

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Samuel K. Cohn, Jr. *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200-1425*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. ix + 376 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02162-4.

Reviewed by Jeanne E. Grant (Department of History, Metropolitan State University)

Published on H-HRE (January, 2007)

Remaking the Late Medieval Rebel into Political Man Using “contemporary narrative reports of social movements circa 1200-1425,” (p. 14) Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., makes the case for bringing political motivations back to the forefront of historical analysis of late medieval revolts in his latest book, *Lust for Liberty*. Cohn’s appeal at the beginning of the book is simple: use sources rather than models. He uses not only a wide array of chronicles, but also makes use of governmental documents such as letters of remission issued in the aftermath of revolts. Cohn’s argument throughout the book, however, is not so simple and is much more rewarding. He heeds his own appeal with an analysis of popular revolts and rebellions that calls into question standard understandings of popular revolt in the late Middle Ages. His analysis, that is, his argument, is of a qualitative rather than a narrative-based or quantitative character. Cohn makes repeated reference to the big three late medieval revolts—the Ciompi (1378), the Jacquerie (1358), and the English uprising of 1381. He fully incorporates the first two into his analysis and even makes a few references to the Hussite revolution, but his focus is on the multitude of smaller and lesser-known revolts recorded in the sources; he found “1,600 descriptions of popular movements, which amount to 1,112 separate incidents” in Italian city-states, France and Flanders (p. 14). This allows him to criticize constructively standard interpretations of late medieval revolts and to make comparisons across the Alps. The book’s full force comes from its contribution to the historiography with its analytical approach to various “truths” held about preindustrial popular revolts. In chapters 2 and 3 Cohn argues convincingly that the immediate causes of the revolts were not economic oppression or even hunger because the people (*popolo minuto* or *menu peuple*) confronted not their landlords or bosses, but their political superiors. He also throws into question the commonly held interpretation that popular revolts sought to restore a perceived lost golden age; instead, he argues, the sources illustrate peasants engaging in contemporary politics astutely, almost with *realpolitik* astuteness. In chapter

4 Cohn continues to explain how popular revolts were against the state and therefore fundamentally political in nature. Even though sometimes “miscarriages of justice, corruption of officials, the arrogance of magnates, new or raised taxes, anti-Semitism, the expense and suffering of war, and the incompetence of military leaders,” that is, not always explicitly political grievances, motivated rebels, “it was the political aspect—a question of rights—... that provoked these revolts” (p. 97). In the next two chapters Cohn debunks the notion that popular protests were led by outsiders—clergy or local secular leaders—and consisted of women. Cohn demonstrates that the sources do not bear this out. Clerics simply do not appear in the contemporary narratives or letters of remission in any significant number except for their involvement in religious movements. In civil revolts he found clerics mentioned in only six instances. Instead, leadership came from the people themselves, usually in the form of coalitions that cut across class and craft lines. Women likewise were neither numerous nor prominent participants in late medieval revolts, probably because, as Cohn demonstrates, preindustrial revolts were not food riots as many historians assert. In the sources, women play a minor role in civil revolts, even though sources record women’s involvement in other public displays such as religious movements.

In chapters 7 and 8 Cohn compares rebellious behavior south and north of the Alps. He found commoners’ revolts in Italy to be “limited by a city’s walls” (i.e., to lack city-country cooperation) in comparison to the “interregional, even international” character of revolts in France and Flanders (p. 161). Cohn proffers a tentative explanation for this difference: the Italian city-states became territorial states, especially after the Black Death, and the result was a political hierarchy that exalted the city-dweller above anyone from the country, both members of old aristocratic families and peasants. This explains why Italian peasants were so often willing to fight with their magnates and so rarely with their working-class brethren in the cities. Cohn also found that south of the

Alps flags with intricate symbolism were the obsession of workers and craftsmen while north of the Alps words stirred the hearts of rebels. In this chapter, Cohn's analytical approach is particularly fruitful because not only do his sources clearly demonstrate this transalpine distinction, but he includes stories that show the validity of his arguments in other chapters. The people's political concerns are highlighted by their retention of flags and flags' meaning in the story of the man in the village of Pontenano, who, in the midst of the town electing a revolutionary council in 1426, retrieved the flag under which this village had fought for its independence against Florence forty-two years previously (p. 186). Cohn repeatedly incorporates such detail into his analysis.

Cohn's book is structured by its analytical approach. This allows him to question these "truths" but, also as a result, it is difficult to piece together the whole story of a single revolt from just this book. Repeated, detailed use of revolts makes the different points of the overarching argument, but little true narrative results. This is not a weakness, however, for trends emerge. One of the trends Cohn draws out is that religiously motivated revolts declined after the Black Death (at least until the end of the book's time frame, c. 1425). He makes a compelling argument for this trend based on his sources from northern Italy and northern France, and no doubt he would have drawn the same conclusion if he had included the popular movements led by John Wyclif (d. 1384) or Jan Hus (d. 1415) in his analysis since strong cases can be made for their political character as well. The post-Black Death religious movements that are taken into consideration—the flagellants and anti-Semitic flare-ups—Cohn argues were the short-lived result of anxiety from the Black Death, and by the mid-1350s, "the number of social protests and revolts with concrete political ends began to rise in Italy again" (p. 217). The same holds true, according to Cohn, for France, where the Jacquerie revolts were merely the most famous manifestations of popular discontent with the political behavior of superiors. The Black Death's role in this transalpine similarity was pivotal according to Cohn: "The Black Death realigned the trajectories of

social conflict north and south of the Alps to progress along similar tracks, despite the lack of any evidence of joint organization or communication linking such distant insurgents" (p. 211).

The Black Death is a key pivot point in Cohn's other work as well and thus fits the book neatly into his corpus of work.[1] What was it, then, about the Black Death that had such a transformative impact on popular revolts? In the concluding chapter, Cohn offers an explanation, though it is not necessarily a causal one. A "new spirit for societal change" arose among the lower classes by 1355. This "new spirit" meant "a new self- and class-confidence, that commoners could change their social, economic, and political worlds, the here and now, in concrete and practical ways" (p. 233-234). It also was analogous to other new popular attitudinal changes that Cohn characterizes as an "about-face from utter despondency and fear to a new confidence" to change one's fate (p. 237). Cohn's main conclusion, therefore, is that late medieval revolts in Italy, France, and Flanders were the result of popular political discontent more than any other motivation and that they further changed in character after the Black Death, much in tune with other attitudinal changes in European society. After the Black Death, "one word became dominant when chroniclers pointed to rebels' motives—*libertas*" (p. 238). Furthermore, the meaning of *libertas* changed from an indication of a desire for privileges to an indication of a desire for "an implicit sense of equality" both south and north of the Alps (p. 239). Although this was the argument toward which Cohn was driving throughout the book, he saved the explicit explanation for the concluding chapter.

Note

[1]. In Cohn's *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) and *Death and Property in Siena, 1205-1800: Strategies for the After-life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), the Black Death's pivotal role came in its second wave around 1363 rather than its first wave around 1347-48, as in this book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Jeanne E. Grant. Review of Cohn, Samuel K., Jr., *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200-1425*. H-HRE, H-Net Reviews. January, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12811>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.