Cities, "city-states," and regional states in north-central Italy

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Italy provides a significant, eloquent example of the difficulties encountered by state formation in the midst of numerous and flourishing urban centers.[1] A unitary Italian state only formed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Although this tardiness was due to many other factors besides the strength of Italy's cities, the roots of a strong municipal tradition dating back to the Middle Ages certainly held back the forces tending toward the country's territorial unification. Most notably during the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, at precisely the time when the great western monarchies were consolidating, the political system of central and northern Italy was characterized by the city-states' great fragmentation and spirit of autonomy. This situation constituted an insuperable obstacle to any prospect of national unification and a serious barrier even to the formation of smaller state organizations such as the regional states into which Italy later consolidated.

The Italian experience would seem less important if the relation between city system and state formation were conceived as linking a) urban centers having commercial and financial functions and the political character they imply with b) various formations, such as principalities, monarchies, and states, having different and conflicting political and economic objectives and intent on expansion, conquest, and territorial unification, sustained not so much by commercial as by agrarian and military social forces.[2]

The extraordinary energy and growing capacity of urban centers led paradoxically to the early elimination from central and northern Italy's political firmament of any *superior* – king, emperor, or princes. The cities transformed themselves precociously into city-states with corresponding territorial dimensions and political functions. In Italy from

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the twelfth to fifteenth centuries it was the cities that inspired and pursued conquest and state formation, although on a limited scale. They did so partly as a consequence of features that distinguished them from other European cities: they were foci not only of mercantile and artisanal classes and interests, but also of "feudal," agrarian, and military ones. Only in a few centers (typically those with the most pronounced commercial and financial character, located geographically on the margins of the city-state system) was the impulse toward the formation of territorial states weak or belated. Nevertheless they, too, heard the call, which generalized through the whole of central and northern Italy during the first decades of the fifteenth century.

The dialectic of city system and state formation thus has peculiar characteristics in Italy, forming less of a contrast than elsewhere in Europe. The role of the Italian city in processes of state unification, and consequently its position within regional states, seems distinctly different from that of cities in other parts of the continent.

The following pages will pursue these questions: 1) What were the distinctive features of Italy's communal cities? 2) What was the place of city-states in the formation of those larger territorial and centralized systems that developed in Italy between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries? 3) What accounts for the slower and contested development of the choice to establish a state and a dependent territory in some centers (notably Florence and Venice) that were more closely tied than other Italian cities to the Medieval commercial system of Europe and the Mediterranean? 4) What position did cities, whether subordinated or "dominant," maintain in the regional states of early modern times?

Distinctive features of Italy's cities

To evaluate to what degree "The city – a general phenomenon in Europe and elsewhere – could develop a life style in Italy, or a large part of it, so different from that in the cities at the other side of the Alps, less in economic affairs than in regard to politics and justice,"[3] it is important to stress again that in general Italian communes "precociously achieved full autonomy with respect to any higher authority" while "municipalities north of the Alps, whatever their juridical base of self-government or their degree of autonomy, never became totally independent of their lords."[4] Strong or weak, the Empire, kingdoms, and principalities continued to constitute the territorial structures in

which cities north of the Alps found themselves embedded. In central and northern Italy, however, these structures did not succeed in imposing themselves or even in acquiring firm roots. Territorial principalities did not succeed because they were hampered and eroded in their consolidation by the smaller lordships that grew from the proliferation of *castra* and the formation of large domains, and by the rapid political growth of the urban centers.[5] Nor did the kingdom of Italy take permanent roots; it was unable to build up structures of sufficient solidity and a dynastic tradition, and never became entirely emancipated but was instead precociously reabsorbed into the empire. The Empire itself did not succeed; as early as the second half of the twelfth and first decades of the thirteenth century, after the failure of Barbarossa's and Frederick II's attempted imperial restoration, it was excluded from the peninsula as an effective political force.[6]

It was therefore the cities, grown into strong municipal structures, that came to the fore as the chief, if not the only, actors in north and central Italy's political organization and territorial consolidation. From the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onward, a political system formed that was based on city-states: autonomous, relatively large, and internally compact, each bordering the next without serious discontinuity. As Otto of Freising noted at the time, Italy became "totally divided up among cities"; he further observed that rural lordships did not attain any important weight, being dispersed, uncoordinated by royal or princely structures, relegated to the margins of urban regions and forced to submit to the *imperium* of cities.[7]

