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First published 2013 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978–0–230–53685–2

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

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# Contents

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<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Editors' Preface</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Notes on the Text</i>	x
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Definitions, themes and chronological scope	2
Historiographical approaches	4
<b>PART I Case studies</b>	
<b>1 The Italian City</b>	<b>11</b>
Urban society and the birth of the commune	12
Proliferation and perceptions of communes	16
Power and participation	18
City culture	20
Renaissance and early modern developments	22
Summary	23
<b>2 The Village in the Holy Roman Empire</b>	<b>25</b>
Origins and early evolution	25
Village culture	28
Political life	31
Relations with princes, lords and emperors in the early modern period	35
Summary	38

*Contents*

<b>3</b>	<b>The English Parish</b>	<b>40</b>
	Emergence and consolidation of the parochial system	40
	Parish government and parish records	42
	Parish life and parish culture	44
	Reformation and early modern developments	47
	Summary	51
<b>PART II Local Communities in Comparative Perspective</b>		
<b>4</b>	<b>Communal Cultures</b>	<b>55</b>
	Community formation	55
	Membership	57
	Communal bonds	58
	Inner tensions	60
	Resources and revenues	66
	Communal values	67
	Political life in local communities	71
	Communication and representation	73
	Summary	76
<b>5</b>	<b>Interactions</b>	<b>78</b>
	Local and regional landscapes	78
	Local communities and their lords	84
	Relations with central authorities	89
	Summary	92
<b>PART III Assessment</b>		
<b>6</b>	<b>Perceptions and Debates</b>	<b>97</b>
	Communal self-perceptions	97
	Communal culture and pre-modern thought	104
	Current approaches and debates	107
	Summary	116
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>118</b>
	<i>Bibliography</i>	122
	I. <i>Primary sources</i>	122
	II. <i>Secondary literature</i>	125
	III. <i>Web resources</i>	142
	<i>Index</i>	144

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# Introduction

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This is a book about an empowering force in European history. Lacking privileges conveyed by birthright (like the nobility) or religious authority (like the clergy), the common people acquired social and political influence through association. From the High Middle Ages, out of a variety of causes, Europeans developed local communities in which they organized public affairs with at least partial autonomy and relatively broad participation. These became the chief frameworks for the articulation of interests by burghers and peasants until the rise of general enfranchisement in the modern period. The following chapters offer an introductory survey to the ‘Communal Age’ in western Europe between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries. In an attempt to overcome common demarcations in the field, the perspective extends over different settings (urban, rural), spheres (secular, ecclesiastical), timeframes (medieval, early modern) and regions (especially English-, German- and Italian-speaking areas).

At the centre of attention, therefore, are the towns, villages and parishes in which people lived. The first two settlement types dominated the secular landscape: villages provided homes and protection for the peasantry, i.e. the vast majority of pre-modern Europeans, while a much smaller number of towns distinguished themselves by a separate legal status and a stronger focus on market exchange. Parishes, the basic units of the ecclesiastical network, cut across this urban/rural divide by providing every man, woman and child with access to the Christian sacraments and a place of worship in the local church. At first sight, therefore, the three types of association appear quite distinct, but – once we turn to underlying structures, collective activities and cultural values – they also had much in common. The ensuing survey attempts to assess these similarities, differences and their wider significance for pre-modern

European society. Following remarks on definitions, thematic structure, regional coverage and chronological scope, the remainder of this Introduction summarizes the state of scholarship and the principal research questions underlying the argument.

### **Definitions, themes and chronological scope**

The notion of ‘community’ continues to fascinate scholars as well as a wider public, particularly at a time when a process of accelerated ‘globalization’ threatens to efface regional identities and loosen small-scale associations [49; 47; 303]. This is not, however, a book about the concept of ‘community’ in general. Mindful of legitimate reservations against its proliferation, ambiguity and indiscriminate application (George A. Hillery identified roughly a hundred varieties well over fifty years ago [53]), the focus here lies on bonds of a very specific nature. Terminological definition thus forms an essential first task.

Throughout this study, the phrase ‘local communities’ will be used as a generic term for small-scale topographical units, in which more or less extensive bodies of (male) members utilized shared resources and institutions to exercise a range of rights and duties on behalf of their fellow inhabitants. The combined features of *locality*, *spatial* circumscription, *horizontal* social organization, (relative) *inclusiveness*, *multifunctionality* and collective *liability* distinguish local communities from other types of association built on *biological* or *cultural* affinities (e.g. families/ethnicities), *personal* power (noble leagues), *vertical* subordination (manors, clientele systems), *spiritually* motivated separation (religious orders, sects), *central* direction (states) and *specific* shared interests (scientific networks, religious fraternities, political parties). ‘Local community’ is preferred over ‘commune’ because of the latter’s predominantly secular and political connotations. The principal types of towns, villages and parishes, furthermore, will be reassessed in the light of both traditional scholarly priorities – like their constitution and social structure – and more recent ‘cultural’ approaches – i.e. with sensitivity to their identities, representations, inter-personal relationships, dynamic evolution and often fluid boundaries [238; 278].

Concentration on local communities as defined above does not imply that other types of association were of little importance.

*Introduction*

Corporations of various kinds, such as *Alpgenossenschaften* in mountainous areas, or craft guilds in towns, united members with shared socio-economic interests; religious houses provided intercessory and charitable services for the local laity; wards and neighbourhoods served a wide range of administrative and practical purposes; bodies of court jurors and representative assemblies fostered further ties within districts and counties. All of these would have to be taken into consideration for a full assessment of socio-cultural organization, but none acquired quite the same overarching local position as towns, villages and parishes. Neighbourhoods functioned as sub-units of larger urban entities; hundreds and counties represented organs of central government; while socio-economic corporations usually focused on the control of specific resources (like trades, pastures or forests). Yet the boundaries were blurred, and closer investigations into the manifold connections and overlaps remain a task for future research.

