Florence in the Early Modern World New Perspectives

Brian Jeffrey Maxson and Nicholas Scott Baker eds
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LUCIO BIASIORI
Università degli Studi di Padova

This volume, edited by two historians of political thought who work in the United States, is an ambitious attempt to study the history of Florence within a wider framework, that of the world of the Early Modern Age, leaving aside the historical narrative of an insular Renaissance while recognizing the importance of other influences on a global level.

The book includes eleven contributions – most of them originally written for the Renaissance Society of America Annual Meeting of 2016 – starting from the editors' introduction, which aims to situate Renaissance Florence in the world of the Early Modern Age, trying also to face the challenge that the global turn has issued to the history of cities. It is not – as the editors of the volume point out – just a matter of scholarly trend. Following in the footsteps of Natalie Davis' invitation to decenter history, they tend to consider global history as the outcome of an older and wider process of decentering history in Western historiography after World War II, which led historians towards subaltern classes, women, non- Western communities and so on. «For Florence – Maxson and Baker go on – a de-centered approach might involve considering Renaissance culture as a product of global exchanges and connections as well as of Italian concerns with classical antiquity and political legitimacy» (p. 5).

Drawing on the studies that fought «the notion of Florence's historical insularity» (p. 2), Maxson and Baker note how Florence had been previosuly left behind in the studies that have tried to treat the history of the Italian peninsula in a transnational or even global perspective. Since at least a decade, the situation has changed and scholars have begun to study the history of Florence from that perspective. The introduction rightly recalls, among others, Lia Markey's studies on the Medici collectionism of objects from the New World, the conference (now a book) organized by the Medici Archivi Project on *The Grand Ducal Medici and the Levant*, and the volumes by Corey Tazzara and Francesca Trivellato about the global dimensions of the commercial traffics that departed from the port of Livorno. Among these studies, the volume aims to be both the point of arrival and to open up new perspectives of research. Let's see which ones.

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Florence in the Early Modern World is divided into three parts: the first dedicated to the "economic perspectives", the second to the "political" and the third to the "cultural" ones. The first part is in turn made up of four chapters. In the first ("Taking Architectural Theory on the Road"), Niall Atkinson shows how the architectural revolution brought about by the Renaissance was nourished by readings of the ancients, but also by the visual skills of travellers such as Benedetto Dei, Giorgio Gucci and Leon Battista Alberti who invariably took account of the cities they visited. This «method of quantifying experience» (p. 29), which was by no means the prerogative of the Florentines alone, was surely a way of turning foreign cities into quantifiable entities, thus shaping the relationship with other cultures when these travellers returned to Florence.

In his "'Tutto il mondo è paese': Locating Florence in Premodern Eurasian Commerce," Baker takes the reader forward in time, analyzing the intercontinental journeys of the well-known merchant Filippo Sassetti, who, after settling in Lisbon between 1578 and 1582, travelled to Cochin, Goa and the Malabar coast where he remained until his death and from where he wrote many letters to Florence full of ethnographic, linguistic and scientific observations (it is perhaps worth remembering that the same proverb mentioned by Sassetti was used by E.P. Tylor at the beginning of *Primitive Culture*). Moving from the still fundamental works by Marica Milanesi, his case-study shows how, on the one hand, the Florentines, due to their long expertise in transnational trade and cartography, contributed to integrate Spain and Portugal within a global system of trade, while, on the other hand, from the 16th century onwards, they had to build commercial networks by proxy, negotiating their action space among the interstices of the Iberian empires.

The assumption of the "mobility turn" as a point of view to look at the Florentine history is also evident when the book considers the city of Florence per se, that is not in its connection with geographically different entities and phenomena. This is particularly visible in the last two articles of the section, that of Nicholas Terpstra ("Mapping Gendered Labor in the Textile Industry of Early Modern Florence") and of Marta Caroscio ("Shaping the City and the Landscape: Politics, Public Space, and Innovation under Ferdinando I de' Medici"). The first one presents the outcomes of the DECIMA project (Digitally Encoded Census Information & Mapping Archive) based at the University of Toronto. Using data from three censuses of the city of Florence (1551, 1561 and 1632), the chapter aims at analyzing gendered labor in the Florentine textile industry paying great attention as to how the terminological shifts between reelers, spinners and weavers did (or did not) correspond to the steps of the social ladder. Caroscio's chapter partly shares the chronological framework of Terpstra's but moves from the structure to the superstructure, highlighting the ways in which the Grand Duke Ferdinand I has shaped the public spaces not only of Florence but also of the dominions. If anyone who has taken a walk through the center of Pisa or Livorno can rapidly have a clue of what is meant here, what is remarkable

in this chapter is the insistence on the fact that the public display of foreign materials and objects allowed visitors and subjects to be aware of the imperial and transnational claims of the Medici dynasty, performing at the same time the exotic as a daily experience.

