and takes steps to address them through as many comparative examples as possible. This is an enviably organized and focused book that clearly presents and proves its claims through both qualitative and quantitative evidence.