These *civitates* were the few centers, almost all of them ancient in origin, that were able to keep on trying to impose themselves as organizational nuclei for large territories through the high Middle Ages. This vocation was often inherited from their former position as *municipia* in Roman territorial organization. Ecclesiastical functions such as a bishop's chair were added to reinforce their position. From their origins, this mixture of functions, powers, and social classes, both rural and urban, did not oppose Italian cities to the surrounding countryside but instead created a close symbiosis. This was the basis of the cities' strong capacity for influence and for polarization in themselves of interests and social forces that might have furthered the conquest and creation of the *contado*.[8]

The number of *civitates* was limited. In comparison with the rest of Europe, only a few Italian cities developed autonomous municipal

institutions and domination over a *contado* – essentially those that had already had such functions in the early days of municipal life in continuation of their traditional positions as Roman *municipia* and bishops' seats. Only these centers had the title of city, in the old and well-established meaning of capital of both a civil and an ecclesiastical district.

During the Middle Ages numerous other centers (such as Monza, Vigevano, and Prato), that achieved demographic and economic importance with thousands of inhabitants, manufacturing establishments, and trade, never obtained the title of city because they found themselves included in districts, *contadi*, and bishoprics headed by another urban center; despite many efforts, struggles, and confrontations, they never acquired the strength to change the old structure of urban districts and create the indispensable requisite for the honor to which they aspired: a space of their own. Promotions to the rank of city, which occurred frequently in Europe as a whole during the late Middle Ages, were extremely rare in Italy. Moreover, the occasional concession of the title *civitas* ran the risk of being only a name and of fading quickly into obsolescence if (as happened in some cases) it was not sustained by its indispensable correlate: the clearly acknowledged and autonomous domination of a substantial territory.

This explains the relatively low number of cities in Italy, and their greater scarcity and dispersion where their political growth was most impressive. In the Po Valley and Tuscany, for example, in a space of nearly 100,000 square kilometers only a few dozen municipalities enjoy the title of city.[9] Accordingly, the urban districts (*contadi*) are large. In that area, average sizes are 1,500 to 2,000 square kilometers, larger in the cases of the biggest cities (Milan, Bologna, and Florence) and with minima that rarely drop below 1,000 kilometers. This situation differed greatly from that beyond the Alps, where only Zurich and Nürnberg exceeded the limit of 1,000 square kilometers while even the strongest other cities had territories of a few hundred kilometers, and many had a few dozen.

It is also characteristic of the great Italian cities that they succeeded in exercising extensive powers in their districts, which were well organized, compact, and controlled in a way that was unthinkable beyond the Alps. It would be hard to find a transalpine equivalent of an Italian city's *contado*. What we might find is a mosaic of small territories in which a city exercised rights concerning taxes and justice, and other

territories in which it had minor rights exercised in competition with various claimants. The influence of a transalpine city remained weak *vis à vis* the prerogatives of lords, individual urban families, or ecclesiastical institutions. Still more indirect is the influence that large European cities sought to obtain – sometimes in vast and distant areas – by granting citizenship, enacting commercial and tax agreements, regulations for food supply, protectorates, wardships, and controls over waterways, thus defining what has been called their *Stadtraum*. This influence always remained limited to some kinds of activity: it never excluded the presence and influence in the same area of other powerful lords and potentates, who were sometimes their political and military rivals.

Control over the Italian *contado*, in contrast, was much more firm and complete. Italian cities strove systematically to eliminate all intermediary and indirect forms of government and to organize their territories into lower-level districts run by officials from the city (*podestà, vicari*); the law, the legislation, and the fiscal, juridical, and administrative rules of the city were extended to the whole territory. This process formed a unitary body in which the city was the head (as in the famous image) and the countryside, organically and inseparably linked, the members.[10] Strict economic control paralleled the territorial administration. It extended to matters of commercial and industrial policy and above all to agriculture and landed property. The *contado* thus became the natural area of expansion for urban property, which underwent continuous expansion under intensive tutelage from the city.[11] Urban landlords, in any case, had contributed to the formation of communes from their very origins.[12] All in all, as has often been pointed out, the city and the city-state represented a set of classes and interests in which, besides mercantile and artisanal actors, other forces were interested in an expansionist policy and strict control of the surrounding territory.

