Early Modern Democracy in the Grisons

Social Order and Political Language in a Swiss Mountain Canton, 1470–1620

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INTRODUCTION

Social order, politics and political language in Graubünden, 1470–1620

Among all of the temporal blessings and gifts, which God is accustomed to bestow on the human race, spiritual and worldly liberty of conscience and of self-government is by no means the least, because one can preserve one's soul, honor, body and goods through its legitimate use, and enjoy these things without vexatious compulsion and pressure. Therefore it has always and everywhere been desired and sought after by everyone as a precious valuable treasure.[1]

The form of our government is democratic; and the election and removal of all kinds of magistrates, judges and officers, both here in our free and ruling lands and in those lands subject to us, lies with our common man.[2]

Grawpündtnerische Handlungen deß M.DC.XVIII jahrs (1618)

The statements above, with their unapologetic use of the expressions "democratic" and "common man," appeared in a factional manifesto written in the "Freestate of the Three Leagues in Old Upper Rhaetia" – now the modern Swiss canton known in its three native languages as Graubünden, Grischun, or Grigioni.[3] Effectively separated from the Holy Roman Empire in 1499, the Rhaetian Freestate developed into a polity unique in early modern Europe. Multi-lingual, and after the 1520s multi-religious, the Freestate spent the stormy years of the sixteenth century governed by communal democracy according to majoritarian principles. In an age that celebrated hierarchy and divinely ordained authority, its inhabitants celebrated their "liberty of self-government," maintaining that they had no lord but God himself. Living in a confederation of autonomous political communes, the Freestate's citizens claimed the power, "according to [their] majorities, to create laws and to abrogate them, to form alliances with foreign princes and communities, to regulate peace and war, and to deliberate concerning all other matters pertaining to higher

[1] *Grawpündtnerische Handlungen*, A ii^{r}. Translated from the 52 page German edition of 1618.
[2] *Ibid.*, A ii^{v}.
[3] On names for the republic in question, see Oechsli, "Die Entstehung der Namen 'Graubünden' und 'Bündner.'"

and lesser authority."[4] Contemporary observers often described the Freestate in terms of sheer anarchy; yet this polity enjoyed relative autonomy and prosperity, if not always tranquillity, until the rising tides of confessionalism and power politics upset its internal equilibrium and submerged it in the disaster of the Thirty Years' War.

The Freestate's place in European history reflects the ambivalence of its geography, which is both central and isolated. Since the days of the Carolingian empire, the long, high mountain range at the heart of Western Europe has had seemingly contradictory effects on the inhabitants of those mountains. On the one hand, the Alps stood at the geographical center of the medieval German empire, separating two imperial heartlands, southwestern Germany and northern Italy. Almost everyone – French, English, Dutch, Slav – had to cross the Alps to get to the Mediterranean world, while Italians in turn crossed northwards to go to the courts of Germany, the universities of Paris and England, and the merchant centers of the Netherlands and the Hansa. Crowded into a few passes, all of Europe passed before the doorways of the Alpine population. On the other hand, the Alpine regions have always been marginal in a number of ways. The terrain and the climate guaranteed that they would remain economically marginal, thinly populated, and dependent on imported grain. The physical barrier they represented made them a region crisscrossed by boundaries: boundaries between kingdoms and principalities, of course, but also between language groups and cultures. The central Alps, from Sion to Innsbruck, and from Bellinzona to Lucerne, are the source of waters that run to the Mediterranean, to the North Sea, and to the Black Sea. The same watersheds also separated German, French, Italian, and Romantsch speakers, distinct in language and government even as they shared the same high mountain meadows for their cattle and goats.

