

Becoming Neapolitan. Citizen Culture in Baroque Naples

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In his New Year's address for 2012 the British Prime Minister sought to rally a demoralized people saddled with debts, recession, and unemployment in the face of a continuing policy of wholesale transfer of assets from public to private, by reminding them of the forthcoming Olympic Games and the Queen's Jubilee. There was something redolent of early modern Naples in the promise of bread and circuses, the emphasis on display rather than substance, the insistence on a glorious past and (hastily reinvented) tradition, and the conjuring of the allure and excitement of feasts, festivals and pomp to divert and distract, reassure and unify a divided and potentially disaffected citizen body. John Marino's book argues that, in the face of the dispossession and exploitation of the poor of Naples, the elites mounted fabulous festivals, parties and celebrations, and threw in their lot with the Spanish against the *popolo*. Indeed court culture emerges as a monstrous seduction of its elites, narcissistic and self-serving. It feels a familiar story; yet Marino tells it by drawing together a rich variety of sources – visual, artistic, ephemeral, hagiographic, ludic, literary, and legal.

This book – part of a remarkable recent resurgence of scholarly interest in Naples and its Kingdom – grew from an enquiry into the noble *seggi*, political aristocratic administrative districts of Naples, and became an investigation into the ways in which the inhabitants of Naples 'constructed their identity' under Spanish rule. *Becoming Neapolitan* examines 'the making and unmaking of citizens', their identity and self-representation through the myths and rituals of early modern Naples.

Marino's selection of fields to analyse ritual includes city and religious festivals, processions, saints and the work of Paolo Regio, royal obsequies, painting and architecture. One chapter is devoted to games as a form of ritual, relating the chance and skill to the *fortuna* and *virtù* of the courtier with their underlying rules, structure, order, hierarchy. The book brings together a full and rich bibliography with much useful

information and a wealth of facts, making them readily accessible for an English language readership.

Marino is interested in the problem of what he terms 'citizen identity' (to this reviewer at least, an uncomfortably historicist notion). 'How did the early modern city hold together? Why did its diverse social components of caste and class not pull it apart?' (p. 2). Broadly, ritual is identified here as central to the binding of the social; and in this the author follows the path established by anthropologist Victor Turner and adopted over 25 years ago by historians such as Richard T rexler for Renaissance Florence and Edwin Muir for Renaissance Venice, and subsequently taken up by a flurry of contemporary scholars including Maria Antonietta Visceglia for Rome.

Fundamentally Marino argues for something far more nuanced than a simple explanation of colonial exploitation of a degenerate oligarchic political culture caught in a debilitating spiral of a backward economy. Rather, he follows a Machiavellian-inspired interpretation, one espoused by other recent historians, in seeing the contestation of early modern Naples as 'the product of a conscious policy pursued by the Spanish occupation to incorporate Naples into its imperial system as the centerpiece of its Mediterranean policy' (p. 113). But constant conflict brought no change at all. The essence of early modern absolutist rule in Naples was 'a dialectic without synthesis', whereby superior military force and centralized bureaucratic institutions exerted control by manipulating antagonisms between 'indigenous vying parties' (p. 113). While nobles and *popolo* retained 'more than the illusion of self-governance' in city affairs, the asymmetrical power relationships of noble patrons, commoner clients and the poor in fact reinforced the Spanish control of power, because the monarchy's "good arms" held the status quo in check' (p. 113).

Broadly speaking, the picture Marino paints is one of cynical manipulation leading inevitably to ossification and failure. The overall trend was towards the victory of the central state and its bureaucratization. The pacification of Naples under Charles V fostered a policy of 'divide and conquer' among factions in Naples, while the 'patronization of the Tridentine Reform of the church under Philip II froze local rituals into the celebration of the city's imagined greatness' (p. 220). Under Philip IV 'local Neapolitan citizen culture' became an introverted 'nostalgic reverie' (p. 22). 'In post-plague, post revolt Naples, as wealth and power were concentrated in fewer hands, church and state exerted greater control over public celebrations and the *popolo*'s resistance was broken. In the slow recovery that started in the last third of the century, the "new men", upwardly mobile members of the state bureaucracy emerged as the 'clear winners' (p. 238). 'Authentic, autochthonous local rituals were infused with Aragonese customs and Burgundian models by their Spanish Habsburg heirs in Naples and manipulated to become mannered, routinized forms that lost their original content and meaning' (p. 22).