City-states and larger systems

All this helps explain the differences between Italy and Europe in the territorial recomposition of the late Middle Ages – or, in other words, the different place of cities in the formation of the larger and more compact political systems that can be observed in Europe as a whole during that period. North of the Alps, we generally observe antagonism between cities, on one side, and other political forces, sovereigns, and territorial princes. The political entities initiated changes in which

smaller and even larger cities did not want to participate, and which they opposed and resisted.

Situations on the two sides of the Alps differed radically. *Vis à vis* the dukes of Burgundy, Flemish cities defended their acquired position of quasi-independence with great energy and determination. *Vis à vis* the king of France, small provincial urban centers could only aspire to somewhat greater autonomy. German cities differed in other ways, perhaps more comparable to Italian ones; but even the *Freie Städte*, *Reichsstädte*, or *Landesstädte* confronted potentates who were frequently hostile, and who were strongly oriented to policies of extension and consolidation of their authority over urban centers. The German cities did not, as a rule, tend to form analogous and opposed territorial organizations; such a program would in any case have been difficult to realize, and would probably not always have fit the economic and political orientations of their leading classes.

The German situation left to cities the objective of preserving the liberties that the constitution (*Verfassung*) guaranteed them in relation to the other estates (*Stände*). Hence the character of the urban leagues (*Städtebünde*) for the defense of common economic and political interests against rival interests.[13] Hence also the importance of estates and representative assemblies, which were institutional spaces for meeting and dialogue made necessary by the coexistence within the same political system of different forces and interests. In a word, cities tended to oppose the formation of states and did not themselves initiate the process. City and state formation are an opposed pair in the lexicon of European political history.

The construction of states, as they formed in central and northern Italy from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, was on the contrary the work of cities as political organizations imbued with an interest in territorial conquest; confrontations took place between antagonistic city-states and not, or only marginally, with other political forces such as landlords or the Empire. Urban leagues also appeared in Italy, but as a rule they opposed towns to other towns, not towns to princes and lords. These conflicts, however, had as their object conquest and subordination of the territories of other city-states, which does not differentiate them from conflicts fought elsewhere by aristocrats or feudal actors. Leading classes in the towns were not only interested in commercial and industrial assets, but also aimed at territorial expansion. (Later we shall discuss the few centers that were exceptions to this rule.) Italian

political powers did not experiment at all successfully with forms of economic organization that were distinct from political forms. Their means of pursuing commercial objectives, food supply, or the control of production were oriented chiefly to political conquest and subjugation of the territory.

This background helps explain Italian politics, especially in the Po region, from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, with their endless struggles between individual cities or groups of cities; these struggles could only end with the total subjection of one city and its *contado* to a stronger one. From this resulted the formation of territorial aggregates containing several cities, aggegrates that were very labile, predestined to fall into fragments and to recompose in various shapes. It proved difficult to build up a solid system without external actors or determinants, since the existing system resulted from power relations within the urban world as they underwent hundreds of turnovers, alternating and contradictory phases, expressing a changing, uncertain hierarchy of power, hegemony, and alliances among centers.[14]

The same circumstances help account for the unusual position of the *podestà*, a figure whose Italian form did not appear in other European cities, and the peculiarities of the *signoria* within cities.[15] They also lie behind the exhausting, fluctuating struggles over the creation of dynastic states around major urban lordships in the Po region, where all these conditions had their strongest and most durable roots. The *signorie* of the Estensi, Scaligeri, Gonzaga, and Carraresi were among the most enduring. Above all, the Visconti succeeded in adding the energy of a lucky, aggressive dynasty to its base city, Milan's, old and very strong tradition of widespread influence and capacity to expand. In these dynastic states, the lord was more an organizer, mediator, and coordinator of urban interests than a statemaker aiming at the absorption of cities into his own different territorial organizations.