Part I of this book provides the empirical foundations through brief overviews of paradigmatic case studies. Focusing on regions where the respective units were particularly strong, we shall look in turn at the 'Italian city', the 'German village' and the 'English parish'. The purpose of these broad overviews is to distil the complexity of actual situations into 'ideal types'. Rather than on exhaustive chronological coverage from 1100 to 1800, the emphasis lies on key themes, such as the emergence, characteristics and transformations of the communal principle. Part II then proceeds to a wider comparative analysis of common features, contextual variables as well as interactions with other local, regional and central bodies. Given the ubiquity of all local communities – there were, of course, parishes on the Italian peninsula, villages in England and numerous towns in the Holy Roman Empire, the results should yield insights for western European society more generally. Eastern parts of the Continent, where feudal powers remained considerably stronger and urbanization relatively less advanced, lie beyond the scope of this inquiry, even though communal structures were certainly not absent there [243; 200]. Part III, finally, focuses on period perceptions, conceptual models and current debates, i.e. the ways in which contemporaries as well as modern observers have engaged with the role of urban, rural and parochial communities in European history.

The chronological scope of this study is large, perhaps over-ambitious. It starts in the High Middle Ages, the time of the first

*The Communal Age in Western Europe, c.1100–1800*

firm evidence for ‘local communities’ in the narrower sense, and extends over several centuries right up to the Atlantic Revolutions of the late eighteenth century, i.e. the moments when ‘equality’ and *universal* political rights became fundamental constitutional principles (not always, of course, fully implemented in practice). The latter part of this timespan, from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, is often linked with the ‘rise of the individual’, i.e. a period in which confessional division, educational opportunities, growing commercialization and economic self-interest weakened collective bonds, creating tensions within local communities which will need to be addressed in Chapter 4 [237; 242]. It goes without saying that the long-term perspective necessitates a concentration on principal features, prevalent patterns and general change rather than a detailed appreciation of the heterogeneity of situations on the ground. Pre-modern history is rightly characterized as primarily local, and few of this book’s findings will be applicable in full for all specific environments, but the main objectives are to lay the foundations, to establish a comparative framework and to propose preliminary conclusions on the nature and significance of the Communal Age in European history. In line with the remit of the ‘Studies in European History’ series, the argument aims for a balanced discussion of sources, methods and concepts, but also for a fresh interpretation of the phenomenon as a whole. As always, such an account can be neither unbiased nor ‘objective’. The author, to lay the cards on the table, leans towards a ‘bottom-up’ school of historiography, seeing the historical process as shaped, if not driven, by the ‘many’ rather than the ‘few’.

### **Historiographical approaches**

Scholarship in the field is of a bewildering richness and variety. Historiographies of individual regions, types, periods and processes all have a bearing on the study of local communities, not to speak of the various scales – from micro to macro – and national traditions [236]. Again, it would be futile to aim for comprehensive coverage (and indeed even listing) of all relevant contributions. The emphasis has to be on comparative and general works. Naturally, studies in English predominate, but – given the wider geographical scope – many important French, German and Italian

*Introduction*

titles will also be drawn upon. An annotated list of further reading can be found at the end of the book. The bibliography is divided into primary sources, secondary literature and online materials, each in turn arranged into thematic sections.

So where to start? Two essential points of reference are the works of Otto von Guericke and Ferdinand Tönnies first published in the late nineteenth century. The former studied the long-term development of the phenomenon of association (*Genossenschaft*) as a whole, particularly from a legal and Germanic perspective, covering phenomena as varied as guilds, clubs, sects as well as local communities [50], while Tönnies traced the gradual transformation from a ‘natural’ society based on custom, personal bonds and shared resources (which he termed *Gemeinschaft*) to one defined by man-made rules, contractual agreements and private property (*Gesellschaft*) [65b]. For much of the twentieth century, where constitutional history loomed large, we find sustained interest in the medieval concept of *universitas*, an umbrella term for different types of association linking people with shared interests, common rules and independent institutions – including bodies as diverse as monasteries, towns and universities [56]. Alongside, students of political thought focused on the ‘great minds’ and intellectual schools which generated new ideas and ultimately transformed the ways communities, especially in northern Italy and England, were organized [224]. From our perspective, works on guilds (including both secular craft associations as well as religious fraternities), the conciliar movement (which placed the collective power of assembled Church prelates above that of an individual pope), and the development of republicanism are of particular interest [210; 259; 231; 219]. For the latter, concerned with polities in which sovereignty rested in a wider body of citizens rather than a single monarch, scholars usually draw a pretty straight line from classical models – Aristotle’s Greek *polis*, where the need for face-to-face exchange among equals limited the size to a few thousand inhabitants [33: iii. 17, vii. 4] – via the constitutional debates of the Italian Renaissance, English seventeenth-century revolutions and the Enlightenment – represented by jurists and philosophers like Bartolus of Sassoferrato, Machiavelli, James Harrington, Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – to the proto-democratic revolutionaries of the Atlantic world [222].

While of unquestionable contextual relevance, the above are probably not the best places to start investigations of local communities



*The Communal Age in Western Europe, c.1100–1800*

as just defined. Neither are many of the older specialized studies, because of the marked broadening of historiographical agendas over the last generation. The closing decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of, first, social and economic approaches and, more recently, the cultural turn. History as an academic discipline now aspires to capture the entire range of past human interactions, i.e. not just facts, deeds and ideas relating to elites, but also the contributions, perceptions and values of humbler groups. Over and beyond the legal, constitutional and intellectual framework of associations, therefore, relevant works – including those of the ‘new’ political history (which applies a broad cultural approach to the study of government at all levels) – are now expected to address issues like social composition, economic importance, everyday practice, communication structures, gender roles, symbolic representations and spatial constitutions [254]. As yet, many answers remain elusive, not least due to the fragmentary and terse nature of primary sources, but innovative studies like those of Richard C. Trexler (on civic ritual), Katherine French (on late medieval gender roles), and Rudolf Schlögl (on early modern communication systems) provide tasters of what can be achieved [111; 174; 103].

Regional and period-specific surveys of towns, villages and parishes as well as essay collections on the wider concept of community offer the most convenient introductions to date. Léopold Genicot and Jerome Blum examine developments in the pre-modern countryside [132; 121; cf. 123]; Mack Walker, Eberhard Isenmann, Marino Berengo and Christopher Friedrichs discuss towns [114; 86; 69; 81]; a number of anthologies address medieval parishes [183; 190]; Tom Scott and Richard Mackenney offer comparative studies of city states [105; 92]; Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington survey community studies for early modern England [64], Robert Armstrong and Tadhg hAnnracháin for early modern Ireland [38] and Michael Halvorson and Karen Spierling for Europe as a whole [51]. Charles H. Parker and Jerry H. Bentley adopt a yet wider comparative scale [58], while Anthony Molho, Diogo Ramada Curto and Niki Koniordos focus on related discourses and perceptions [57]. All of these works offer distinctive approaches to key themes such as forms of community, inner structures, conflicting loyalties, patterns of inclusion/exclusion and trends over time.

