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A History of Florence, 1200-1575

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John Najemy is a pre-eminent historian of Renaissance Florence. His previous books on Florentine political, social and constitutional developments from 1280 to 1400 (1) and on Machiavelli's correspondence with Francesco Vettori (2) have shown him to be a scholar of learning, imagination and intellectual penetration, with a profound knowledge of Florentine history from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century and with a remarkable range of interests in political, social and intellectual history. Among current Florentine historians, he is particularly well qualified to write a new history of later medieval and Renaissance Florence.

There has been no credible attempt to write a history of Florence in this period since the time of Perrens's multi-volume work, finished in 1883 (3). Schevill's history, dating from 1937 (4), was never a serious piece of work. Its sources went scarcely further than a few of the published chronicles. It made little use of the scholarship then available. Conceptually, it was outdated when it was published. The only recent synthetic work covering the Renaissance period is John Hale's *Florence and the Medici: the Pattern of Control* (5). This book has been popular with students, but it was intended only as a basic introduction. It presents an over-simplified and sometimes misleading picture, and, in any case, there has been a vast amount of new scholarship since the mid 1970s. So the niche is there for a new history of Renaissance Florence.

Najemy has risen admirably to the challenge. He has assimilated the vast secondary literature on Florence, from the beginning of the thirteenth to the late sixteenth century. He has read, with admirable thoroughness

and perspicuity, all the published narrative sources. He has pondered and distilled fundamental features of Florentine history, not only its highly technical and changing constitutional structures, but also various complex series of events such as the working-class revolt of 1378, the rise of the Medici regime in the early 1430s, the challenges to that regime in 1465-6 and 1478, the fall of the Medici in 1494, the factional turmoils and constitutional upheavals of the revived republic beginning in late 1494, the Savonarolan episode from 1494 to 1498 and beyond, the establishment of the Great Council in 1494, the fall of the revived republic in 1512, the collapse of the Medici regime in 1527, the last republic and the siege of Florence in 1530, and the establishment of the Medici principate from the 1530s. The range of his analysis and explication (I deliberately avoid the term narrative, because this book is genuine history, not chronicle) stretches across a vast range of fundamental social, political, economic, diplomatic, military and biographical topics. Nor is Najemy indifferent to intellectual history, especially questions involving political thought and ideology.

This book is no mere synthesis of other scholars' work. Indeed, Najemy offers a distinctive interpretation, one which has already stimulated controversy and will doubtless continue to do so. Najemy has done no less than to challenge the orthodox approach to Florentine history as it developed from the turn of the last century. In 1899 Gaetano Salvemini published a ground-breaking Marxist interpretation of Florentine politics at the end of the thirteenth century (6), viewing magnates and popolani as discrete social classes with conflicting economic interests: the magnates were a feudal caste with mainly landed wealth, whereas the popolani were a commercial bourgeoisie. In 1926 this thesis was challenged by Nicola Ottokar (7), who used prosopographical techniques soon to be employed by Lewis Namier (8) and Ronald Syme (9) to demonstrate that these were not distinct classes: by examining magnates and elite non-magnates - both as individuals and in terms of their families - Ottokar showed that such groups were interconnected by a dense network of business associations, marriages and neighbourhood links, with the result that it was impossible to regard them as distinct social classes with divergent interests.

In the second half of the last century, Ottokar's interpretation became the orthodox approach, not only among Italian medievalists but also in Anglophone historiography. Here the crucial figure was Nicolai Rubinstein, who became Ottokar's pupil and assistant in the 1930s. Rubinstein remained a devoted admirer of Ottokar throughout his long life (1911-2002), not only recommending his seminal study to beginning postgraduates at the University of London but even planning, in his last year, to write an architectural history of Florence modelled on a similar little-known work by Ottokar. Rubinstein did not court historical controversy (unlike his teacher), and he never articulated an explicit methodological or historiographical stance; nevertheless, his two most extensive studies of Florentine politics, an article on the early years of the Florentine Great Council (10) and a book on the Medici government from 1434 to 1494 (11), both followed Ottokar in suggesting the limitations of a class-based interpretation of Florentine history: on the one hand, the elite retained a decisive voice under the supposedly popular government inaugurated after 1494, while, on the other, the Medici represented an elitist regime, not a popular alternative to oligarchic rule before 1434.