Under these distinctive circumstances, it is not surprising that the political life of the central Alps was also unusual compared with that of most of Europe. The Rhaetian Freestate violated most of the patterns of early modern state formation. Not only did its inhabitants speak three languages, they were also subjects of at least three different major lords during the late Middle Ages, not to mention half a dozen local dynasties. Some were vassals of the bishops of Chur, others of the abbot of Disentis, still others came under Habsburg dominion by the end of the fifteenth century. With the onset of the Protestant Reformation, grounds for division only increased: some villages became Protestant, while others remained staunchly Catholic. Nor did any dynamic central authority or institutions bind the Freestate into a whole. On the contrary, authority was zealously protected at the local level, allowing a bare minimum of joint action to protect the Freestate's existence. Like

[4] *Grawpündtnerische Handlungen*, A ii^{v}. This passage continues the second one quoted at the head of this chapter. The word *Demokratie* is very rare in German before the seventeenth century, and in Latin works is generally seen as a negative form of popular government. GG I: 821–900, esp. 844–45.

Switzerland, the Freestate remained a confederation of quasi-sovereign entities; unlike Switzerland, where the entities were mostly large rural communes or good-sized towns, the individual units in the Freestate were mountain valleys, often with no more than a few hundred inhabitants. Yet common political institutions and a common political identity did develop in the Freestate, despite the many divisions among its population. By the late sixteenth century, moreover, this common identity was reflected in common values and shared myths about the region's history.

For all its unique characteristics, Rhaetia underwent economic and social transformations similar to those found in the rest of central Europe during this period. Agricultural colonization and political fragmentation in the high Middle Ages, contraction and retrenchment during the plague years, and the emergence of rural and urban communes as a distinctive and decisive form of social organization: all of these phenomena took place in Rhaetia, although they often took on distinctive forms as a result of local conditions. The appearance of a territorial state in Rhaetia paralleled similar developments across southern Germany, while European legal systems penetrated the region. In the southern valleys, notaries drew up Latin contracts that they recorded in their registers, while in the north petty nobles used their seals to guarantee charters written in German. Latin statutes reflecting Italian developments were drawn up in the Engadine even as German-speaking communes codified their common law in the north.

In most of Europe's republics, narrow elites came to monopolize political power during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Many of the Italian city-states became autocratic, or, as in Venice, laid an increasing emphasis on birth over talent as a qualification for office. A similar process was under way in Swiss and German cities, as the ranks of political citizenship were closed to newcomers. Comparable developments began in the Freestate as well, yet in Rhaetia the principle of majority rule actually increased in importance between 1520 and 1620. Such rule was frequently turbulent, however. Modern historiography has generally accepted the judgment of the seventeenth century, that the Rhaetian Freestate was weak and anarchic, and that foreign influence was the primary factor in its eclipse from 1620 to 1639. Even Swiss historians who praise its democratic tendencies conclude that the absence of central authority condemned the Freestate to an impotence remedied only by the more oligarchic regime established after 1639.

Most inhabitants of the Freestate in the late sixteenth century would not have agreed with this assessment. They repeatedly attempted to reform their constitution so as to prevent governmental corruption. Moreover, the direction of these reforms was exactly the opposite of what we might expect: in 1603, when the situation seemed graver than ever, the Great Reform devolved *more* authority onto the Freestate's constituent communes, rather than strengthening the central government. Obviously, the reformers' assumptions about what values were paramount in a political system, and about where the greatest dangers to their freedom

lay, were quite different from those held by contemporary theorists of absolutism and centralization. In the early seventeenth century, during a political crisis that nearly destroyed the Freestate, some Rhaetians also claimed that the government they lived under was democratic. This study attempts to trace the political culture and political experience that led up to such statements, looking not only at institutions and at the exercise of power, but also at the social practice of the peasants and village magnates who inhabited the Freestate of the Three Leagues.

