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Ideal Types and Negotiated Identities: A Comparative Approach to the City-State

The City-State in Europe, 1000–1600: Hinterland, Territory, Region. By Tom Scott (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012) 382 pp. \$65.00

The Italian Renaissance State. Edited by Andrea Gamberini and Isabella Lazzarini (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012) 634 pp. \$166.00

City-states hold a special place in the political history of medieval and early modern Europe. The urban belt—the populated core of premodern Europe, which included the central and northern Italian communes; the Alpine cantons; the southern and eastern Franconian, Swabian, and Rhenish cities; and the urban centers of the Low Countries along the Rhine—followed a backward route to the modern state. Flush with capital, the urban belt failed to produce consolidated states, instead forming a series of incomplete, federal, or half-made modern states. Yet cities were more than just “islands of capital” in a sea of territorial lords; they also were political innovators, achieving robust representative institutions and such fiscal advances as public credit.

Central to the study of the European city-states is how to address these polities comparatively—how to explain the rise and decline of certain city-states and the survival and persistence of others and to relate a wide-range of public institutions within many different urban areas. Notwithstanding their historical importance, however, the comparative study of premodern European city-states has often been more a subject for political scientists and sociologists than for historians. From the hundreds of semi-independent urban centers in Europe, scholars have produced numerous comparative typologies to distinguish these cities by their systems of government, economic productivity, and relation to

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nonurban forms of territorial rule.¹ For their part, historians of Europe's city-states usually concentrate on individual town studies or, at most, bilateral or regional comparisons.²

The two books under review in this essay offer a distinctly comparative and interdisciplinary approach to the political institutions of the premodern urban belt. Across dozens of cases, hundreds of years, and thousands of miles, both studies show that historians have much to contribute to comparative methods when they attend to the changes in, as well as the timing of, political developments, when they trace historical trajectories rather than assume teleologies, and when they analyze networks of exchange from a temporal perspective. Both studies reveal not only new findings about why city-states emerged, changed/diversified, and declined but also how transnational and comparative history can enhance the work of other comparative social scientists.

THE CITY-STATE DEFINED How should we define *city-state* in the context of premodern Europe? Political scientists and sociologies often answer with ideal types—the thresholds that a nascent city must reach in order to become a city-state, as opposed to a larger regional or even territorial state. To Tilly, city-states were bastions of capital in a sea of coercive territorial polities; to Spruyt, they were incomplete, half-made sovereign states with strong external boundaries but little internal control; to Stasavage, city-states were defined by their limited geography and forms of government (small territories allowed for representative institutions); and to Savy, Italian city-states were distinguished from the dynastic/

1 Piere Savy, "Gli Stati Italiani Del XV Secolo: Una Proposta Sulla Tipologie," *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 163 (2005), 735–759; Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton, 1994); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, A.D. 990–1990* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

2 Maria Ginatempo, "Gerarchie Demiche e 'Sistemi Urbani' nell'Italia Bassomedievale: Una Discussione," *Società e Storia*, LXXII (1996), 347–383; André Holenstein, Thomas Maissen, and Maarten Prak (eds.), *The Republican Alternative: The Netherlands and Switzerland Compared* (Amsterdam, 2008); Tamara Munger, "Hanse Und Eidgenossenschaft: Zwei Mittelalterliche Gemeinschaften Im Vergleich," *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, CXIX (2001), 5–48; Elisabeth Raiser, *Städtische Territorialpolitik in Mittelalter: Eine Vergleichende Untersuchung Über Verschiedene Formen Am Beispiel Lübecks Und Zürichs* (Lubeck, 1969); Massimo Vallerani, "La Politica Degli Schieramenti: Reti Podestarili e Alleanze Intercittadine Nella Prima Metà Del Duecento," in Giuseppe Galasso (ed.), *Comuni e Signorie nell'Italia Settentrionale: La Lombardia (Storia d'Italia, 6)* (Turin, 1986).