For theoretical guidance, however, pride of place belongs to Peter Blicke’s concept of ‘communalism’ (discussed in more detail

*Introduction*

in Chapter 6 [42]), which embeds the constitutional and ideological affinities of German towns and villages into a much wider interpretive framework for pre-modern Europe. Many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences provide additional methodical tools to study networks and hierarchies of communal units [66], while the late twentieth-century ‘communitarian’ movement attempted to re-balance the weight of individual interests and the needs of wider societies [230]. Closer integration of sociological, anthropological and philosophical perspectives clearly provides a fruitful challenge for future investigations.

Last but not least, numerous sceptical voices have to be taken into account. The concern about terminological imprecision has already been mentioned, but other common charges include the tendency of ‘community studies’ to romanticize the past by packing it with homogeneous *Gemeinschaften* [267]; to downplay structural tensions within towns, villages and parishes [63]; to ignore the strength of individualist forces [256] and to exaggerate continuities between medieval communes and modern political systems [220]. ‘What is common in community’, as David Sabean famously stated, ‘is not shared values so much as the fact that members of a community are engaged in the same argument’ [145: 29–30].

Such reservations need to be taken seriously, but – as the following chapters aim to demonstrate – they do not overturn the historical role and relevance of towns, villages and parishes throughout the areas examined here (and, as an extension of the regional scope to Scandinavia would surely underline, beyond). As long as ‘community’ is not merely understood as a vague sense of belonging, but a conceptual tool to analyse networks of relationships prompting members to take specific actions, it retains the ability to illuminate ‘a very significant part of social life’ in pre-modern Europe [45: 127]. It is hoped that the ensuing argument will substantiate this point.



# Index

Page numbers in *italics* indicate illustrations

- abbots/abbesses *see* prelates  
 absolutism, 38, 72, 110  
 account(s), 42–3, 46–7, 49, 59, 88  
 accountability, 19, 71–2, 77, 120  
 Adler, Benjamin, 114  
 age, 57  
 agency 111; and *see* collective  
     action  
 agrarian crisis, 27  
 agriculture, 12, 25, 27–8, 56, 58,  
     66, 69, 84, 108, 111  
 Alba, 15  
 alliances *see* leagues  
 Alps, 17, 24–6, 34–5, 80–1, 100, 113  
 Alsace, 98, 104  
 Althusius, Johannes, 106  
 America, 112  
 Ammann, Hektor, 82  
 Amsterdam, 98  
 ancestors, 89  
 anthropology, 7  
 anticlerical(ism), 13, 86–7  
 antiquity, 69, 100, 104, 112, 114  
 Apian, Phillip, 98  
 appeals, 15  
 arbitration *see* jurisdiction,  
     mediation  
 architecture, 20–2, 21, 45, 64, 75,  
     99, 114  
 archives, 19, 31, 58, 75, 85  
 Arezzo, 13  
 aristocracy, 12–13, 18, 23, 57, 81,  
     109, 112, 119  
 Aristotle, 5, 75, 104, 112  
 Armstrong, Robert, 6  
 army *see* military affairs  
 art, artists, 20, 22, 45–6, 60, 73, 74,  
     75, 99, 111  
 artisans, 17, 27, 44  
 Ashburton, 42–3, 45, 50, 78  
 assemblies, 11, 14–15, 22, 30, 33,  
     43, 47, 49, 57–8, 62, 65, 71,  
     76, 79, 81, 88, 92, 102, 106,  
     110, 113–14; *see also* councils,  
     representative assemblies,  
     vestries  
 association, 1–2, 5–6, 18, 40, 62,  
     78, 80–1, 106–7, 117, 119  
 Asti, 14  
 Atlantic, 4–5, 24, 112; and *see*  
     revolutions  
 audits, 72  
 Augsburg, 25, 82  
 Austria, 38  
 authorities, authority, 1, 16–18, 31,  
     34–5, 37–9, 42–4, 48–9, 52, 56,  
     68–9, 76, 86–92, 110–11, 120  
 autonomy, 1, 9, 17, 23, 25, 28, 31,  
     32, 33, 35, 56, 58, 81, 85, 92, 104,  
     109, 111, 114, 118, 120  
 Baldus de Ubaldis, 104  
 Ball, John, 70  
 Baltic, 111  
 Baptists, 105  
 Barcelona, 65  
 Bartolus of Sassoferrato, 5, 19  
 Basel, 82–3

## Index

- Bassano, 14  
 Bavaria, duchy/electorate, 91, 98, 103  
 beggars *see* poor  
 bells, belltower, 22, 30, 97, 103  
 belonging, 7, 29, 57, 97, 118  
 benefaction, 59, 63, 89, 104  
 benefice, 41, 88  
 Bentley, Jerry H., 6  
 Berengo, Marino, 6  
 Bern, Republic of, 64, 67, 72, 100, 103, 106, 114  
 Bible, 37, 48, 71, 87, 89, 105  
 bishops *see* prelates  
 Black, Antony, 112  
 Black Death, 27, 76, 84  
 Black Forest, 63  
 Blicke, Peter, 6, 85, 105–10  
 Blum, Jerome, 6  
 Bodin, Jean, 106, 114  
 Bohemia, 72  
 Bologna, 13, 20  
 bonds *see* community  
 border *see* boundaries  
 boundaries, 2–3, 15, 40, 49, 58, 64–5, 76, 78–81, 83, 97–8, 118–19  
 Boxford, 50  
 Brandenburg-Prussia, 85  
 Braun, Georg, 98  
 Brechershäusern, Jost von, 103  
 Bremen, 59, 68  
 Bristol, 43, 47, 58–9  
 brokers, 44  
 Bucer, Martin, 104  
 Burckhardt, Jacob, 22–3  
 bureaucracy, 28, 35, 49, 71, 73, 90, 114  
 burghers, 15–16, 18, 26, 36, 59, 61, 79, 81–2, 88, 100, 105, 107–8, 113–15, 119  
 Burke, Peter, 58  
  