An outpouring of political texts after 1607 sought to explain and justify Graubünden's communal government to its participants and to the rest of Europe. Some authors combined feudal and humanist models in defense of Rhaetian liberty, while others drew upon their communal experience to propose a radically populist interpretation of the Rhaetian republic. The latter are particularly interesting because they expressed ideas we otherwise glimpse only in revolutionary manifestos or eccentric utopias – ideas that were usually suppressed or marginalized by a European power structure committed to hierarchy and "natural" authority. But radical political language in Rhaetia was no aberration or individual fantasy: instead, a century's experience of communal politics on a national scale combined with a domestic and international political crisis around 1620 to produce a burst of texts expressing communal ideas about political authority and legitimacy. Despite the sometimes fragmentary and incoherent character of populist texts, they represented a creative attempt to capture their authors' practical experience in a vocabulary drawn largely from quite different political world-views. Radical communal rhetoric from Graubünden provides a window into a conceptual world that extended far beyond Switzerland, moreover, although it was Graubünden's atypical circumstances that made its expression possible.

Aside from their sheer unusualness, political thought and practice in Rhaetia are potentially interesting for two major trends in the study of early modern Europe. First, the Rhaetian situation adds an important viewpoint to current scholarship about European peasants and their relationships to larger political systems. Generations of historians have assumed that most peasants were politically inert, at most rising up unpredictably in the name of "tradition" and their good old customs. Recent work, especially by German and American scholars, has attempted to recreate the peasantry as an actor in the political history of European nations, and to show how peasants' understanding of their own situation and interests influenced the way they interacted with their lords, especially when they chose to rebel. In most of Europe, in fact, rebellion is the only time we see peasants as autonomous political actors, which explains why scholarship has generally focused on events such as the German Peasants' War of 1525.[5] In Rhaetia, in contrast, peasants were actively involved in creating a new and distinctive state. For once, we

[5] Most lasting of the wave of scholarship that accompanied the 450th anniversary of the German Peasants' War has been Peter Blickle's *The Revolution of 1525*.

can see them acting as the legitimate bearers of political authority, rather than as desperate rebels or sullen subjects. Naturally, the Rhaetian peasants in their communes had to contend with entrenched power structures and ambitious leaders of their own; nevertheless, their position was nearly unique in early modern Europe, and provides a revealing contrast to the much more restricted role they usually played elsewhere.

The history of political culture in Graubünden can also contribute to the study of European political theory in general. Recent work on the history of political ideas has focused on "languages" or "idioms" that European thinkers used to express their understanding of human societies in history. This linguistic metaphor is a powerful way of representing political thought: it can accommodate both dissonance and change without reducing discussion to "unit ideas" or endless strings of "influences." It allows us to outline cohesive political world-views without insisting on perfect systems and total coherence.[6] Anthony Pagden has recently identified the four most important political idioms in early modern Europe as the language of natural law, the language of classical republicanism, the language of political economy, and the modern science of politics.[7] The language of communalism, if we may call it that, that was found in Rhaetia was less clearly articulated and less consistently disseminated than Pagden's major traditions, but for the historian interested in the structure of human action as well as the transmission of ideas, it was of comparable importance. Too many historians have demonstrated the tenacious hold that such ideas had for Europe's "common man," both in the towns and in the countryside, for them to be ignored.[8] Communal values displayed the persistent ability to organize and motivate direct action by large numbers of people, and cannot be dismissed in the study of politics and political change during this era. Just as English history and the experiences of common lawyers provide a background for interpreting seventeenth-century rhetoric about the "Ancient Constitution" of Britain, so does the practical organization and the ideology of late medieval village life in Graubünden provide an unusual window on the conceptual world of communal politics across a large part of Central Europe. Much of this study is therefore intended to explain the origins of the "political languages" that appeared in the region's literature, especially around 1620.

Yet a linguistic metaphor for political ideas can be confining if one's object of study is not political texts themselves, but rather the collective experience of a people living in a specific polity. As J. G. A. Pocock and his colleagues freely admit, neither *mentalité* nor human action is central to the kind of research they

[6] Pocock, "The concept of a language." See also Melvyn Richter, "Reconstructing the history of political languages: Pocock, Skinner, and the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*," *History and Theory*, 29, 1 (1990): 38–70.