patrimonial states of the rest of Europe by their unique political profile, that is to say, by their urban/communal traditions.³

Such definitions often prove troublesome on closer inspection. The distinctions between an independent city, a city-state, and a territorial/regional state often blur. For instance, would the Duchy of Florence depart from the category of a city-state into the realm of a regional-dynastic polity at the end of the republic (1532), when it achieved territorial/geographical control over most of Tuscany (1406), or when its economy shifted from capital-intensive overseas trade to agricultural production? Would Cologne, a city with little territorial presence but strong regional commercial links, even fall into the category of city-state? Such ideal types also tend to be static rather than dynamic; they can tell us little about the trajectories of polities over time, and even less about the particular political motives of their citizens and subjects.

Scott's Model Scott's *City-State in Europe* and Gamberini and Lazzarini's collection of chapters about the Italian Renaissance state repair these faults by comparing the diverse political pathways of the city-states with those of other polities in the urban belt over time. Scott examines the city-states less as an urban phenomenon than as a territorial one. Adopting a distinctly regional framework from German historiography and drawing entirely on secondary sources, he synthesizes the many ways in which European cities attempted to control the rural lands around them from 1000 to 1600. His contention is that a regional approach can unlock a general model for the city-state in Europe.

Scott divides his book temporally into century-and-a-half blocks, thereby avoiding the thorny debate about the transition from the medieval to the early modern era. His canvas is the whole urban belt from north-central Italy to Flanders, along with the outliers Barcelona and Wrocław. Chapters 1 and 2 track the policies of the cities' early years, when they achieved independence from both local rural lords and distant imperial power. Chapters 3 and 4, the core of Scott's narrative, discuss the golden age of the city-states in both the European North (Flanders, the North-German Hansa, Switzerland, and South Germany) and the South (Italy). From

3 Savy, "Gli Stati Italiani Del XV Secolo"; Spruyt, *Sovereign State*; David Stasavage, *States of Credit: Size, Power, and the Development of European Polities* (Princeton, 2011); Tilly, *Coercion*.

1300 to 1450, all of the cities across the continent employed certain strategies to incorporate their hinterlands—issuing contracts to rural manufactures, purchasing strongholds along axial trade routes, provisioning radial grain supplies, imposing direct and customs taxes, and exercising juridical authority over subject cities and citizens. Along the way, Scott visits dozens of cities and their surrounding lands, swiftly bouncing from one rich historiography to the next.

Central to Scott's argument is that the evolution of territorial control occurred through a series of stages of increasing economic and juridical complexity. Cities began as "demographic sinks" in search of a hinterland to sustain their population, later building deeper economic ties with surrounding territories, and, in rare instances, managing to dominate, albeit partially, surrounding regions—hence the book's subtitle "Hinterland–Territory–Region." For instance, the Flemish city of Ypres, with a pre-plague population between 25,000 and 30,000, progressed at first by admitting country dwellers as citizens, incorporating rural economic production, and acquiring trade routes. Yet the Black Death and powerful nearby lords eventually stifled the city's political ambitions for a larger regional polity. By comparing the "evolution and transformation" of city-states like Ypres in a framework combining "chronology with spatiality," Scott largely overcomes the deficiencies of static structural ideal types (236).

Scott's chronospatial comparative model levels the traditional division between the city-states of Italy and those of the German/Dutch-speaking lands. The Italian city-states are often thought to exemplify a fully realized city-state identity, whereas the German/Dutch ones represent a false-start that gave way either to confederation (Swiss and Dutch) or to outright domination by local princes and territorial lords. Territorial expansion, however, exposes more similarities than differences between transalpine cities. Scott contends that cities differed not so much by their location relative to the Alps as by the extent of their ability to envelop surrounding areas. Although most cities achieved economic hegemony over a hinterland, few of them exercised juridical power over an extended territory that, in Scott's view, "marks . . . a fork in the road in the evolution of city-states" (236).