 Calvin(ism), 48, 89, 111  
 Cambridge, 72  
 Camenzind family, 60–1  
 Canaletto, Antonio, 74  
 canon law, 40–1, 46, 51  
 capital(ism), 12, 16, 60  
 carnival, 20, 30, 64  
 case studies, Part I  
 Catholicism, 47–8, 83, 87, 89, 104–5  
 celebrations *see* festive culture  
 cemetery, 91  
 central(ity), centralization, 2–3, 89–92, 114, 120; central government, 22–3, 52, 91; central place, 82  
 ceremonies, 20, 45, 59, 69, 72–3, 74, 76, 109, 113, 120; and *see* ritual  
 chantries, 45, 50  
 chapels, 32, 33, 43, 64, 83  
 charity *see* poor relief  
 charivari, 30, 64  
 Charles the Bold of Burgundy, 99  
 Chester, 49  
 Christ(ianity), 67, 86–7, 89, 107; Christianization, 105; and *see* Church, religion  
 Christaller, Walter, 82  
 chronicles, 13, 31, 34–5, 58, 61, 70, 100, 102–3, 114; and *see* historiography  
 Chur, 81  
 Church (institution), 5, 14, 37–8, 40, 51, 56, 59, 78, 86–8, 105, 120  
 church ales, 63  
 church courts *see* ecclesiastical courts  
 Church of England, 47–8  
 churches, 1, 18, 20, 22, 27, 30–1, 56, 64, 85, 89, 103–4; and *see* chapels, parish churches, religious houses  
 churching, 45  
 churchwardens, 41–4, 46–7, 49, 59, 72; and *see* accounts  
 churchyard *see* cemetery  
 Cicero, 102  
 Cirencester, 49, 63  
 citizens *see* burghers  
 city *see* towns  
 city states, 6, 11, 13, 15, 17, 23, 25, 79, 84, 90, 92

## Index

- civic (duties/rights), 6, 14, 17–20, 22, 58–9, 72–3, 74, 75–6, 79, 84–5, 99, 102, 113–14, 116
- civil society, 79, 113–14
- civil wars, 51, 60, 89, 103
- clergy, 1, 12, 19, 31, 36–7, 41, 43, 45, 57, 64, 67, 86–7, 89, 99–100, 103, 105, 119
- clients *see* patronage
- clubs, 5
- coffee houses, 75
- collective action, 12–13, 26–7, 32, 40–3, 46, 56, 60–1, 85, 108–10, 119
- Cologne, 65, 76, 98
- colonization, 25, 55, 69
- commemoration *see* memory
- commerce *see* trade
- common chest, 88
- common good, 13, 15, 30, 68–9, 80, 86, 88, 100, 102, 107–8, 114, 120
- common land, 26, 33, 36, 66, 83
- common law, 42
- common man *see* common people
- common people, 1, 16–17, 19, 28, 34–5, 86, 105, 108, 110, 119–20; and *see* *popolo*
- communal–manorial dualism, 35
- communalism, 6–7, 86, 107–10, 117
- communalization, 56, 67, 77, 105, 120
- commune, 2, 11–24; and *see* local communities
- communication, 6, 46–7, 73–7, 110, 118, 120
- communitarian(ism), 7, 116
- community, 2; coherence, 58–60, 62, 83, 100, 119–20; formation, 13, 25–6, 40–2, 55–7; membership, 14, 57–8; pride, 97; resilience, 51–2, 85–6; resources, 15, 23, 33, 42, 45, 47, 49–50, 52, 62, 65–7, 77, 80, 83, 88–9, 92, 98–9, 108, 119; and *see* association, factions, common land, infrastructure, local communities, tensions
- Compagni, Dino, 18
- comparison, 53
- confessionalization, 89
- confessions, 35, 39, 60, 67, 87–8, 98, 102, 105, 110, 115; and *see* Baptists, Calvinism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Zwinglianism
- conflicts *see* tensions
- confraternities *see* guilds
- congregations, 48, 67, 105
- conjuratio*, 13
- conscience, 60
- consistory courts *see* ecclesiastical courts
- consociatio*, 106
- constitution(al), 2, 5, 7, 23, 33, 49, 62, 118
- consuls *see* council(lors)
- consumers, consumption, 20, 29–30
- contado* *see* territory
- continuities, 7, 25, 114, 120
- contract, 106
- conviviality *see* sociability
- co-option *see* elections
- co-ordination *see* collective action
- corporation, 3, 25, 42, 51, 106
- corruption, 72
- council(lor)s, 13–16, 33, 43–4, 52, 59, 65, 71, 79, 82, 87–8, 102, 106, 110–12
- councils of the Church, 5, 41, 104, 114
- countryside *see* villages
- courts (legal) *see* jurisdiction
- crafts, 3, 5, 11, 18, 62–3, 65, 72, 106
- credit, 26–7, 82
- Cremona, 14
- crests, 97, 101
- crime, 45, 64
- Cromwell, Oliver, 112
- cultural turn, 6, 109
- culture, 20–2, 28–31, 44–7, 55–77, 108, 115, 118–19
- cure of souls, 40, 87
- Curto, Diogo Ramada, 6
- custom(ary law), 5, 30, 33, 36–7, 40, 43, 61, 64, 69–71, 85, 120