[7] Anthony Pagden's own introduction to Pagden, *The Languages of Political Theory*, 3.

[8] See esp. Blickle, *The Communal Reformation*.

do.[9] Different jobs require different conceptual tools: since this study attempts to trace both language and action from the Rhaetian Freestate's emergence in the mid-fifteenth century until its near destruction in the early seventeenth, it will also draw upon the broader category of "political culture." By "political culture" I understand the whole complex of ideas, assumptions, reflexes, specific language, and expectations that the inhabitants of Graubünden held about the nature and conditions of their collective existence. Such a broad definition ensures that all aspects of political life will be included. It recognizes that political culture organizes action as well as knowledge, providing patterns for response to various situations as well as values useful in interpreting one's predicament.[10]

Political culture can be usefully divided into unselfconscious and self-conscious parts. The former may include unexamined assumptions about how individuals and groups should interact, reflexive reactions to certain problems, and ideas about "human nature" and the nature of the universe – the whole range of phenomena that can also be gathered under the rubric *mentalité*.[11] For the historian, unselfconscious political culture is difficult to investigate; often it must be deduced from the actions of individuals in specific situations. Self-conscious political culture includes openly expressed ideologies, the purposeful self-representation of individuals in their political context, explanations of their situation to outsiders, and all forms of persuasive rhetoric and propaganda directed to political ends. Most of the evidence in textual sources is relevant primarily to self-conscious political culture, although routine documents often contain clues to unselfconscious values as well.

There is no reason to believe that the political culture of the Rhaetian Freestate (or of any polity) formed a single coherent whole. On the contrary, political ideas are almost always controversial, discursive, and entwined with other spheres of interest. Nor should we assume that every *Bündner* had a coherent set of ideas about politics at any given moment: the evidence from Graubünden suggests that people held ideas about politics that seem contradictory if we try to order them into a single system. Indeed, much of our source material is a direct consequence of the controversial nature of political ideas. People argued, disputed, and attempted to convince one another or a more general audience; in doing so, they left evidence about what they thought, or what they wanted others to believe they thought. Their arguments relied on ideas that were emotionally loaded and rhetorically effective, whatever their origins. Even so, there was some consistency to the Rhaetians'

[9] Pocock, "The concept of a language," 22, 36–38. More generous about the connections between political ideas and political action is Skinner, *Foundations*, I: xi–xii.

[10] Rohe, "Politische Kultur," 326. Rohe emphasizes that "political culture" is a useful viewpoint because it allows us to analyze the connection between "Einstellungen *und* Verhaltensmuster."

[11] Rohe, "Politische Kultur," 336–37, who agrees that political culture is "mehr oder minder gleichbedeutend mit politischer Mentalitätsforschung," though he emphasizes that it implies an expressive dimension as well as a set of ideas.

political culture. Certain connections among ideas were immediately plausible to audiences within the Freestate, whereas others could be adopted only at the expense of becoming an outsider in the political debates then taking place. People were more willing to act upon some appeals than upon others, and experience and observation about how the Freestate was in fact ruled constrained the ways in which its government could be described.

The study of any real polity therefore requires that one study its institutions as well. To quote John Najemy, "it was in the matrix of institutions that the fundamental assumptions of political life, and ultimately of political thought, gathered concrete significance and precise definition" in the minds of the Rhaetians.[12] By arguing and fighting about which of their institutions were legitimate, and what ought to be changed to increase their legitimacy, Rhaetians often revealed their assumptions about what made a political order legitimate in general. Most of what they said was about the concrete political world they took part in – its specific characteristics, the specific measures needed to improve it, the specific ways in which they could bring their own interests to fruition. To understand the unusual language found in the Freestate around 1620, therefore, we must look both at political values and at institutional practice before that time. The sum of all these considerations should provide an understanding of the Rhaetians' political culture.