Rubinstein's influence was particularly felt among his many postgraduate students. Najemy has spoken elsewhere of 'the veritable school that Rubinstein created' (12). One of Rubinstein's most eminent pupils has taken issue with this characterisation (13). It is certainly true that Rubinstein did not preach a methodology or a historical philosophy to his pupils: his style of supervision was distinctly hands-off. However, his eminence did attract pupils sympathetic to his particular approach: one would hardly have gone to Rubinstein to undertake research on working-class agitation in fifteenth-century Florence! Moreover, Rubinstein did attempt to channel his pupils into biographical currents compatible with and indeed conducive to an elitist prosopographical approach: his first two students wrote biographies of leading Florentine politicians from the early sixteenth century, Francesco Vettori (14) and Piero Soderini (15); moreover, he was sceptical about analytical synchronic studies of Florentine politics and society, particularly for a novice researcher, unsuccessfully attempting, for example, to steer one now distinguished Florentine historian from her plan to study the Florentine ruling elite as the context for the rise of the Medici faction (16) into writing a biography of a prominent Medicean politician, Agnolo Acciaiuoli. The result was that many of his pupils wrote biographies (17), while others studied elite families or factions (18); the few who

worked further afield, for example on religion and religious movements, did not pursue their topics from a distinctive sociological or economic perspective, focusing instead on institutional (19) or ideological patterns and trends (20). So, whether or not it was Rubinstein's deliberate intention, an elitist approach certainly emerged from his stable.

Rubinstein, of course, was not solely responsible for the dominance of elitism in Florentine historiography. In Italy, Salvemini's approach attracted immediate hostility from contemporary political sociologists such as Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, who developed the theory of the ruling group (ceto governante / dirigente), according to which real politics stayed in the hands of a limited group, which, despite various inevitable changes in composition, remained fundamentally unaltered (21); this approach was buttressed by the experience of post-war Italian politics, in which the leading protagonists seemed merely to swap chairs as one short-lived government followed another. The situation developed similarly in North America, albeit for different reasons: in the Cold War era, a Marxist or even left-wing model was distinctly out of favour. The result was that, in Anglophone as well as the Italian political historiography - and certainly as far as Florence was concerned - Ottokarian elitism has been almost universal.

Najemy's refutation of this approach is based on a redefinition of Salvemini's and Ottokar's magnates and popolani. But both historians used popolani to refer to upper-class non-magnate families. By this definition Ottokar was correct in arguing that the magnates were not a class and that their economic activities and interests were in many cases identical to those of leading popolani. He and the many historians who followed his approach went on from there to deny any and all class conflicts, a view that reduces Florentine politics to mere quarrels within the upper class. Between an aristocratic ruling class on the one hand and the occasional eruption of the masses in the form of raw street power on the other, this approach to Florentine history sees nothing in between. What such approaches miss is precisely the popolo and the entire alternative political culture that it represented and promoted. (p. 39)

The term popolo is crucial here. This label, in contemporary Florentine usage, tended to refer specifically to the middle class of shop-keepers, craftsmen and artisans, as well as to the lower professional ranks including notaries and physicians; such individuals and families tended to hold lesser political offices, to lack ancient family lineages, to be involved in local rather than international trade and manufacturing, to have lesser investments in landed property, to contract marriages outside elite circles and to provide lower dowries for their daughters. On the other hand, the elite tended to be major rural landholders, to be involved in international trade, to boast ancient family lineages, to hold the lion's share of major political offices, to marry into other elite families and to provide ever more extravagant dowries for their children; professionally, they tended to be lawyers rather than notaries, bishops and major ecclesiastics rather than lower ranking clergy.

Over the long chronological range treated by Najemy, there were, of course, changing social, economic and cultural patterns. In the thirteenth century, the elite tended to form a knightly military caste, with wealth based mainly in land; as military customs and economic patterns developed and changed into the fourteenth century, they emerged primarily as great bankers, merchants and industrialists, while always maintaining strong roots in the countryside. The popolo evolved too, from a guild-based sector, especially strong in the less dominant branches of trade and industry (unlike wool and banking, always monopolised by the elite) in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, to a self-conscious, middle-ranking wider political class in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when guild institutions went into terminal decline; the popolo were always distinct from the working class, who were given guild representation only ephemerally following the proletarian revolt in 1378.