## Index

- Dachau, 91  
 Dauphiné, 90  
 dead, 41, 43, 48, 80, 97, 100  
 debates *see* historiography  
 decentral(ization), 68, 111–12  
 decision-making, 13, 32–3, 44, 46, 57, 75, 114, 119  
 deference, 17, 49, 84  
 definitions *see* terminology  
 demesne, 25, 28, 56, 84, 108  
 democracy, 5, 18, 22, 35, 45, 72, 81, 109–10, 112, 114–15, 117  
 Denmark, 81  
 diaries, 102–3  
 Diet of Worms, 28  
 Dilcher, Gerhard, 13  
 diocese *see* prelates  
 diplomacy, title image, 20, 75, 83, 113  
 discourses, 6, 23, 63, 95, 104–7  
 Dithmarschen, 34, 81  
 divine law/right, 105–6, 108  
 Doge, 20, 23  
 Dutch Republic, 24, 75, 113
- Earls Colne, 116  
 eastern Europe, 3, 56, 84–5, 120  
 ecclesiastical courts, 64, 67, 71, 86  
 economy, 11, 15, 17, 20, 24–5, 27, 29, 34, 38–9, 55–6, 61, 83, 109, 111, 116, 118  
 education, 20, 29, 57, 60, 64, 80, 89–90, 120  
 Edward VI of England, 47  
 Elbe river, 25, 28, 84  
 electioneering, 30  
 elections, 1, 14–16, 18, 31, 33, 36–7, 42–3, 46, 51, 57–8, 68, 71–2, 76–7, 87, 105, 108, 115, 119–20  
 elites, 12–13, 34, 35, 44, 50–1, 57, 61–3, 68, 70, 80, 85, 92, 110, 113–14, 119  
 Elizabeth, Queen of England, 47  
 emancipation, 34, 64, 120  
 Emperor, 12–13, 15–17, 26, 31, 35, 58, 80, 98, 100, 104; and *see* individual rulers
- Empire *see* Holy Roman Empire  
 enclosure, 66  
 England, 3, 5–6, 24, 40–54, 58, 60, 62–3, 66, 68–9, 79–80, 84, 89–90, 102, 112–13, 116  
 Enlightenment, 4–5, 34, 77, 98, 104, 106, 112  
 environment, 55  
 equality, 4, 29, 70  
 equity, 14, 19  
 Esslingen, 76  
 estates (landed), 15–16, 26, 31, 41–2, 47, 66, 68, 84, 86  
 estates (social groups), 36, 63, 67–8, 76, 106, 115; and *see* clergy, common people, nobility  
 Este dynasty, 22  
 EU, 118  
 Europe, 1–4, 6–7, 9, 11, 16, 20, 23, 25, 27–8, 30, 32, 36, 40, 44, 53, 55, 63, 66–7, 69, 72–3, 82–90, 92–3, 95, 105–7, 109, 111–13, 117–21; and *see* eastern Europe  
 exclusion, 6, 19, 62–3, 100, 102, 110  
 excommunication, 86  
 executions, 32, 73  
 Exeter, 46  
 Extra-European *see* global
- fabric, 41, 51, 88  
 face-to-face exchange, 5, 30, 46, 73, 75, 77, 120  
 factions, 18, 22–3, 34, 58, 60–2, 72, 104, 119  
 families, 2, 11, 60–2, 89, 102, 104, 116  
 fashion, 46  
 feminine *see* women  
 Ferrara, 22  
 festive culture, 86, 105; and *see* ceremonies, sociability  
 feudal(ism), 3, 12, 14, 16–17, 22–3, 25–8, 30, 34, 39–40, 44, 48–9, 56, 60–2, 68–9, 71–2, 78–9, 81, 84–6, 90, 99, 104–5, 108, 111, 115, 119–20  
 feuding, 28, 61, 68, 99

## Index

- fiscal *see* taxation  
 Florence, 13, 17–18, 20, 21, 22–3, 61–2, 83, 112  
 France, 18, 23, 58, 60, 80, 82, 84, 90, 106–7, 111–12, 114–15  
 franchise *see* elections  
 Frankfurt, 76  
 fraternities *see* guilds  
 Frederick Barbarossa, Emperor, 14, 16, 80  
 freedom, 16, 19, 27–8, 37, 69–71, 79, 84, 87, 100, 101, 107, 110–11, 115  
 French, Katherine L., 6  
 Friedrichs, Christopher, 6  
 Frisia, 36  
 Friuli, 62
- gallows *see* executions  
*Gemeinschaft*, 5, 7  
 gender, 6, 12, 28–9, 45, 57, 63–4, 89, 99, 109–10, 119; and *see* men; women  
 general mind, 59  
 Geneva, 104  
 Genicot, Léopold, 6  
 Genoa, 13–14, 23  
 gentry *see* nobility  
 German(y) *see* Holy Roman Empire  
 Gersau, 31, 32, 42, 60–1, 69–70, 79, 83, 100, 101, 103, 114  
*Gesellschaft* *see* society  
 Ghibellines, 19, 62  
 Gierke, Otto von, 5, 107  
 gifts, 42, 44  
 glebe, 41  
 global(ization), 2, 6, 109, 111, 118  
 good police, 38, 69, 107  
 good works, 41, 48, 105  
 government *see* central, local government  
*gravamina*, 92  
 Greece, 5, 11, 75, 104, 112  
 Grisons, 35, 81, 89, 110  
 Guelfs, 19, 61–2  
 guilds, 2–3, 5, 42–5, 50, 64, 73, 80, 106; and *see* crafts
- Habsburg dynasty, 69  
 Halvorson, Michael, 6  
 hAnnracháin, Tadhg, 6  
 harmony *see* community  
 Harrington, James, 5, 114  
 harvest, 26, 29  
 Hauenstein, 33  
 Henry IV, Emperor, 13  
 Henry VIII of England, 47  
 heresy, 60, 86  
 heriot, 69, 71  
 Hesse-Kassel, 35, 38  
 hierarchy, 16, 18, 28, 35, 38, 44, 48  
 historiography, 3–7, 16, 61, 88, 102, 107–17, 120; and *see* chronicles  
 history from below, 4, 109–10  
 Hobbes, Thomas, 106  
 Hocktide, 45, 64  
 Hogenberg, Franz, 98  
 Hohenlohe, 38  
 Holstein, 81  
 Holy Roman Empire, 3, 7, 11–12, 15, 17, 24, 25–39, 56, 58, 60, 66, 70, 75–6, 78, 81–2, 84–5, 98–100, 102, 104, 106–12; and *see* emperors  
 honour, 29, 68, 99, 102  
 house(holder), 11, 14–15, 25–6, 29, 33, 43, 48, 57, 62, 65, 79–80, 88, 99, 107–8, 118  
 human rights *see* natural law  
 humanism, 104–5  
 humanities, 7
- iconoclasm, 89  
 iconography, 114  
 ideal types, 3  
 identities, 2, 15, 20, 29, 42, 57, 64–5, 68, 97, 99, 102, 113, 115–16, 119  
 imperial cameral court, 36  
 imperial free cities, 25, 67, 102, 113  
 inclusion, 2, 6, 110, 115  
 indirect taxes *see* taxation  
 individual(s), 7, 26, 60, 64, 69, 109, 113, 116, 119–20