City-states evinced two parallel trajectories—one solely eco-

conomic and the other territorial and juridical. Scott's group of cities that fell short of full judicial regulation of their hinterlands runs from those that achieved only basic rural capital accumulation (Cologne, Augsburg, Barcelona, and Antwerp), to those that acquired limited juridical control (in the southern Low Countries), to those that had a considerable geographical reach (Genoa and the cities of southern Italy), and finally to those that pursued territorial control purely to buttress commercial interests (the Hanseatic cities). His range of cities that succeeded in transforming into regional, juridical forces runs from those that gained strength mainly through defensive strategies (the South German imperial cities) to those that deliberately expanded (the Italian and Swiss city-states). His framework shows that the territorial strategies of city-states on either side of Alps bear substantial similarities. Both Bern and Florence, for instance, which at first extended their influence for purely commercial reasons, gradually usurped complete administrative and juridical control of large and complex territories. The net effect of Scott's typology is to reveal the salience of such transalpine comparisons.

Gamberini and Lazzarini's "Open-Ended" View Gamberini and Lazzarini's collection has a wholly different objective—to turn away from a limited “history of the cities” in the Italian peninsula to examine every entity “that enjoyed even a fraction of political agency” there. No longer limited to “a somewhat technical designation such as regional or territorial state,” the chapters in their book deploy a broad notion of the Renaissance Italian State—a premodern political society founded on an “open-ended concept of structures of authority and power, of frames and patterns of politics” (2). Casting aside modernity in Burckhardt's sense, the editors view Renaissance politics as less a prelude to modern forms than a “double knot” to be untangled—a culture in which political thought, civic life, and cultural achievement prospered but produced weak political institutions, a fragile international system (which collapsed after 1494), and a “backward” pathway for Italy to the modern state (1).⁴ Whereas Scott uses a comparative framework to jump the Alps, the contributors to Gamberini and

4 See Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (London, 1878; orig. pub. in German, 1860).

Lazzarini's book are content to investigate exclusively the institutions, interactions, and cultures—urban and otherwise—that flourished south of the Alps.

Although Gamberini and Lazzarini do not provide much of a comparative frame beyond their brief introduction, the volume takes a valuable first step toward a comparative history of Italian polities and politics. This collaboration of twenty-four (primarily Italian) scholars and their translators represents the pinnacle of current Italian scholarship about premodern Italian political history. It puts to rest two once-sacred assumptions—that a vibrant, energetic, and urbanized northern Italy diverged radically from the despotic, enervated southern kingdoms and that the governments of Florence, Venice, and other republics contrasted sharply with the monarchical despotism of the era. This book draws no heavy lines between the *Mezzogiorno* and its northern neighbors or between princes and oligarchs.

The contributors draw comparisons between Italy's many polities as well as between its many political institutions. The first half of the volume contains eleven narratives about individual polities drawn from the entirety of the Italian peninsula, its adjoining islands, and those "pass-states" (*Paßstaaten*) astride its Alpine valleys. Although housed within vastly different political units, from urban communes to cogs in the Aragonese Empire, Italian rulers—urban and rural alike—had a common set of political projects: Tightknit oligarchic committees and princely courts stabilized internal discord; officials spread across increasingly larger territories to claim juridical and fiscal supremacy and manage regional economic integration; and rhetoricians and lawyers articulated new discourses of authority. The contributors argue that, far from being monolithic, even the most well-formed Italian states contained a number of "constituent elements"—cities, local communities, factions, and aristocratic families—that negotiated the exercise of power.