The second part, which is devoted to the "political perspectives", opens with an apparently surprising chapter in such a collection: "'Nelle parti di Romagna'*:* The Role and Influence of the Apennine Lords in Italian Renaissance Politics", by Luciano Piffanelli. *Apparently* surprising because it introduces a narrowing of scale, which risks disorienting the reader, who does not expect to find in a book like this the political relations of Florence with the Visconti and with the combative lords of Romagna as the Alidosi, the Malatesta and the Manfredi, which notwithstanding were no less important than those woven over longer distances. The latter ones are the subject of the chapters of Brian Brege ("The Advantages of Stability: Medici Tuscany's Ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean") and Katherine Poole-Jones ("The Medici, Maritime Empire, and the Enduring Legacy of the Cavalieri di Santo Stefano"). Brege's chapter is a portion of a larger research he dedicated to "The Empire that wasn't" (as the title of his PhD dissertation icastically goes), that is the Florentine ambitions to build (the only one among the Italian states) an empire on both coasts of the Atlantic. Between the Foundation of the maritime order of Santo Stefano (1562) – whose visual representations are brilliantly described by Poole-Jones in her chapter – and the sale of the fleet in 1632, Brege tracks the shift from an active, almost warlike, activism in the Mediterranean to a policy of neutral trade which culminated with the issuing of the *Livornine*, a series of legislative measures issued by the Grand Duke of Tuscany Ferdinando I de' Medici between 1591 and 1593, which called to Livorno merchants from very different backgrounds ("di qualsivoglia Nazione") in order to o promote the economic development of the city and the maritime economy of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. On the effectiveness of such a measure Brege is rather skeptical: «Livorno's role as a notorious nest of corsairs rather compromised its attractiveness as a center of peaceful trade» (p. 146). Observing the profound anti-Ottoman traits of the visual self-representation of the Cavalieri di Santo Stefano studied here by Poole-Jones (again, since a picture is worth a thousand words, a visit in the church of Santo Stefano dei Cavalieri in Pisa, where the flags stolen from the Ottoman ships during the battle of Lepanto are exhibited, is illuminating), one is inclined to agree with him.

The last (but not the least, talking about Florence) section deals with the cultural implications of this effort of broadening the scale of analysis up to a global level. This part, more than the others, runs the aforementioned risk that adopting too many scales of analysis is equivalent to not actually adopting any.

Clémence Revest's chapter 9 ("Poggio's Beginnings at the Papal Curia: The Florentine Brain Drain and the Fashioning of the Humanist Movement") is an important contribution to the reconstruction of Bracciolini's career at the Papal Curia

(a place, as is well known, decisive for the rise of Florence and the family of bankers who governed it – the Medici – to the role of transnational power). Perhaps Revest's chapter might have paid more attention to the relationship between Bracciolini and the Venetian traveller Niccolò de' Conti. During his travels, Niccolò converted to Islam, and on his return, as a penance, he was forced by Pope Eugene IV to tell his travels to the papal secretary Poggio Bracciolini, who included their description in Book IV of his De Varietate Fortunae (On the Vicissitudes of Fortune). To understand the importance of Niccolò de' Conti's account – extensively reworked by Poggio – for the early modern global world, let us just recall its timely translations into Portuguese (1502) and Spanish (1503).

Maxson's chapter shows that the Renaissance as a bubble was a myth, born as it was in the context of nineteenth century nationalism. In his view, the last and most celebrated example of such a historically untenable interpretation is Poggio's portrait painted by Stephen Greenblatt in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Swerve*, in which his peregrination to the Northern monasteries in search of the manuscript of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* is depicted as a journey of a stranger into the unknown. Be that as it may, the chapter highlights how Renaissance Florence was connected to the rest of Europe by diplomatic, commercial, and epistolary relations. Among the various examples put forward by Maxson to illustrate his point, suffice it to mention the analysis of Matteo Palmieri's chronicle *De temporibus*, claiming Florentine independence from any power and widespread all over Europe.

The final chapter by Sarah G. Ross ("New Perspectives on Patria: The Andreini Performance of Florentine Citizenship") contains many of the issues dealt with in the volume in the form of an individual, or rather family, parable, that of the Andreini, among the most celebrated *comici* of the Late Renaissance. Belonging to a physically and socially mobile category *par excellence*, Giovan Battista Andreini continued to define himself as Florentine even when other definitions would have done better for him. This shows, as Ross correctly emphasizes, that in the first place citizenship was something liquid, which was just an element – and an element much less crucial than others – in the identity of an individual. Secondly, to be so rooted in the Florentine origins allowed Andreini to fashion himself as the son of a city whose prestige as a cultural center of first importance did not seem to diminish well into the seventeenth century, at the sunset of that world that had created Renaissance Florence and that this book brings back to light in such a vivid manner.