## Index

- indulgences, 41  
 industry, 26–7, 61, 111  
 information *see* communication;  
     news  
 infrastructure, 12, 28, 42, 45, 65, 89  
 inheritance, 27, 30  
 inns *see* public houses  
 interaction, 3, 6, 29–30, 35, 39,  
     45–6, 52, 56, 75, 77, 78–93, 105,  
     110, 113–14, 116, 119–20  
 intercession, 3, 51, 58, 80, 105  
 interdisciplinarity, 6, 46, 73  
 invented tradition, 31  
 Ireland, 6  
 Isenmann, Eberhard, 6  
 isolation, 98  
 Italy, 3, 5, 11–24, 21, 39, 56, 60–1,  
     73, 80, 82, 84, 104, 107, 111–12,  
     116  
 Jews, 29  
 juridification, 36, 71, 92  
 jurisdiction, 12, 15, 19, 25–6, 30,  
     32, 33, 36, 40, 42, 46, 51, 64–6,  
     68–9, 71, 79, 83–5, 90, 92, 108,  
     113, 119; and *see* ecclesiastical  
     courts  
 jurors, 3  
  
 kinship, 56, 60–2, 77, 97, 118  
 Koniordos, Niki, 6  
  
 labour(ers), 12, 26, 66, 71, 85  
 laity, 19, 41, 46, 51, 86, 89, 99–100,  
     105; and *see* common people  
 land *see* estates  
 landscape, 1, 12, 20, 27, 41, 58,  
     78–9, 82, 91, 97–8, 108, 111, 118  
*Landsgemeinde*, 57, 115  
 language, 58, 97  
 law, 13, 17, 19, 30, 58–9, 64, 66, 68,  
     81, 89–90, 100, 101, 106, 120;  
     and *see* canon law, common law,  
     custom, divine law, legislation,  
     Roman law  
 lay *see* laity  
 leagues, 17, 31, 34–5, 80, 102,  
     109–10  
  
 legislation, 15, 33, 35–8, 40, 43, 47,  
     48–9, 68–9, 71–2, 79–80, 83–4,  
     90, 92, 106, 108, 119  
 legitimacy, 37, 68–9, 93, 106–7,  
     113–14  
 Leisnig, 87–8  
 leisure, 20  
 Levellers, 68, 112  
 liberal(ism), 113, 115–16, 119  
 liberties, 27, 31, 97, 100, 104, 114–15  
 liberty *see* freedom  
 lineage, 60, 100  
 literacy, 46  
 liturgy, 41, 43–4, 48, 103  
 livelihood *see* subsistence  
 living, 43, 48  
 living standards, 27, 29, 84, 102  
 local(ity), 2, 4, 97–9, 104, 111, 118,  
     120  
 local autonomy *see* autonomy  
 local communities, 2 and *passim*;  
     and *see* community, parish,  
     towns, villages  
 local government, 15, 16, 19, 23,  
     30–5, 39–40, 42–4, 46–9, 51–2,  
     75, 85, 90, 117  
 Lombardy, 14, 16  
 London, 43, 49, 74, 78  
 Long Melford, 48  
 Lorenzetti, Ambrogio, 22  
 Losaeus, Nicolaus, 106  
 Louis XIV of France, 113  
 Low Countries *see* Netherlands  
 loyalties, 6, 11, 15, 78–80  
 Lübeck, 76  
 Lucerne, 69, 81, 100  
 Ludlow, 80  
 Luhmann, Niklas, 76  
 Luther(anism), 29, 87, 89, 105  
  
 Machiavelli, Niccolò, 5, 104, 112,  
     114  
 Mackenney, Richard, 6  
 macro, 4, 116  
 magic, 26–7, 80  
 Maissen, Thomas, 113  
 majority decisions *see*  
     decision-making

## Index

- male *see* men  
 manors *see* feudal(ism)  
 maps, 98  
 marginal groups, marginality, 27, 63, 85, 90, 91, 111, 116, 119  
 market (squares), 1, 12–13, 15, 20, 26, 28, 75, 82–3; and *see* trade  
 marriage, 27, 30, 49, 57, 60, 64–5, 69, 85, 103; marriage of the sea, 20  
 martyrdom, 107  
 Marx, Karl, 104  
 Mary, Queen of England, 47  
 masculinity *see* men  
 material culture, 38, 46, 66  
 mayors, 74  
 media 46, 73, 76–7, 118; and *see* face-to-face, orality, print, rituals  
 mediation, 19  
 Medici dynasty, 23  
 Mediterranean, 11, 20, 24  
 Memmingen, 79  
 memory, 13, 31, 38, 45, 47, 59, 76, 85, 89, 97, 99  
 men, 2, 28–9, 62–4, 99, 114, 118  
 mentality, 116  
 merchants, 12, 18, 82  
 method, 4, 7, 73, 76, 115–16  
 micro, 4; microhistory, 115–16  
 Middle Ages, 11–24, 40–2, 45, 55, 63, 69, 76–7, 89, 105–6, 119  
 middling sort, 44, 63, 79, 92, 111, 119  
 migration *see* mobility  
 Milan, 12–13, 17, 19, 23  
 military affairs, 11, 13–15, 17–18, 20, 23, 28, 35–6, 48, 57–8, 62, 64, 68, 71–2, 76, 80–1, 90, 99, 102, 104; and *see* wars  
 militia *see* military affairs  
 ministers *see* clergy  
 minsters, 40  
 mir, 85  
 mission, 55  
 Mitterauer, Michael, 109, 111  
 mobility, 11, 15, 28, 69, 82, 84, 98  
 Modena, 15  
 modern(ization), modern period, 7, 71–2, 112, 115, 117–18, 121  
 Molho, Anthony, 6  
 monarchies, 17, 22–3, 34, 51, 58, 68, 84, 91, 100, 110, 112–13  
 monasteries *see* clergy, religious houses  
 money, 11–12, 26  
 Montesquieu, 5  
 moral, 63, 86, 90, 102–3, 105, 120; moral economy, 68  
 Morebath, 44, 50  
 Muir, Edward, 62  
 multifunctional(ity), 2  
 Münster, 65  
 music, 42, 45–6, 48  
 myths, 20, 100  
 Naples, 17  
 Napoleon, 23  
 nation(al), 4, 115, 119  
 natural law/state, 5, 63, 85, 106, 114–15, 119  
 Neckarhausen, 116  
 negotiation, 12, 15, 35, 44, 58, 61, 63, 74, 77, 90, 93, 108, 118–19  
 neighbour(hoods), 3, 11, 18, 20, 64–8, 106  
 Netherlands, 11, 26, 60, 66, 106, 111; and *see* Dutch Republic  
 networks, 2, 82, 116  
 news(papers), 73  
 nobility, 1–2, 12–13, 16–19, 26, 28, 34, 36, 43, 49, 58, 60, 62, 66, 69–70, 79, 81, 86, 107–8, 110, 112–13, 119  
 nonconformity, 51, 87, 105  
 norms *see* custom, law  
 Novgorod, 85  
 nucleated settlement *see* settlements  
 numbers, 1, 19, 26, 45, 55, 57–8, 60, 63, 66  
 Nuremberg, 25, 66, 82  
 oaths, 13–14, 17, 44, 56, 59, 68–9, 73, 97, 108, 113, 120; and *see* *conjuratio*