The question of what is meant by 'ritual' and how it produced 'meanings' might usefully have been more critically investigated. Are urban feasts and religious processions, however popular, not inevitably to some extent 'routinized'? And what of the lament for a lost 'authentic' meaning? Marino himself reiterates Paul Veyne's argument that tradition emerges as a tale-carrying authority, here he assumes that customs have an original inherent 'meaning'. One might, instead, think of 'meaning' as less inherent within art or actions than produced by their interpreters. Are all cultural forms that include rules, regulation, hierarchy and structure best understood as 'rituals'?

The claim here is that investigating Neapolitan ritual practices allows us 'to test how the factions in the city held together and came apart, and how effective the monarchy was in drawing its subjects to itself in forging a unified state' (p. 20). In 1510 and 1547 nobility and *popolo* joined forces to resist the imposition of the Inquisition. 'The failure of any other sustained collaboration between the nobles and commons of Naples ossified the political development of the state, a fact that can be demonstrated in the disciplining and routinization of the city's ritual life' (p. 20). But why would nobles and *popolo* find common interests? Lurking here is perhaps an assumption that living in the same city necessarily provides greater bonds between inhabitants than those between elite groups of diverse origins. If rituals are assumed to function as a social 'glue', then maybe they are not the best place to detect radical social divergence.

Historical contingency and the role of 'ritual' in producing what it claims merely to represent are perhaps

inadequately entertained here. Thus while on the one hand, Marino speaks of *piazze* as ‘parade grounds for face-to-face interaction in the struggle for power’ (p. 4), nevertheless he sees processional positions as ‘reflecting’ status and honour ‘among fellow citizens and one’s place in the local social and political structure’ (p. 3–4), rather than as actively *producing* status and honour in a contested field. Likewise, in arguing that origin myths of the city were deployed in the 16th and 17th centuries to identify its rightful citizens, Marino claims: ‘Thus myths and rituals attempted to rationalize the fissures in the body politic, but they could never really repair or remove them’ (p. 7). One might ask whether those myths and rituals were not kept alive largely because they were partial, deeply interested (especially at those moments when disinterest was most sharply feigned) and served not to heal but to intensify and re-route social fissures and ruptures.

Marino argues that Naples, though unique, was ‘far less different from Italy’s other cities ‘than is generally believed’ (p. 114): ‘the relative number of Neapolitan clergymen, nobles, and unemployed does not seem to be disproportionately large’ (p. 114). Naples’ clerical population was roughly equivalent to that of other cities; the percentage of its nobles very similar to that in Venice; and after the revolt of 1647, non-noble citizens still had wealth enough to support some 97 charitable institutions providing dowries to poor girls. Yet while these aspects of Neapolitan life were less exceptional than has often been asserted, the political, social and cultural implications of Spanish rule rendered the city of disproportionate significance.

While the Spanish government deployed its court in Naples to stage its power on a wider European stage, the effects on Naples were nevertheless local and specific. Marino argues that the elaboration and alteration of baroque rituals over time ‘affected authority, solidarity and identity in Spanish Naples’; ‘Spanish rule and church reform transformed commoner traditions from above’ (p. 3). Marino suggests that the King’s absence could make foreign rule more tolerable, as the king might be staged as benevolent, moderating over urban factions.

Marino sees Spanish control as implemented in part through the circumscription of inhabitable space (the Spanish walls defensive against French, Turk and Naples’ own people) and the crowded space as limiting employment, producing a legacy amongst the urban of ‘dependence, destitution and despair’ (p. 115). ‘Napoli nobilissima was ‘the faded dream of a nostalgic nobility, a dream not open to the middling orders’ (p. 116). Marino sees ‘a truer Naples’ as that adopted by ‘the excluded middle’, masquerading as ‘fedelissima’, who were ‘held in check by Spanish arms, noble *seggi* exclusion, and their own accommodation’ (p. 116).