The Duchy of Ferrara was typical of most Italian states. Ruled by the Este family, it contained the capital Ferrara, the subject cities of Modena and Reggio, and a welter of rural holdings. During the fifteenth century, the Este dukes succeeded in forging a strong central government in the city of Ferrara, but it did not extend elsewhere. Legal norms prevented Este encroachment on the rights of

the citizens of Reggio and Modena, who were left, by and large, to their own juridical and administrative devices. The Este dukes and the nobles of their two subject cities spoke different political languages—the dukes’ discourse of “courtly chronicles, manuals for Christian princes, and allegorical tapestries” clashed with the language of “statutes and negotiated agreements” spoken by Reggio and Modena’s leading citizens (127). The cast of political characters increased further through the accords and contracts that the Este signed with rural lords and villages. Rather than promoting the formation of a unitary state, these agreements guaranteed the legal rights of scattered rural lords and individual communities.

The chapters in the second half of the collection explore alternative sites of authority and identity that cross-cut the peninsula’s many polities; they focus less on a reified state than on “the mutual action of all the different political forces and the complex pattern of their negotiations” (5). Massimo Della Misericordia and Federica Cengarle explore the tenacity of local power within rural communities and minor lordships. Succeeding chapters by Marco Gentile, E. Igor Mineo and Serena Ferrente chronicle how faction, rank, and gender splintered urban spaces. Guido Castelnovo, Lazzarini, Franco Franceschi and Luca Molà, and Andrea Zorzi show the often private objectives of such putatively public sites of authority as office holding, diplomatic relations, economic development, and seats of justice.

But the collection’s most important insight is to reveal how the emergence of territorially larger and politically consolidated states hides the extent to which Italian politics was a deeply negotiated process involving a multitude of competing interests—public and private, princely and communal, and peripheral and local. Instead of depicting power-hungry sovereigns devouring their countrysides, the collection shows territorial aggrandizement often to have been the result of contractual relations; individual accords formed the basis of diarchic rule between a center and its periphery. Political discourse eschewed a language of sovereignty, emphasizing pacts instead. Indeed, the polities of Italy were less regional than “contractual states” (130). Nor was negotiation confined to the territorial state; it penetrated all levels of society. Zorzi shows how juridical systems obviated potentially destructive internal discord by maintaining “a wide sphere of negotiatory procedures” (513), in-

cluding vendettas, feuds, and other informal methods of justice. The Italian state was not a stagnant political collective but an ever-changing process of negotiation.

DIFFERENCES, SIMILARITIES, AND FLAWS IN COMPARATIVE APPROACHES At first glance, the two books appear headed in different directions. Scott argues forcefully for a trans-Alpine city-state model based on territorial expansion; Gamberini and Lazzarini cast doubt on a specific urban state, preferring to see in the political institutions and discourses south of the Alps a uniquely prenatal history of Italy.

Genoa Notwithstanding the differences in the orientation of these two works, the two approaches converge on an interest in, if not an understanding of, Genoa. Comprised of numerous private groups—factions, families, and neighborhoods—and reliant on private contractors to construct its trade empire in the Mediterranean, Genoa never evolved into a coherent state. Moreover, because it was subject to frequent revolts, Genoa was vulnerable to occupation by outside forces, first Milan's and then France's. Scott's book and Christine Shaw's contribution to the Gamberini and Lazzarini volume come to different conclusions about what this predicament means for the study of Genoa. Scott places Genoa firmly within the same category as the Republic of Ragusa/Dubrovnik—a limited territorial state lacking juridical force. In his view, any movement toward consolidation by Genoa owed more to the advancement of private capital—"capital which became the state itself"—than to the creation of something like a modern state (78). Genoa's internal disorder stifled its territorial ambitions, killing the Genoese regional state on the vine.

Shaw, who concentrates on the struggles among the city's many factions, argues that although revolts often disrupted Genoese life, the underlying structures of government did not change much. She adopts a more halcyon view of the city. Even the most obvious symptoms of social pathology, the occupation of the city by foreign troops, appear less onerous in her account. To her, such incidents were commonplace and, more often than not, intentional. In the end, Shaw even seems to doubt that Genoa conforms to any political typology, noting that "neither the Genoese nor their state can be fitted easily into the matrices that have been im-

posed on the history of the political society and the institutions of government of the cities” (236).