Few contemporary Florentine historians would disagree with these definitions as articulated by Najemy, developed from the important contributions of American historians such as Gene Brucker (22) and Lauro Martines (23). What is distinctive is the spin Najemy puts on this social structure: Ottokar had shown how magnates and upper-class popolani were not in conflict; Rubinstein had minimised the role of the popolo as the silent majority of Florentine politics in the fifteenth century. What Najemy demonstrates is that class consciousness, tension and conflict - in Florentine, not Marxist, terms - were perennial features of Florentine

history from the mid thirteenth to the mid sixteenth century. The conflict between these groups was overt from the 1250s to the 1380s, with alternating elitist and popular regimes; thereafter, the popolo, terrified by the spectre of working-class radicalism that they themselves had called into being with the Ciompi revolt of 1378, acquiesced in elite dominance after the 1380s, in exchange for sporadic and mainly honorific major office-holding, as well as to put themselves in line for elite patronage.

However, the popolo were far from dead: Najemy has emphasised their self-conscious identity, providing a telling analysis of the non-elitist mid-century chronicler Marco Parenti (24), as well as underlining their role in backing the attempt to oust Piero de' Medici in 1465-6 by supporting the end of Medicean restrictive electoral manipulation and wider access to political offices. One could add that the popolo had an important role in the near-collapse of Medici power between 1454 and 1458, refusing, as the dominant voice in the ancient legislative councils, to renew Medicean constitutional machinations and indeed humiliating Cosimo de' Medici by sacking his old friend and favourite, the renowned humanist Poggio Bracciolini, as chancellor and blocking other Medicean appointees to the chancery (25); Cosimo sanctioned a move to reconsolidate his regime's position only after the death of his enemy Alfonso of Aragon at the beginning of 1458 removed the possibility of foreign intervention on the side of his popular enemies. The *popolo* returned to the forefront of Florentine politics with the collapse of the Medici in 1494: although the elite's revulsion at Piero de' Medici's princely and courtly ruling style and his disastrous foreign policy brought down the regime, it was pressure from and fear of the popolo that forced the elite to come up with the Great Council as a desperate attempt to salvage their power on the Venetian aristocratic model. Such stratagems failed as the popolo seized the electoral initiative in the later 1490s; even the last-ditch attempt to secure elitist dominance by electing the aristocratic Piero Soderini as Florence's chief magistrate in 1502 was a spectacular failure, when it turned out that he supported constitutional structures that favoured the popolo, not the elite.

When the revived republic collapsed in 1512, as a result of a disastrous pro-French foreign policy, the popolo did not return to the passive acquiescence characteristic of the years between the Ciompi revolt and the rise of the Medici: the Medici rulers were all too aware that Florentines, and particularly the popolo, were unflinchingly attached to their Great Council; the Medici regime became increasingly isolated, falling almost without local resistance after the sack of Rome temporarily emasculated the Medici leader, Pope Clement VII, in 1527. Popular fervour, bolstered by renewed Savonarolan millenarianism, had its finest day in the eleven-month siege of Florence in 1529-30: the aristocrat Francesco Guicciardini witnessed the heroics of the endemically non-military Florentine populace with incredulity, confirming him in the view that politics had become totally irrational in sixteenth-century Italy (26). In the end, the popolo and the elite annihilated each other politically, making way for Medici absolutism after 1530. For Najemy, Florentine history was not the gradual and inevitable transformation of an elite, riven by faction, into a principate, but rather the tragic conflict of two ultimately irreconcilable social classes, protagonists whose strife in the end destroyed Florentine liberty.

Of course, Najemy does not see these centuries as a continual battlefield of class warfare. More subtle is his picture of the dialogue between the elite and the popolo: on the one hand, the elite shed its warrior, knightly image for more urban, mercantile garb by the fourteenth century, infiltrating, appropriating and eventually dominating the popolo's guild institutions and political-constitutional structures such as the priorate, which became the city's chief magistracy; on the other, the popolo normally practised social climbing rather than confrontation vis-à-vis the elite. For Najemy, nevertheless, these classes never dissolved under the vertical pressures of patronage or hierarchy: institutions such as Florentine neighbourhoods (the so-called sixteen official districts or gonfaloni into which the city was divided from the mid fourteenth century) or confraternities - which embraced both popular and elitist elements - never blurred class consciousness or, in moments of crisis or tension, confrontation.