As a historian, Marino is particularly interested in the role of history and historians in fashioning and reshaping city myths. Machiavelli, Botero, and Leandro Alberti set the scene. Marino shows us how antiquity and myth were reinvented by early modern rulers. He argues that Pandolfo Collenuccio’s *Compendio de le istorie del Regno di Napoli* (1498) was prompted by the French invasions and the loss of kingdom’s independent monarchy. Claims to Neapolitan significance were routinely rooted in claims to exceptionality, precedence and priority. Michele Zappullo’s *Sommario Istorico* (1598) casts Naples as the first city in Europe converted to Christianity, the refuge of Christianity during its persecution, and still ‘the most devout [...] part of Italy’ (quoted p. 47). Naples, the New Jerusalem, was a religious centre before Rome. In Spanish Naples historians mined classical sources to trace the origins of the city, rationalize Spanish rule, and promote *napolitanità* – the distinctive pre-eminence of Naples – in order to link the ancient republic to the present. Thus Empire was restored, rather than republicanism lost; universal faith achieved, rather than *cuius regio, eius religio*. What was fashioned was the myth of *buon governo* as the history of triumphant nobility, antagonistic to the *popolo* and disdainful of the plebs. Marino reads Capaccio’s *Il Forastiero* (1634) as an anti-Machiavellian political theory for the Counter-Reformation prince, as ‘the culmination of literary-historiographical culture’ of the 30 preceding years (p.4 8), a dialogue that becomes philosophical disputation and moral instruction for the ruling class, and polemic against the vile and seditious *popolo* and plebs.

Marino suggests that cultural representations allow us ‘to see how Neapolitans conceived of themselves across their three primary social divisions of nobility, *popolo*, and plebs’ (p. 236). While his arguments are

elegantly and carefully made, it is assumed that 'nobility, *popolo* and plebs' pre-existed their artistic and political staging, rather than that they were the very categories the historians, the festival choreographers and painters worked so hard to secure.

The book is at its best when Marino spends longer in analyzing specific events, such as the visit of Maria d'Austria in 1630. The relentless jockeying for position, the frustration and anger when Neapolitans found the vast fortunes they'd invested on welcoming festivities went unreciprocated, and the ruthless self-serving scheming of the viceregal circles emerge sharply. Marino's efforts to engage seriously with art and architecture and to relate them to politics, literature and festivals to interpret the complex fracturings of citizen culture are particularly commendable. The curious juxtaposition of Vitruvian images of the ideal city with Old Testament and Apocalypse cycles in the marvelous intarsia panels of the sacristy of the monastery of San Martino are read here as a staging of the Carthusian monks themselves as key intermediaries in the rendering of Naples the New Jerusalem.

Marino is attentive to the delicacy and complexity of relationships between Habsburg monarch, viceroy, *seggi*, nobility, archbishop and papacy, and demonstrates how such relationships were delineated urbanistically in the *possesso*. He is refreshingly alive to the porosities between the religious and the supposedly mundane, such that the 'real presenza' might refer to the royal/ real presence of the king / eucharist, and he demonstrates effectively that the Viceroy deployed a rhetoric of humanist virtue to preside over secular and religious feasts and to refashion a symbolic geography and history. He is quick to point out that a certain civic ideology mirrors the Christian theology of the soul, with its emphasis on the city as a complete world in itself with a unique destiny and privileges, holding its citizens together in its mystical body. Such subtlety makes more disappointing those occasional slips into mere periodization as explanation: 'the political debates and cultural wars contested symbols, values, and meaning, as late Renaissance culture confronted Counter-Reformation spirituality' (p. 24).

City history as moral lesson was perhaps nowhere more urgently articulated than in urban festivals. Marino has gathered copious amounts of facts and engages in a considerable amount of quantification of feasts and their taxonomizing, which will be of use to scholars in diverse fields. Marino insists that Naples' three most important religious feast days (S Gennaro's translation, Corpus Christi and S Giovanni) formed a 'political-religious unit' (p. 92) that came to play a central role in Neapolitan ritual, because they intertwined religious holiday, traditional agrarian and astrological calendar with the rising star of Spanish government and the viceroy's rule. Processional routes became sacred ways, blessed and honoured by repetition. Departing from the 'civic ritual' model espoused by Muir, Marino interprets the involvement of the viceroy in civic and religious festivals as part of a *sacralization* of religious celebrations until 'the religious component of festivals overwhelmed and subordinated the secular and political profile of Neapolitan public rituals in the second half of the 17th century' (p. 73). Marino identifies various ritual itineraries through the city, principally royal, viceregal, religious and *popolo* – to which he adds the way of the condemned to their execution and those of the *charivari* (times of 'social inversion' (p. 111)), such as upon the murder of Don Giuseppe Carafa. One wonders if thinking of these events in terms of 'inversion' unnecessarily forecloses their interpretative potential, that is, whether such nomenclature itself limits our understanding of them as anything more than temporary aberrations from a naturalized order.