City-State Endurance Yet such differences of interpretation lie more in the authors’ conclusions than in their methods. Both of their studies are interested in showing the advantages of a comparative methodology in the study of premodern politics, particularly when confronting the latent teleology of structural ideal types, to allow for, in Scott’s words, “evolution and transformation over time” (230). Scott describes four pathways by which city-states maintained control over their hinterlands after 1500. The Swiss Confederation attracted newcomers Basel and Geneva and nearly made other south German cities “turn Swiss”; Barcelona, Metz, Antwerp, and other cities held onto their territories in spite of their political accommodations; the Italian states largely adopted the monarchical and absolutist practices of their French and Spanish overlords; and a few cities survived as cultural and political centers (Rome, Bruges, and Ghent) almost by default. Some scholars might disagree about how Scott allocates individual cities within his typology, but the point of Scott’s account is not to discover the static categories to which city-states must logically conform but to follow their actual trajectories of endurance.

The contributors to Gamberini and Lazzarini’s volume mostly tell the same story; Italian political durability mattered more than decline. In Tuscany alone, tiny Lucca and the miniscule Duchy of Piombino survived long into the modern period, thanks to a mixture of contingency and purposeful strategy. The princely states of the Marquises of Monferrato and Saluzzo, wedged between great powers in Piedmont, endured by re-branding themselves as mercenaries, and smaller lordships (*piccoli signori*), from the Pio di Carpi in Emilia to the Orsini Del Balzo in the Kingdom of Naples, persevered with surprising resilience.

Self-Contradictions, Missed Opportunities, and Further Questions Despite the overall quality of these books, however, their comparative frameworks can lead to a misstep or two. Scott subdivides his analysis into three layers—first by location relative to the Alps, then by region (north German cities, Emilia-Romagna, and central Italy), and, finally, by separate city-states—a format that seems to contradict his stated goal of reconciling forms on either side of the Alps rather than continuing to oppose them. By the same token,

some of the chapters in the Gamberini and Lazzarini volume ignore what appear to be natural comparisons. Fabrizio Titone, Francesco Senatore, and Olivetta Schena compare the diverse responses of the kingdoms of Sicily, Naples, and Sardinia/Corsica to the imposition of Aragonese rule, but only respectively and separately. Moreover, Michael Knaption (Venice), Federico Del Tredici (Lombardy), and Shaw (Genoa) overlook the clear interactions between neighboring territorial and maritime powers. These missed opportunities become conspicuous only in the light of the chapters that excel at making connections—Trevor Dean’s comparison of the power shared by the dynastic court and the urban communes of Este Ferrara and Gonzaga Mantua, Lorenzo Tanzini’s discussion of the Tuscan states, and the two chapters by Alessandro Barbero and Marco Bellabarba that explore the principalities on the western (Monferrato, Saluzzo, Savoy, and Savoy-Acaia) and eastern (Trent, Bressanone/Brixen, Aquileia, Tyrol, and Gorizia) shoulders of the peninsula.

Two questions arise from the different orientations of these books: (1) Can a single comparative methodology account for all of the many political constellations within the premodern urban belt? (2) If a model cannot accommodate all of the cases, is it thereby devoid of value? As Scott notes more than once, earlier attempts at large typologies of city-states fall short chiefly because they ignore particular outlying cases. He discounts Hansen for ignoring the Swiss cities, Savy for failing to explain Europe north of the Alps, and Tilly for preferring the northern Italian and Dutch cases over the rest of them.⁵ If the search for a city-state model is futile, a retreat into individual studies is the only option.