Commercial centers and state formation

Some great and strong centers such as Venice and Genoa (and, to a lesser degree, Florence and Pisa) were little involved in these conflicts, considering their importance. Although these centers likewise seem to have been aiming at strong political authority, they aimed less at large-scale territorial conquests than at an expansion appropriate to their commercial and industrial calling and sustained by their secure posi-

tion within the Mediterranean and European commercial systems. These different aims help explain their interest in broader and more distant targets in southern Italy or the Levant, and their involvement in conflicts and wars that were not less bitter than those fought along the Po or across the Appenines. They fought especially at sea, aiming at commercial hegemony, at colonies and maritime bases, at commercial agreements and pacts rather than at the stable occupation of territory, at least in the peninsula.[16]

The internal political evolution of these cities also differed from that of northern Italy's interior cities. Their republican institutions showed more vitality and capacity to resist, and the *signoria* was weak or absent. They met the need for internal stability by other means, chiefly through oligarchy. Their commercial patriciates were powerful, their corporate structures strong and politically active; in all these ways, these Italian cities more greatly resembled centers elsewhere in Europe.[17]

For a long time, and with relatively little variation from case to case, these cities showed little interest in territorial expansion; instead they pursued a policy of agreements and alliances aimed at the maintenance around their borders of free communes and small urban or rural lordships. Toward the end of the fourteenth century and (especially) the beginning of the fifteenth, however, the formation of robust, aggressive princely states changed the situation suddenly. The situation became more serious when the Visconti, and in particular Gian Galeazzo Visconti, led a determined, effective policy of territorial expansion, aiming to solidify their hegemony over north-central Italy by means of a great state – a new kingdom, some said, in which a stable monarchial order would be imposed on the restless urban world.

More than in the past, a confrontation between a city system and a statemaker seemed to come into the open in Italy in ways that other European regions had already experienced. On the one hand, a prince sought military conquest, the acquisition of new territory, and reorganization in terms of strong monarchial centralization. On the other hand, urban leagues (with Florence in forefront as the great animator of resistance) formed to defend a system based on the federal order of towns, republican liberties, and the ideals of civic life.[18]

The firm resistance of this urban world and its determined opposition to absorption into state structures that were so different from the old

tradition of municipal liberty played a major part in the defeat of the Visconti and in their definitive containment within Lombardy during the early fifteenth century. In similar conflicts, other European urban centers were unable to mobilize equal economic and military force. But the other, possibly even more significant, difference from the situation beyond the Alps was the gradual transformation of some of the same greater commercial centers into territorial states. This did not happen in Lucca or Siena, which were too small. It was only partly true of Genoa, which limited its territorial expansion to the arc of the Ligurian coast; Genoa was favored by its geographical location, protected by the Appenine wall, and sheltered even more by the broad, intense system of relations and alliances in which the city and its aristocracy were embedded.[19]

Florence and Venice, however, displayed the same strong tendency to create large and solidly organized dominions around themselves. In the fourteenth century, Florence had already extended its control over various centers in Tuscany, from Pistoia to Arezzo, from Prato to San Gimignano and Volterra, using forms that stood midway between a true *dominium* and a simple protectorate. Over about thirty years during and just after the period of Milanese expansion under Gian Galeazzo Visconti, however, Florence occupied various other territories, notably the Pisano, Cortona, and some places in the Appenines; it expanded its territory to about 12,000 square kilometers. More important, it launched an administrative and fiscal reorganization designed to secure much more effective control over its state.[20]

For centuries, Venice had felt no need to dominate the Terraferma; it occupied only a small strip of land protecting the lagoons, and from 1339 onward the Trevigiano. During the early fifteenth century, however, it transformed itself into Italy's mightiest territorial power. The decision was painful and controversial. It divided the Venetian ruling class in bitter antagonism because it meant a radical reversal with respect to the secular political orientations of the *Commune Veneciarum*.[21] Yet most people felt the change was inevitable. From 1404 to 1428 Venice conquered Vicenza, Feltre, Belluno, Verona, Padua, the Friuli and, beyond Lake Garda, the provinces of Brascia and Bergamo. These conquests brought Venice's boundaries within fifteen miles of Milan and brought together a territory of some 30,000 square kilometers, which comprised its Terraferma state until the end of the Republic in 1797.

The formation of a large territorial domain did not mean for Florence, much less for Venice, renunciation of their old calling as mercantile centers. On the contrary, it was conceived as a means of supporting the free, unthreatened continuation of their intense commercial activity. The new conditions, however, necessarily changed the character of the great commercial centers as they became capitals of major territorial complexes. New political orientations matured and new economic interests (such as agrarian investment, the exercise of offices in the dominion, and the control of ecclesiastical benefices) came to the fore. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the weakening of their potential as commercial and industrial centers made this side of the cities' character ever more visible. In fact, these new functions contributed greatly to the prosperity of Venice and Florence during the early modern period; in the case of Venice, they even aided the long preservation of the old republican institutions.