Najemy's vision is, I think, one that requires to be pondered by Italian historians, who need to take seriously the view that a focus on elitism and patronage is not the only or always the most fruitful approach to these rich centuries. A striking and momentous example of how the elite learned from the popolo comes from the development of humanism and the Renaissance. In its origins, Renaissance humanism was anything but an

elitist movement. The first humanist, Lovato Lovati, contrasted a singer, 'bellowing the battles of Charlemagne and French exploits' in French, 'gaping in barbarous fashion', with '[the courageous poet]...[who] believes that one must follow in the footsteps of the ancient poets' (27). Brunetto Latini could proudly identify with Cicero, the new man who rose to confront the conspiratorial Catiline: 'Tulius was a new citizen of Rome and not of great stature; but through his wisdom he rose to such eminence that all Rome was commanded by his words' (28). Latini's formulation recalls Sallust's description of Cicero as homo novus, previously passed over for the consulate owing to the invidia and superbia of the nobilitas (29); Sallust's anti-aristocratic, pro-popular sentiments complemented Cicero's own arriviste biography, giving classical history and literature a powerful social resonance in mid thirteenth-century Italy. For both Lovato and Latini, a return to classical authors or classical language was connected with antipathy to contemporary aristocratic society dominated by courtly mores and hierarchical values; in both cases, one may detect a reaction against the political dominance of the aristocratic elite in the Italian communes. The same attitudes were explicitly articulated by a third early humanist, Geri d'Arezzo, who showed not only animosity towards the pursuits and pretensions of the contemporary aristocracy, but also used classical writers and history to justify the literary and learned activities of the notarial / legal profession, of which he, as well as Lovati and Latini, was a member (30); early humanism represented an ideology underpinning the political and social aspirations of the popular, non-elite legal class to which Lovato, Latini and Geri belonged (31).

What is remarkable is how the Florentine elite appropriated this originally popular ideology at the end of the fourteenth century. In the generation after the Ciompi rebellion, key elite patrons such as Palla Strozzi realised that humanist learning and classical education were an effective way to differentiate their class from the popolo, who continued to favour non-latinate mercantile education, as imparted in elementary and abacus schools widespread throughout the city; beginning at the turn of the fifteenth century, the elite began to engage private tutors to teach their sons Latin and humanist learning, largely unavailable and unwelcome to the mass of the popolo. Such a classical education served not only to distinguish entrenched members of the elite such as the scions of the Albizzi, Acciaiuoli, Medici or Strozzi families but also facilitated entrée to the upper classes for arrivistes such as Niccolò Niccoli or Matteo Palmieri (32). Lauro Martines has persuasively called humanism a 'a program for the ruling classes' in the fifteenth century (33). Now John Najemy has, with just as much insight, laid the groundwork for the reinterpretation of humanism as one further innovation of the popolo to be subsequently appropriated and transformed by the elite.

Notes

1. *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280-1400* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982). Back to (1)
2. *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513-1515* (Princeton, NJ, 1993). Back to (2)
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4. F. Schevill, *History of Florence: from the Founding of the City through the Renaissance* (London, 1937). Back to (4)
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6. *Magnati e popolani in Firenze dal 1280 al 1295* (Florence, 1899). Back to (6)
7. *Il comune di Firenze alla fine del Dugento* (Florence, 1926). Back to (7)
8. *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929). Back to (8)
9. *The Roman Revolution* (London, 1939). Back to (9)
10. 'I primi anni del Consiglio Maggiore di Firenze (1494-99)', *Archivio storico italiano,* 112 (1954), 151-94, 321-47. Back to (10)
11. *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434-1494)* (Oxford, 1966; 2nd edn., 1997). Back to (11)
12. 'Politics: class and patronage in twentieth-century Italian Renaissance historiography', in *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century: Acts of an International Conference, Florence, Villa I Tatti, June 9-11, 1999* (Florence, 2002), pp. 119-36, at p. 126. Back to (12)
13. F. W. Kent, 'Nicolai Rubinstein, teacher', in *Nicolai Rubinstein: in memoriam* (Florence, 2005), pp. 35-