The Choice of a Comparative Framework Complicating this issue is the fact that the use of a particular comparative framework, regardless of its scope, can dramatically disrupt the political narrative of a city-state. A case in point is how both of the books approach the state-building project of Florence during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Both works place the city’s growth within a distinctly, and presumptively, Tuscan context, coterminous with the borders of what was to become the sixteenth-century Duchy of Tuscany, using it to measure Florence’s regional ascendance rela-

5 Morgans Herman Hansen, *A Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures* (Copenhagen, 2000).

tive to the decline of Lucca, Siena, and Pisa. Yet alternative comparative perspectives exist. At first, Florence sought to unify a larger macro-region spanning Bologna, Perugia, the Tiber Valley, and the petty lords of the Romagna via the pro-papal ideological vehicle of Guelfism. Only later did the city abandon such grand plans to concentrate on solidifying a territorial state within the boundaries of modern Tuscany.⁶ The political survival of the key Tuscan cities Siena (until 1555) and Lucca (until 1805) suggests a less than perfect narrative of a triumphal Florence. A different comparative lens might well suggest a radically different political narrative.

The problem of choosing a comparative framework is crucial to both history and the social sciences. The way in which cities built institutions and conquered or negotiated pacts with neighbors remains a predominantly internal and singular development. When each case becomes a type meant to fit within an a priori “city-state matrix,” it loses its historical dynamism and slips into teleology. Comparative analysis in the historical social sciences has long sustained the trend of looking at the modern European states as starting points and reading their various historical trajectories backward.

Instead of imposing an ahistorical comparative lens and deploying rigid categories, comparisons work best when they attend to the complex interactions between cities on a regional, continental, or even global scale. As public and private citizens, the people of the urban belt built a variety of interrelated networks. Scholars have already made strides in this area: Hansen’s *Comparative Study of Thirty City-State Cultures* sees not isolated and independent city-states but fundamentally interconnected cultures; Close’s *Negotiated Reformation* emphasizes how sixteenth-century South German cities pursued a form of “collective politics”—an exchange of advice, guidance, and information in the pursuit of religious change; and Gelderblom’s *Cities of Commerce* explores how competition among Dutch cities inspired economic recovery.⁷ Rather than impose an ideal-type of geographical, institutional, chronospatial, or even his-

6 Serena Ferrente, “Guelphs! Factions, Liberty and Sovereignty: Inquiries about the Quattrocento,” *History of Political Thought*, XXVIII (2007), 580.

7 Christopher Close, *The Negotiated Reformation: Imperial Cities and the Politics of Urban Reform, 1525–1550* (New York, 2009); Oscar Gelderblom, *Cities of Commerce: The Institutional Foundations of International Trade in the Low Countries, 1250–1650* (Princeton, 2013).

torical set of characteristics upon these cities, these studies attempt to understand better how the peoples of the urban belt pursued cooperative strategies.

From this vantage point, vastly different comparative groupings are possible. At the level of economics, the prosperous northern and central Italian cities undoubtedly shared a great deal more with their Flemish trading partners than with their southern neighbors. Cities that had methods of public finance in common might well have been more willing to traffic with each other than with territorial lords. Stasavage and Pezzolo recently described the precocious rise of urban sovereign credit markets in contrast to similar sovereign markets among territorial lords.⁸ Yet, city-states were by no means impervious to influences outside their sphere. In forming their Confederation, the Swiss cities borrowed as much from the political discourses of the confederal and republican Dutch as from the monarchical and centralized French.⁹ The exact degree to which European cities interacted publicly and privately remains an open question.

FINANCIAL NETWORKS AND CITY LEAGUES The two volumes implicitly suggest two additional networks among European cities. Cities often gained territory through the purchase of rights and privileges of trade nodes, strategic points, and even whole city-states. Example abound. Venice purchased much of its *Stato da Mare*, acquiring the island of Corfu for 30,000 ducats in 1402 and the city of Zadar for 50,000 soon thereafter; Genoa withdrew from the *Banco di San Giorgio*, the commune's bank, the better to extend its holdings; and the German city of Nuremberg spent about 180,000 florins to acquire its *Neue Landschaft*. North of the Alps, these sales typically took the form of a fixed-year mortgage, whereas in Italy the purchases often were more permanent.

