Samuel K. Cohn. *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolution in Medieval Europe, 1200–1425*.
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. x + 376 pp. index. bibl. $49.95. ISBN: 0–674–02162–2.

Samuel Cohn has long had an enviable talent for setting the terms of discussion in the field of social history. He has posed penetrating questions, offered original answers, and championed a comparative methodology against more standard approaches that derive conclusions from the evidence of single cities and states. Cohn's new book, *Lust for Liberty*, follows the same tradition. It examines popular revolt in three places — Italy, France, and Flanders — over a 225-year period and challenges the most basic assumptions. The book is magisterial in scope, highly original, well-argued, and sure to set the terms of future discourse on the subject. Its effectiveness is enhanced by the author's lucid writing style and ability to stay on point despite changes of geographic setting and historiographical tradition. Cohn deserves especial credit for integrating analysis with narrative, such that, in addition to his challenging interpretations, the reader is left with indelible images of the revolts themselves. Who can forget the uprising spurred by the cardinal's pretty dog or the revolt of the people without underpants?

Cohn carefully lays out his argument, beginning with a thorough discussion of methodology and the sources, as well as a rigorous definition of *popular revolt*. The latter is particularly necessary given, as Cohn notes, the surprising absence of explicit definitions in most scholarly discussions. Cohn culls together a sample of 1,112 revolts, using chronicles (with caution) and archival materials. The number is in itself noteworthy, since some scholars view premodern revolts as infrequent, owing to the limited coercive power of the lower classes and brutal repressions from above. Cohn shows that revolts were, however, common, and rather than always leading to violent oppression, they were often brought to negotiated settlement. The rebellions themselves were often not violent: Cohn includes in his sample peace movements and nonviolent protest.

Cohn devotes considerable space to establishing the typologies and ideologies of the revolts. He sees collective action as basic to all of them and opposes this to the activities of single individuals and families. He stresses the difficulty in gaining precision, given the shifting meaning of such terms as *popolo minuto* and *menu peuple*, as well as the multifaceted aspect of the insurgencies, which at once often

had political, social, and economic dimensions to them. But Cohn's sample offers fascinating insights and brings forth striking conclusions. Cohn fundamentally revises the well-known views of modernist scholars such as Hobsbawm, Thompson, Rudé, and Tilly regarding the nature of preindustrial crowds and their discontents. Cohn shows, contra Rudé, that there were few bread riots and little involvement of women. He demonstrates, contra Tilly, that there was significant coordination of revolts, broad coalitions, and leadership from within. Rather than women, Cohn finds significant participation of young people, university students, and even small children. The revolts were predominantly urban and rarely pitted one social group against another. They were often aimed at government authority and, in this sense, were primarily political in nature.

The validity of Cohn's political interpretation will likely draw considerable scholarly debate. My own economic bent engenders a reflexive skepticism. But Cohn defends his position well, and offers a strong and compelling argument. He follows with a fascinating comparison of revolts north and south of the Alps. In chapter 8, Cohn finds in Italy a greater use of symbols, most notably flags. In the north, words and oratory played a larger role, a distinction that, as Cohn notes, appears odd given the importance of emblems to the aristocracy and king (189). Cohn speculates that the differences may reflect divergences in Northern and Southern religious processional life.

In the last two chapters, Cohn focuses primarily on the Black Death, the long-held point of departure among medievalists for the study of revolts. Here he offers his final corrective and, perhaps, most provocative conclusion. Departing from the analyses of Pirenne, Wolff, Mollat, and Hilton, Cohn does not see a shift in the nature of revolts from ones of "craft and occupation" (3) in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries to those concerning the economic misery of the nascent proletarians after the plague. Instead, he argues that plague helped align patterns of social conflict in the north and south along similar trajectories, bringing about a new era in communication and a "hidden sense of unity" (227). Revolts increased greatly after the plague, nearly threefold from 1348 to 1425. But rather than stress the spontaneous outbreak of protests or a cluster of insurgencies from 1378 to 1382 (Wolff, Mollatt), Cohn views the 1350s as the point of departure and the years from 1354 to 1383 as the high water mark of revolt, with nearly ten per annum. This allows Cohn to contextualize famous uprisings such as the Florentine Ciompi and English Peasants Revolt and show how they were part of a broader tradition. The tradition was one of increasing secular revolt, focused on political and social issues. Cohn sees a "new spirit for societal change," which involved a desire among the lower classes for "liberty," now expressly stated as a goal (236). The post-plague insurgents — peasants, artisans and workers, and petty shopkeepers — gained a new self- and class-consciousness, and with it the belief that they could fundamentally alter their social and political circumstances. They coopted the language of liberty from their social betters, who had used it to defend their corporate privileges.

The call for liberty by the lower class is a theme first developed by Cohn in

his *Creating the Florentine State*. It will resonate especially with Italianists, given the central place of the term in the longstanding debate over politics and republicanism, arising from the work of Hans Baron and others. Cohn's conclusions are worthy of this exceedingly rich book, which offers no less than a basic reinterpretation of the social world of late medieval Europe.

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