As for relations between Florence and Venice, on the one hand, and the state as it developed during the Renaissance, on the other, these Italian cities followed different trajectories from other great European commercial centers. They were not subordinated, even as privileged cities, to other state structures; that development would be hard to imagine in Italy. Instead, they transformed themselves into large regional states. In the context of the whole continent's experience, this is an unusual outcome, one that is hard to compare with the Helvetic Confederation, the Hanseatic League, German imperial cities or, later, the United Provinces. But Florence and Venice were able in this peculiar way to acquire firm guarantees for their independence and their potential for economic activity.

Cities in regional states

Thus the formation of a system of regional states, which often took the form of principalities, did not mean that cities decayed in the face of rising states. Although the remarkable trajectory of the independent city-state came to an end almost everywhere, its heritage still left a strong imprint on the Renaissance political order. An established historiographical tradition sees the figure of the prince and princely state structures as the most characteristic features of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. In reality, the Renaissance prince was less the result of a process directed toward the establishment of solid absolutist structures than of a personality capable of holding together a scattered,

disaggregated, fragile political order: thanks to personal talent, without the support of specific, consolidated instruments of government. These are the features of Machiavelli's *Prince*.[22] In this political system, old municipalities and their ruling classes actually kept a preponderant influence.

Lamentations about lost "liberties" certainly sounded loudly in the cities. Indeed, the establishment of principalities and regional states implied the creation of new governmental institutions that limited the autonomy of cities. The old free towns found themselves reduced to the status of "subordinate cities," of provinces within regional states. Yet belonging to a princely state did not force the old leading groups to renounce their fundamental interests and objectives or to subordinate them to new political programs. In exchange for the authority they exercised, the prince or the dominant city provided for the old needs of the urban world, such as internal peace, external defense, and a new "Italian equilibrium." It was in fact these needs that, from the thirteenth century onward, had led many citites to seek a more stable and secure order in overlordship.

In fifteenth-century regional states and principalities, what stands out is the division and complementarity of functions between a central authority and local political institutions. The situation was now therefore not so different from that in other European countries having very different traditions.[23] Yet in Italy this "dualism," which we often find in institutions of the early modern state, meant essentially a polarization between prince and cities, while feudal lords and smaller towns had much less weight. The role as full-fledged city-states inherited by cities from the municipal tradition turned out to be strong; it could be maintained to a large degree in the new state systems. The stabilization and legitimation of the preeminent position they had acquired compensated for the loss of independence.[24]

In this sense, the general political orientations of the new states, whether principalities or republics, did not break with the old ways. Especially in matters of local government, old communal institutions, such as statutes, councils, and offices, were maintained beside those of the central power. Legally or practically, large responsibilities were left to cities – a distribution of power that some historians have called a "diarchy." In particular, cities maintained extensive control over their old *contado*; this control was perhaps their greatest bulwark and chief privilege.[25]

Just as the old city states in all regions became provinces in the new regional states, so the cities gained recognition as so many provincial capitals. They were not simply neutral administrative centers, but organs disposing of their own powers and of the authority to exercise them. In matters of jurisdiction, their statutes, courts, and colleges of jurists held primacy throughout the province. In fiscal affairs, municipal institutions influenced the assessment and collection of rural taxes as they did for food supply, water, roads, and so on. To the preeminence of the city in the *contado* was added the privileged position of citizens by comparison with *comitatini*: in economic activities through the recognized rights of urban corporations; in fiscal matters, "civil" goods were not as heavily taxed as "rural" ones. In judicial action, citizens were favored over the *rustici laboratores terrarum*. As a consequence, urban-landed property penetrated more deeply into the *contado* during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[26]

It was chiefly on these foundations that Italian provincial cities maintained such a strong position in the modern era. They reveal an economic and social organization in which landed, "territorial" interests prevailed. Certainly commercial and industrial activities still constituted a significant component of many cities' economies. Within the new regional states, we can see some reorientations and shifts in productive activities and commercial roles; the cities discussed earlier experienced limits and difficulties,[27] but these problems did not restrain or strongly affect their economic potential.