## Index

- officials, 13–14, 18–19, 30, 33, 37, 41, 44, 46, 48–50, 52, 57, 61–2, 64–5, 70–3, 75, 77, 79, 87–8, 90, 92, 100, 103; and *see* churchwardens, mayors
- oligarchy, 23, 34, 49, 72, 113
- oral(ity), 75
- order, 63, 76
- overlaps, 79
- Padua, 62
- pagan *see* magic
- palaces, 21, 22, 91
- Palatinate, 36
- Paris, 65
- parish(es), 1, 6–7, 11, 33, 40–53, 50, 55–6, 59, 65–6, 78–9, 87, 90, 98, 104, 108, 113, 117–21
- parish churches, 32, 43, 50, 75, 79, 80, 91, 98–9
- parishioners, 31, 40–52, 57, 69, 72, 78–9, 83, 86, 88, 97, 99, 119; and *see* parish
- Parker, Charles H., 6
- Parliament *see* representative assemblies
- participation (political), 1, 17–19, 22–3, 33, 48, 57, 62, 71–2, 77, 114–15, 118
- parties, 2
- patriarchy, 28, 38, 57, 63–4, 121
- patronage, 2, 20, 46, 62, 64, 116
- Pavia, 13
- peace, 13, 30, 57, 68, 70, 80, 102, 104, 107; of Constance, 14; of Westphalia, 34, 113
- peasants, 1, 25–39, 79, 84–5, 88, 92, 99, 105, 107, 110–11, 119; and *see* agriculture; villages
- Peasants' War, English, 70; German, 36–7, 65, 71, 86, 92, 105, 108; Swiss, 103
- people *see* common people, *popolo*
- perceptions, 6, 16, 97–104, 116
- periodicals *see* news(papers)
- periphery, 46, 90
- petitions, 35, 76, 92, 108, 120
- philosophy, 7
- piety, 27, 32, 33, 45, 103–4
- pilgrim(age), 41, 48
- Pisa, 22, 99
- Pistoia, 19
- Plato, 112
- Pocock, J.G.A.
- podestà*, 19–20, 22
- Poland-Lithuania, 29, 85, 112, 115
- police *see* good police; police state *see* state
- polis*, 5, 75, 104
- political parties *see* parties
- political rights, 4
- political thought, 5, 19, 104–7
- politics, 18–20, 31–5, 42–4, 46, 71–2, 93, 110; and *see* parties
- poor, 11, 26
- poor relief, 3, 41, 48, 50, 58, 88–90, 116, 120
- popes, 5, 47
- popolo*, 13, 18–19, 21, 22, 62
- popular culture, 63, 68
- population, 11, 17, 19, 26, 37–8, 57, 84–5
- postmodern, 109
- power, 1, 48, 58, 83, 93, 115
- preaching, 48–9, 87–9, 103
- Preis, Caspar, 102
- prelates, 12–14, 16–18, 26, 44–5, 47, 56, 58, 81, 86, 89, 111, 119
- prices, 28
- priests *see* clergy
- primary sources *see* sources
- princes, 35, 38–9, 60, 79, 81, 90, 92, 100, 105, 111, 113; and *see* monarchy
- print(ing), 47, 73, 75–6, 120
- privileges *see* liberties
- processions, 20, 74, 97, 118
- profit, 12
- property, 68
- Protestant, 38, 47–8, 51, 87, 105, 109; and *see* specific denominations
- proto-industry, 26–7, 83, 116
- public houses, 20, 27, 30, 63–4, 75
- public sphere, 12, 63, 73
- public works, 42

## Index

- Purgatory, 41, 48, 87  
 Puritans, 48–9, 63  
 Putnam, Robert, 116
- Radeff, Anne, 82  
 reason, 60  
 rebellions *see* resistance  
 recusants, 48  
 Reformation(s), 37, 47–8, 52, 59,  
 63–4, 67, 70, 80–1, 88–9, 100,  
 105, 108–9, 120  
 reformed confession *see* Calvinism,  
 Zwinglianism  
 reforms, 20, 34  
 regions, 2–3, 30, 64, 78–83, 111, 115  
 regulation *see* legislation  
 Reinhard, Wolfgang, 110  
 religion, 20, 39, 58, 64, 88, 97,  
 104–5, 107; and *see* Church,  
 confessions, piety  
 religious houses/orders, 2, 5, 26–7,  
 29, 41, 43, 64, 86–7, 106  
 Renaissance, 4–5, 12, 22–3, 60, 73,  
 100, 112, 116  
 representation (symbolic), 2, 6, 14,  
 18, 20, 73–6, 89, 99–100, 111,  
 114, 116  
 representative assemblies, 3, 36,  
 92, 108–9, 111–12, 115, 120; and  
*see* *Landsgemeinde*, *Riksdag*  
 republic(s), 21, 22–3, 31, 32, 34, 51,  
 58, 70, 72, 75, 81, 101, 104; and  
*see* city states, Dutch republic,  
 Swiss Confederation, Venice  
 republicanism, 5, 107, 110–15  
 reputation, 64  
 resistance, 27, 30, 35–8, 59, 68,  
 70–1, 92, 103, 106–7, 109,  
 111–13, 120  
 revolutions, 4–5, 11, 18, 34, 37, 51,  
 105, 107–8, 112, 114–15, 119  
*Riksdag*, 36, 112  
 riots *see* resistance  
 rituals, 20, 30, 45, 48, 58, 64, 73,  
 74, 75, 109  
 rival(ry), 11, 29, 65, 79, 83  
 Rome, Roman (law), 11, 13, 16, 36,  
 90, 100, 104, 112–14
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 5, 104,  
 106–7  
 rumour, 64  
 rural *see* villages  
 Russia, 11, 85
- Saanen, 27–8  
 Sabean, David, 7  
 sacral communities, 67, 97, 119  
 sacraments, 1, 40–1, 56, 77, 87  
 saints, 11, 31, 42, 48, 59, 65, 89,  
 107  
 salvation, 29, 48, 102  
 Salzburg, 112  
 San Gimignano, 61  
 Saxony, 103  
 scale, 2, 4, 6, 11, 18, 49, 64, 67, 98,  
 108, 115  
 Scandinavia, 7, 11, 56, 107, 120  
 Schappeler, Christoph, 87  
 Schlögl, Rudolf, 6, 73  
 schools *see* education  
 Schwäbisch-Gmünd, 100, 102  
 Schwendi, Lazarus von, 99  
 Schwyz, 32, 80, 114–15  
 Scott, J. C., 35  
 Scott, Tom, 6, 109  
 Scribner, Bob, 109  
 Scriptures *see* Bible  
 seals, 28, 31, 42, 97  
 sects, 2, 5, 48, 88, 106  
 seigneurial *see* feudal  
 self-government *see* autonomy,  
 local government  
 self-perception *see* perceptions  
 self-representation *see*  
 representation  
 separatism *see* sects  
 serfdom, serfs, 15, 27–8, 37, 57,  
 69–71, 84–6, 108  
 servants, 11, 88  
 services, 33, 66, 84, 90  
 settlements, 1, 12, 17, 25–6, 55–6,  
 64, 68, 98, 116  
 sexuality, 29, 45, 64  
 Shepard, Alexandra, 6  
 Siena, 19, 22, 65, 83  
 Sigismund, Emperor, 31