45, at pp. 37-9. Back to (13)

14. R. Devonshire-Jones, *Francesco Vettori: Florentine Citizen and Medici Servant* (London, 1972). Back to (14)
15. R. Pesman Cooper, *Pier Soderini and the Ruling Class in Renaissance Florence* (Goldbach, 2002). Back to (15)
16. D. Kent, *The Rise of the Medici: Faction in Florence 1426-1434* (Oxford, 1978). Back to (16)
17. R. Black, *Benedetto Accolti and the Florentine Renaissance* (Cambridge, 1985); P. C. Clarke, *The Soderini and the Medici: Power and Patronage in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (Oxford, 1991); K. J. P. Lowe, *Church and Politics in Renaissance Italy: the Life and Career of Cardinal Francesco Soderini (1453-1524)* (Cambridge, 1993). Back to (17)
18. Kent, *Rise of the Medici*; F. W. Kent, *Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence: the Family Life of the Capponi, Ginori and Rucellai* (Princeton, NJ, 1977). Both these scholars have gone on to write biographies or biographical studies: F. W. Kent in *Giovanni Rucellai e il suo zibaldone*, 2 (London, 1981); D. Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: the Patron's Oeuvre* (New Haven, Conn., 2000); F. W. Kent, *Lorenzo de' Medici and the Art of Magnificence* (Baltimore, Md., 2004). Back to (18)
19. J. Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* (Oxford, 1994). Back to (19)
20. L. Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation: the Savonarolan Movement in Florence, 1494-1545* (Oxford, 1994). Back to (20)
21. M. Vallerani, 'La città e le sue istituzioni. Ceti dirigenti, oligarchi e politica nella medievistica italiana del Novecento', *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, 20 (1994), 165-230. Back to (21)
22. *Florentine Politics and Society, 1343-1378* (Princeton, NJ, 1962); *The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, NJ, 1977). Back to (22)
23. *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists 1390-1460* (London, 1963); *Lawyers and Statecraft in Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, NJ, 1968). Back to (23)
24. Najemy, 'Politics: class and patronage', pp. 133-5. Back to (24)
25. Black, *Accolti*, pp. 85-114. Back to (25)
26. *Maxims and Reflections of a Renaissance Statesman*, trans. M. Domandi (New York, 1965), p. 39: 'In our own day, the Florentines offer an excellent example of such obstinacy. Contrary to all human reason, they prepared for an attack by the pope and the emperor, even though they had no hope of help from any quarter, were disunited, and burdened with thousands of difficulties. And they have fought off these armies from their walls for seven months, though no one would have believed they could do it for seven days.' Back to (26)
27. R. Witt, *'In the Footsteps of the Ancients': the Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden, 2000), pp. 52-3. Back to (27)
28. Brunetto Latini, *La rettorica*, I.16, ed. F. Maggini (Florence, 1915), p. 8; see P. J. Osmond, 'Catiline in Fiesole and Florence: the after-life of a Roman conspirator', *International Journal for the Classical Tradition*, 7 (2000), 15-18. Back to (28)
29. Sallust, *Bellum Catilininae*, XXIII.5-6. Back to (29)
30. See Geri's letter to Gerardo da Castelfiorentino, first published by R. Weiss, *Il primo secolo dell'umanesimo* (Rome, 1949), pp. 120-1; trans. R. Black, 'The origins of humanism', in *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*, ed. A. Mazzocco (Leiden, 2006), pp. 55-6. Back to (30)
31. Black, 'Origins', pp. 52-6; for the social position of the early Paduan humanists, see J. K. Hyde, *Padua in the Age of Dante* (Manchester, 1966), p. 134. Back to (31)
32. R. Black, 'Education and the emergence of a literate society', in *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance*, ed. J. M. Najemy (Oxford, 2004), pp. 18-35; R. Black, *Education and Society in Florentine Tuscany: Teachers, Pupils and Schools*, c.1250-1500 (Leiden, 2007), ch. 5. Back to (32)
33. Power and Imagination: City-states in Renaissance Italy (London, 1980), p. 191 and ch. 11. Back to (33)

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