These important sectors of the urban economy, however, were not by themselves sufficient to make the city, *vis à vis* the state, the interpreter and representative of mercantile or industrial interests alone. Although communal Italy did not have representative assemblies analogous to those Estates that were elsewhere the loci of negotiations with the prince, an intense, continuous dialogue went on between subordinate cities and regional states, especially during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[28] In these contacts, urban councils, merchants' colleges or various craft organizations often spoke with regard to commercial interests and various artisanal or industrial activities, above all concerning taxation. Problems related to administrative and fiscal control of the territory and to the juridical and fiscal condition of landed property, however, were much more widely discussed. These discussions testified to the strong rural and territorial markings of the urban physiognomy. The crisis of the urban economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could only accentuate this feature; a dense and still

mighty urban network became steadily more inert and lethargic: the "hundred cities of silence" evoked by Gramsci.[29]

Conclusions. Similar observations apply to cities such as Venice, Florence, Genoa, and Milan, which during the Renaissance retained their places as centers of European trade, and which also carried on vigorous manufacturing activity. These centers (which, not accidentaly, found themselves promoted to the rank of state capitals in the new political order) maintained positions of considerable strength, and contributed greatly to the image of the Italian political system as being still dominated by cities. But the sources of their strength were to be found more and more in their preeminence as political capitals rather than in the vitality of their economic role. This position survived without substantial modification, even after the crisis of the early sixteenth century. During the Italian wars, the weak, fragmented political system of the peninsula was confronted by the great European powers, which initiated the period of "foreign preponderance." The pressures and conquests of France, the Empire and then, more durably, of Spain had substantial effects and doubtless produced significant reshuffling: the definitive fall of the Florentine republic, the submission of the Sienese republic to the new grand duchy of the Medici, the substantial reduction of Bologna's and Perugia's "liberties" within the papal state.

These episodes could give the feeling of an irreversible crisis of republican and urban liberties, and so they were presented in a long historiographic tradition as the symbolic end of a glorious historical era.[30] After four centuries without *superiores* during which these anomalous and vital city-states could develop, the Italian urban world – with the exception of Venice – found itself subjugated, although in a new organization and a changed context, to the influence or dominion of great foreign political forces: a development not so different from what in previous centuries had happened in other regions of Europe that earlier had an equally fragmented urban tradition.

But even then no serious conflict arose between statemaker and city system in Italy. That for many reasons: the marginal position of Italian provinces in the whole of the Spanish empire, which a certain international equilibrium guaranteed; the propensity of the Madrid government to do little for effective state integration; the absence of religious or economic antagonisms that might have provoked conflicts similar to those occurring elsewhere (between Spain and the cities of the Netherlands, for example). The lives of great Italian centers, both those en-

tirely absorbed into the Spanish system and those, like Florence, under its influence, could go on in far-reaching autonomy.

A historiographic tradition with distant origins in nationalism and the Risorgimento insisted on the grave consequences of foreign domination: loss of liberty, taxation, economic crisis, hispanization, cultural decadence. Recent research, less conditioned by the "fundamental presuppositions of nineteenth century historiography that claimed an incompatibility in principle between civil progress and national dependence," has pointed out that Italian states enjoyed relatively wide areas of autonomous government and the opportunity to develop their own forms of social and political life.[31]

Foreign domination was not responsible, or at least not solely responsible, for the decadence and the crises. Decline seems rather to have resulted, as some economic historians have pointed out, from the progressive and slow loss of the role played by the great centers in the Medieval economic system.[32] They became increasingly inert, marginal, and secondary in the new economic world system, especially in the seventeenth century, and were unable to organize their production in new forms.[33] Venice had increasing trouble maintaining its commercial position between Europe and the Levant, fell outside the great streams of traffic, and could only find partial relief in the renewal of its manufacturing. Florence became ever more wrapped up in itself as its economy weakened steadily. During the seventeenth century Genoa lost the very strong position it had held in the Spanish financial system. Milan turned to new forms of "rural" economy, in both manufacturing and agriculture, but only in the long run did this shift stir innovation.[34] Within Italy of the late Middle Ages the cities had exercised the vital function of mediating between the agrarian economy of the south and centers of manufacturing in the north; even that function gradually wore out.[35]

The prominent position that great Italian urban centers continued to hold throughout the modern period depended on past achievements, on a *rentier* role, one might say, derived from their territorial and agrarian advantages. It did not depend on effective vitality or a capacity to tap new energy from the old resources that had fed urban growth in the past and that continued to sustain the prosperity of other great centers in the continent.