## Index

- Sion, 81  
 sociability, 29–30, 43, 46, 58, 89, 105  
 social capital, 63  
 social control, 30  
 social differentiation, 34–5, 38, 62–3, 99, 116  
 social discipline, 63, 86, 89, 107  
 social polarization *see* social differentiation  
 social sciences, 7  
 society, 3, 5, 12, 16, 26, 62–3, 77, 120  
 solidarity, 83  
 Solothurn, 88  
 sources, 4–5, 19–20, 31, 47–9, 84, 100, 102, 120  
 Southwark, 65  
 sovereign(ty), 5, 18–19, 23, 35, 106, 120  
 space, 2, 6, 20, 22, 44, 46, 60, 73, 97–8, 118  
 Spain, 23, 84, 111–12  
 Spierling, Karen, 6  
 state, 2, 23, 28, 33, 35, 50–1, 69, 71, 78, 83, 89–93, 106–8, 113, 116–17, 120; and *see* city states  
 state building/formation, 37, 39, 67, 90, 93, 98–9  
 States General, 111  
 status, 27, 57, 64, 69  
 Strasbourg, 65, 86  
 Stratton, 46  
 Strausebach, 102–3  
 Strinati family, 61  
 Stuart dynasty, 51, 112  
 subsistence, 26, 29, 67–8, 108  
 suburbs, 62, 65  
 superstition *see* magic  
 Swabia, 27, 34, 36–7  
 Swallowfield, 49  
 Sweden, 36, 69, 92, 112  
 Swiss Confederation, 31, 33–4, 57, 60, 67, 69–70, 75, 80–1, 83, 98–9, 103–7, 110, 112–13  
 symbolic capital, 76  
 taxation, 14, 27, 35–6, 59, 76, 83–4, 90  
 Taylor, Michael, 116  
 tensions, 7, 13, 18–19, 22, 26, 29, 32, 34, 39, 44, 56, 60–6, 68, 77–8, 83–4, 86–7, 89, 93, 100, 102, 104, 119  
 Terling, 62–3, 116  
 terminology, 2, 7, 11, 58, 108, 115  
 territory/territorialization, 15–17, 25, 35, 40, 43, 56, 68, 80, 83–4, 110, 115, 119  
 theologians, theology, 69, 87, 105  
 theory, 3, 6–7, 38, 71, 82, 104–17  
 thick/thin trust, 116  
 Thirty Years' War, 38, 102  
 tithe, 41, 86  
 Toggenburg, 104  
 toleration, 51, 111  
 Tönnies, Ferdinand, 5, 107  
 topography, 2, 20, 64, 108, 118  
 tourism, 61  
 town–country relations, 80–3, 108, 110  
 towns, 1–3, 5–7, 11–24, 26, 28, 39, 42–3, 55–6, 59, 61, 66–7, 73, 78–9, 81–3, 89, 92, 98–9, 102, 104, 109, 113, 117–21; town halls, 20–2, 21, 75, 91, 97; town walls, 11, 65  
 trade, 11, 15, 24, 29, 55, 82, 100, 111, 120; trade guilds *see* crafts  
 transport *see* mobility  
 Transylvania, 98  
 Treviso, 19  
 Trexler, Richard C., 6  
 Trier, 36  
 trust(ees), 41  
 Tudor dynasty, 47–8, 52, 113  
*Turmkuigel Dokumente*, 31  
 Turner, Thomas, 75  
 Tuscany, 23, 56, 61, 83  
 Twelve Articles, 37, 71, 89  
 tyranny, 34, 106  
 Tyrol, 27, 36  
  
*universitas*, 5, 106  
 university, 5, 20, 106  
 Unterwalden, 80

*Index*

- urban *see* towns  
urbanization, 3, 26, 85  
Uri, 80
- Valais, 81, 89  
Valenciennes, 72  
values, 1, 6, 22, 57, 67–71, 76, 79,  
93, 100, 107, 111, 113, 119  
Venice, 17, 20, 23, 57, 66, 73, 74,  
75, 98  
vestries, 44, 47, 48–9, 71, 75  
Vicenza, 66  
Victorian period, 51–2  
Vienna, 36  
villages, vills, 1–3, 6–7, 11, 25–39,  
48, 55–6, 61–3, 78–9, 85, 98,  
102–4, 109, 113, 117–21; village  
halls, 32, 75; and *see* agriculture;  
peasants  
violence, 30, 65  
Visconti dynasty, 22  
visitations, 37, 44, 47, 49, 86–7, 90  
viticulture, 27
- Volterra, 13, 22  
voluntary, 78, 80
- Walker, Mack, 6  
wall *see* town walls  
wards *see* neighbourhoods  
wars, 23, 36–7; and *see* civil wars,  
military affairs, Peasants' War,  
Thirty Years' War  
Warwick, 50  
weapons of the weak, 35, 92  
Weber, Max, 40, 51, 109  
Westphalia, 34; and *see* peace  
Withington, Phil, 6  
women, 28–9, 44–5, 63–4, 119  
writing, 19, 30–1, 46–7, 73, 75–7,  
99, 120  
Württemberg, 26, 29
- Yatton, 44
- Zurich, 65, 88  
Zwingli(anism), 83, 87, 104