Marino acknowledges that corporeal involvement and pleasure were vital to processions, music, feasts and masques, but while the spectacular is given significance (spectacle 'turned myth into ritual'; 'spectacle transforms representation into lived experience' (p. 235)), the phenomenological is not richly ploughed. The tendency instead is to read cultural creativity in a text/image paradigm, in which iconographical decipherment yields coherent meanings. While Marino's engagement with a rich range of different sorts of objects yields rich results, he tends to hold them apart interpretatively. Thus the materiality and form of the objects with which he engages, the connections they make with other objects in space and time, and their potential for radically new interpretations are missed. Thus Domenico Fontana's mausoleum for Philip II is interpreted iconographically through its numerous statues and narrative paintings of the kings' deeds, its emblems and mottoes as revealing 'the esteem that the Neapolitan ruling class held for him and for themselves' (p. 168). But its precise form, its claims to origins and its material history that inscribed it in real

and imagined spatial and temporal webs of relations to other objects and absent bodies are not further investigated. Curiously, the very mobility and connectivity of such artworks that rendered them such eloquent and associative political instruments, is leapfrogged. Similarly, Marino's interpretation of processions and patron saints as 'part of the normal response to natural disasters and disease' (p. 83) renders them already too familiar, too readily inscribed into pre-existing patterns of power arrangements. It is the very strangeness of objects and practices that is too quickly lost.

Interpretation at times becomes too homogenized: 'the primary goal played for by the nobles at court rituals was to [...] increase their own status and power in the pecking order among their peers' (p.197). Patterns of patronage and alliance across and between specific groups and clans and their development over time tend to get lost. Indeed, the desire to produce a coherent narrative might at times profitably have been resisted. 'Early modern Neapolitan rituals provide a lens to view how the city represented itself', he suggests (p. 234). This supposes that the city was homogenous, coherent and did represent itself. Naples' population was of course, richly heterogenous consisting of Spanish, French, English, Ragusans, Florentines, Venetians, Lombards, Genoese, Romans, Germans Greek, Netherlanders and Flemings. Recent scholarship has sought urgently to locate Naples in sharper relation to the rest of the Habsburg empire and to global exchange between northern and southern Europe, the eastern Mediterranean, Africa, Asia and beyond. Naples was a key site for the inter-relationship of these worlds, a point of intersection and exchange between East, West, North and South. The richness of early modern Naples is precisely in its hinge-like character, positioned at the meeting place and exchange point of real and imagined spatial and political networks – Naples, Madrid, Rome, the Holy Land; and the stagings of these relationships in festival apparati, funerary catafalques in replicative and transcriptive modes of likeness worked to collapse absence, loss and the past into spatial and temporal presence.

Sometimes the lens is too closely held to its subject. Ceremony worked in more than one direction, but we rarely get a glimpse down the other end of the telescope. Thus while parliamentary ceremonial display is here usefully interpreted as part of the playing out of rivalries between baronial clans and the dynamic between monarchic centralization and local power, as recent scholarship emphasizes, parliament – more than an arena of local factions – was also part of the theatre of power through which Charles V consolidated the Kingdom into the wider empire. One misses here a sense of the difference that Naples made to that wider empire. Likewise, one wants to know to what extent the local nobility bought into Hispanicization--actual or interpretative--of local practices? Does 'nobility' refer only to resident local landed families or does it include the various absentee landlords and nobility with vital interests in the city itself, such as the Colonna in Rome? How does what occurred in Naples compare with Milan under Spain?

Marino's evident passion for facts occasionally displaces analysis. Noting that Suor Giulia lived in Franciscan convents, Marino offers the striking statistic that Franciscan convents represented 31 per cent of the city's total convents and 41 per cent of its nuns. But what is one to make of this in relation to Suor Giulia? The suggestion that her message coincided with the political and cultural reform programme of the Viceroy Count of Lemos and the wider policy of the Duke of Lerma to reinforce royal over ecclesiastical power and an 'increase of the social base of government' (p. 134) whets one's appetite for further interpretation of these relations.

There are some minor errors ('Labore et constantia' 'through work and constancy' on Philip II's catafalque is deciphered as 'Arbore et constant', translated as 'A tree and constant'), but generally the book has been meticulously proof-read and presented. Marino's laudable engagement with visual sources required the reproduction in his book of important maps, prints and artworks. The Johns Hopkins University Press should surely have risen to printing the images larger and more legibly, so that we could properly appreciate their detail and beauty.

The author declined to respond.

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7859>