Hence, for example, the difference in economic and social style

between Venice and Amsterdam.[36] Hence, again the frequently mentioned impression of weakness, of "decadence" of Italian city-based states as compared with the place of cities in other European states. In comparison not only with the great monarchies, but even with republican and federal political organizations that had strong urban centers such as those in the Netherlands, Germany, the Baltic, and the Atlantic, Italian city-based states proved poor in capacity and willingness to take the international economic and political initiative, partly because of the lack of commercial stimuli, and partly because of high costs. [37] The case of Venice shows this clearly: it belonged among the most autonomous and active states of its size, yet could not, in the long run, sustain a high-cost, high-obligation role in the Levant. The internal order also offers a picture of relative inertia and passivity, due to the absence of reforms and the heaviness of the mechanisms for social and political change.

The imprint of the city-state, the old capacity of the Italian city to penetrate its territory broadly and deeply, and to construct solid political systems to protect its territory and itself, thus remained clearly visible until the end of the old regime, even when the old, specific forms of economic vitality of towns dwindled and were not replaced (as they were elsewhere in Europe) by other commercial or industrial activities.[38] On the eve of the eighteenth-century enlightened reforms, "agriculture and the countryside formed the heart of the problems which the Italian economy and society were facing" either in the sense that "the major forces of conservatism were nested there," or in the sense that in them "could be found all the dynamics that matured in the course of the eighteenth century."[39]

When the nineteenth century finally brought the constitution of a national monarchy in Italy, the initiative would come from a state, Savoy-Piedmont, whose social and political structure was different, and of less glorious tradition, from that of the city-based states.[40] Inversely, the rapid fall of the city-based states signals the absence of effective power to sustain them, even though their long survival testified for centuries to the vitality of Medieval urban civilization.

Notes

1. This article was translated from the Italian by Wim Blockmans and Charles Tilly.
2. See Wim Blockmans, "Economic Network and State Formation: A Comparative

View," presented to the conference on "Stadt-Bürgertum-Staat," Bielefeld, November–December 1985, and Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, editors, *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

3. E. Sestan, "La città comunale italiana dei secoli XI-XIII nelle sue note caratteristiche rispetto al movimento comunale europeo," Eleventh International Congress of Historical Sciences, Stockholm, Rapports, III, Moyen Age (Göteborg, Stockholm & Uppsala: Almquist & Wiksell, 1960), 75–79; reprinted in Sestan, *Italia medievale* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1968), 93.
4. N. Ottokar, "Comuni," in *Enciclopedia Italiana,* XI (1931) and *Studi comunali e fiorentini* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1948), 41.
5. G. Sergi, "L'Europa carolingia e la sua dissoluzione" in N. Tranfaglia and M. Firpo, editors, *La Storia II. Il Medioevo. Popoli e strutture politiche* (Turin: UTET, 1986), 231–262, and especially 250–258.
6. G. Tabacco, *Egemonie sociali e strutture politiche nel Medioevo italiano* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979). 190ff., 266ff.
7. Ottonis and Rehevini (G. Waitz and B. de Simson, editors). "Gesta Friderici I imperatoris," in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores rerum germanicarum in usum scholarium* (Hannover & Leipzig: Hahn, 1912), 116.
8. Sestan, *Italia medievale*, 105ff.
9. For the much denser urban network of some French regions, see the data in Philippe Contamine, "La noblesse et les villes dans la France de la fin du Moyen Age," *Bollettino dell'Istituto storico italiano per il Medioevo* 94 (1985), 467–468.
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15. Sestan, *Italia Medievale*, 117–120; Tabacco, *Egemonie sociali*, 352ff.
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18. D. M. Bueno de Mesquita, *Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan (1351–1402): A Study in the Political Career of an Italian Despot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941); Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); N. Valeri, *L'Italia nel'età dei principati* (Milan: Mondadori, 1966), 208ff.
19. Jacques Heers, *Gênes au XVe siècle. Activité économique et problèmes sociaux* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1961).
20. Giorgio Chittolini, *La formazione dello stato regionale e le istituzioni del contado* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), 293–352.
21. See G. Cozzi, "Politica, Società, Istituzioni" in G. Cozzi and M. Knapton, *La Repubblica di Venezia nell'età moderna* (Turin: UTET, 1986; vol. XII/1 of G. Galasso, editor, *Storia d'Italia*), 3ff.
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