Sales were rarely final, but left a long paper trail. Unlike the typical functioning of the sovereign debt market through which urban oligarchs kept their cities afloat by funding their city's sover-

8 Luciano Pezzolo, "Sovereign Debts, Political Structures, and Institutional Commitments in Italy 1350–1700," in D'Maris Coffman et al. (eds.), *Questioning Credible Commitment: Perspectives on the Rise of Financial Capitalism* (New York, 2011), 169–198; Stasavage, *States of Credit*.

9 Thomas Maissen, "Inventing the Sovereign Republic: Imperial Structures, French Challenges, Dutch Models and the Early Modern Swiss Confederation," in Holenstein, Maisson, and Prak (eds.), *Republican Alternative* 125–160.

eign debts, the price of these purchases required cities to call upon the credit of their neighbors. Buyers, sellers, and lenders tied cities into complex credit relationships that required fiscal innovations to repay loans. Some cities even took out loans to buy their own rights from surrounding lords. The city of Lucca paid 100,000 florins (more than a year and a half of its revenue) to acquire its rights from the Holy Roman Emperor. Strapped for cash, Lucca borrowed from Florence, the Este of Ferrara, the Carrara of Padua, and the papacy, eventually repaying the loans through the foundation of a sovereign debt.¹⁰ Attention to the networks of intercommunal credit can reveal the relative fiscal standing of these cities as well as the intricate fiscal networks that tied cities to their neighbors.

City Leagues In addition to capital, cities across the urban belt also began to pool their militaries and economies during the late twelfth and early thirteenth century through city leagues—associations to which neighboring towns entered for the sake of security. The goals of these leagues varied. The purpose of the loose Hanseatic League was the merging of economic resources, whereas the South German Swabian Town League and the northern Italian Lombard League were formed to assert juridical independence from territorial princes and the Holy Roman Emperor. Although Scott does “not ascribe to [the city-leagues] any intrinsic state-building capacity” (30), these institutions remained key loci of regional negotiation and coordination.¹¹

The quest for collective security followed drastically different routes on either side of the Alps. By the mid-fourteenth century, the Italian leagues, which originally formed to buttress urban prerogatives against the emperor, had transformed into alliances designed to defend against the waves of mercenaries who streamed across the Alps. Such associations achieved varying degrees of success until their demise around 1400. North of the Alps, city leagues persisted into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, gradually becoming less urban as territorial lords commandeered them to achieve imperial peace and, later, the Christian Reformation. On this score, South German and northern Italian cities had much in

10 Christine Meek, *Lucca, 1369–1400: Politics and Society in an Early Renaissance City-state*, (New York, 1978).

11 Helmut Maurer (ed.), *Kommunale Bündnisse Oberitaliens und Oberdeutschlands im Vergleich* (Sigmaringen, 1987).

common with the Swiss and Dutch confederations. Both the Scott and the Gamberini and Lazzarini studies hint at a number of comparative scales that warrant closer inspection.

These criticisms by no means detract from what Scott and Gamberini and Lazzarini have achieved in these volumes or, for that matter, from the promise of comparative political history. Comparative methods could well be the antidote to historians' disciplinary drift away from other scholars interested in historical change—mainly political scientists and macro-sociologists. Comparative history can help to address such key issues as the emergence of the sovereign-territorial state, the development of new political economies, and the onset of colonial exchange. For the urban belt at least, these two studies have built a firm base for future work; each volume contains extensive, multilingual bibliographies and notes. In the end, they make a compelling case for an interdisciplinary approach to the political history of their macro-regions, paying particular attention to contingency, multiple trajectories, and complex networks. They suggest how the grand collective urban project in the premodern period—the elevation of urban communal rights; the restraint of factional discord; the expansion of communes into their hinterlands; and the formation of inter-city financial, military, and private networks—was not an individual, accidental project but a deliberately collective one. Rather than islands of capital isolated in a sea of territorial lords, the cities of Europe existed within a vast network, an urban archipelago stretching to the north and south across the middle of the continent.