Two parallel paths provide the structure for this study. The first is chronological, covering the Freestate's history from about 1450 to 1620. Rather than forming a simple progression, however, the narrative chapters focus on the political predicament faced by the Freestate and its inhabitants during various stages of its history. This predicament changed fundamentally as Rhaetia's internal organization and international environment were transformed. Chapter 2 covers the period before 1520. Why and how communes should join into leagues represented the key issue during the late fifteenth century, as Rhaetians from all estates sought to maintain public peace and establish local autonomy in the face of the collapsing feudal order in the region. Who should inherit what parts of the lords' authority dominated politics during the early sixteenth century, leading up to the promulgation of a group of fundamental constitutional documents between 1524 and 1526. Chapter 4 turns to the consolidation of institutions and power systems that took place after the 1520s, and to the beginnings of a growing rift between the local elite and the remainder of the population. Finally, chapter 6 covers the rise and fall of a reform movement after 1580, and the resultant breakdown of relations among various political forces in the Freestate through the year 1620. After that, foreign manipulation overwhelmed domestic forces in the region, leading to deep-seated changes in the social balance of power between communes and their leaders.

[12] John M. Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280–1400* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 15.

Certain themes run throughout this long century of Rhaetian history: the growing power and legitimacy of communal entities, the shifting balance between hierarchical and horizontal models of political authority, and the growing power of a new local elite that was mirrored by the growing frequency of popular tumults. All of these are discussed in detail throughout the book. I have, in contrast, spent little time on economic developments and limited my analysis of religion to its political dimension, not because other approaches would be fruitless, but because attempting a more comprehensive view would make this study conceptually as well as materially unwieldy.

Parallel to the chronological progression described above, the remaining chapters follow a trajectory from social practice to ideological expression, and from the local community to the Freestate as a whole. Chapter 1 investigates the detailed model of rural organization developed by historians of late medieval southern Germany during the last few decades, and illustrates the model's applicability to Graubünden. The resulting paradigm represents a crucial foundation for this study for two reasons: first, because it provides an explanatory framework for the poorly documented early history of communes in Graubünden, and second, because it places Rhaetian history in a larger regional context, thus establishing its relevance to the history of communalism elsewhere. The chapter also considers other models of social order, such as late feudalism and neo-Stoicism, that had some influence in Graubünden. Chapter 3 turns to the specific political practices that evolved in Rhaetian village communes, and shows how these influenced the construction of the entire Rhaetian Freestate. It goes on to describe the institutional structure of the Freestate as it matured during the sixteenth century, and also considers how the Freestate's institutions actually functioned.

Chapter 5 turns from formal organization to the actual exercise of power in Rhaetia. A new social and political elite that appeared after 1500 provides the starting point: wealth, prestige and military leadership all contributed towards defining a new cohort of powerful families who attempted to monopolize offices and decision-making in the late sixteenth century. The reasons they did not entirely succeed form the remainder of the chapter. Even though a relatively small group of men normally kept control over the political process in the Freestate, the universal acceptance of communal values constrained their action in various ways. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, Rhaetian leaders increasingly feared direct political action by the communes. Popular action might find its origin in feuds within the leading group, but it also reflected common men's conviction that final authority in the Freestate belonged to them. Finally, chapter 7 analyzes the propaganda and rhetoric that appeared after 1600, when it became increasingly clear that the Freestate's institutions could no longer bridge the gap between elite self-perception and communal values. Confronted with a crisis of both authority and power, various thinkers tried to justify the Freestate's existence in various ways: both history and abstract liberty were pressed into service as fundamental

sources of legitimacy, while a few embittered aristocrats even denied that the Freestate had any right to exist at all.

The following study therefore has both a narrative and an analytic dimension. I hope that the systematic explanation of this particular region's history will expand our understanding about the range of social and cultural orders that were possible in early modern Europe. Sixteenth-century Graubünden was different not only from twentieth-century North America, but also from many European societies of its own era. Its history therefore provides a novel perspective on the process of political and ideological change that was under way around 1600.