**Schadee on Field, 'The Intellectual Struggle for Florence: Humanists and the Beginnings of the Medici Regime, 1420-1440'**

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*The Intellectual Struggle for Florence* seeks to show that the rise of the Medici faction in early fifteenth-century Florence was supported by a new humanist ideology, formulated in response to the social and political conflicts of the time. It makes this case by arguing, first, that the Medici party had a fundamentally different sociopolitical profile from its aristocratic opponents and, second, that this was mirrored in an intellectual divide between the “traditional culture” favored by the “oligarchs” and Medicean humanism. This thesis is further developed in case studies of Leonardo Bruni and Francesco Filelfo (traditionalists), and Niccolò Niccoli and Poggio Bracciolini (Mediceans). Provocatively, the book concludes that classicizing humanism was, albeit briefly, a “popular culture.”

The evidence that Arthur Field mobilizes in support of these arguments is very ample indeed. Copious footnotes bear witness to a wide variety of primary sources in both Latin and Italian, scholarship in the four relevant modern languages, and extensive archival research. Moreover, the book’s ambition to straddle social history and the study of humanistic writing is rare and admirable. And yet, this is a problematic book. This review aims to report the *fil rouge* of the argument while also outlining its more important conceptual and evidential flaws. The final paragraphs address some particular choices regarding interpretation and exposition.

First of all, those pesky quotation marks that gird so many key concepts. Who are the “oligarchs” of Florence and what did they want? The first part of the book is devoted to these questions and relies, as Field unreservedly acknowledges, on the work of Anthony Molho, Dale Kent, and especially Gene Brucker.[1] However, Field seeks to use their evidence against them: where these scholars have shown an “aristocratization” of Florentine politics, quantified as a shrinkage of the effective governing circles, Field positions the Medici party as a genuinely popular alternative to the post-Ciompi regime. He does not, however, firmly pin down the Medici supporters on the social scale, identifying them one time with the *popolo minuto*, another with the economically prosperous but politically powerless *gente nuova*. Field chastises Anglophone scholarship for its reluctance to term this opposition a “class struggle” (p. 19), but it is hard to see how Marxist categories illuminate what was essentially a battle for political representation, not labor or capital. Nevertheless, Field is certainly right to underline how readily contemporaries framed political conflict in terms of social class.
Two events, according to Field, show the hardening of the factions and are discussed at length: a supposed conspiracy in 1426 during which Rinaldo degli Albizzi harangued his fellow oligarchs to limit, or even do away with, the political power of the people, and the debates about tax reform culminating in the catasto of 1427. The analysis of the former is methodologically unsound, as evidence for the plot is drawn exclusively from the speech that Giovanni Cavalcanti in his Istorie fiorentine reports was given by Albizzi—although Field states that its tenets and characterization correspond to unspecified other sources (p. 49). While some concession is made to the notion that this speech may have been a fiction (but a fiction, Field suggests, that some Florentines deemed plausible), there is no attempt to place this Albizzi in Cavalcanti’s narrative, or to situate Cavalcanti (whose imprisonment by the regime, and subsequent release under the Medici, is mentioned only in passing) as a magnate who, himself ineligible for office, bore grudges toward oligarchs and popolo alike. As to the catasto, on which Field proffers interesting new findings showing the extreme difficulty with which tax reforms were passed (p. 26): it is unhelpful for his argument, since it has long proven impossible to ascertain whether or not the oligarchs who advocated for these changes were their fiscal beneficiaries.[2]

Next, what is “traditional culture”? The second part of the book opens with this question and proposes a loose admixture of French chivalry, scholastic nominalism, the tre corone Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, and contemporary vernacular poetry: as Field evocatively puts it (p. 90), a literary equivalent of the pictorial international Gothic of Gentile da Fabriano (not coincidentally patronized by the richest man of Florence, Palla Strozzi). The problems arise when he states, without any argument, that “we should assume” that the oligarchs were “traditionalists” (p. 75), and seeks to separate this culture from a “radical humanism.” The dichotomy Field aims for is clear enough: compared to an aristocratic and, crucially, partially foreign traditionalism, classicizing humanism will emerge as a modern, indigenous and, in as far as it can be associated with the Medici, popular counterculture. But in effect its characteristics—a disdain for Aristotle and scholasticism, the tre corone, and the vernacular: in short, a rejection of all post-antique literature—are none other than those identified already by Hans Baron as the hallmarks of an (in his words) sterile classicism that held sway around the turn of the century, duly replaced with fruitful civic humanism in the first decades of the Quattrocento.[3] Now, there can be no doubt that the circle of younger humanists around the chancellor Coluccio Salutati flirted with these ideas, since they constitute the precise objects of debate in Leonardo Bruni’s Dialogues for Pier Paolo Vergerio (c. 1407), but it is a stretch to recast what was avant-garde then as “Medicean” twenty years later. Indeed, it can only be achieved by having Bruni change sides—from “radical” to “traditionalist”—and the remaining “radicals” (Niccolò Niccoli, Poggio Bracciolini) change motives: from independent antiquarians to mouthpieces of the Medici.

Field’s research would have benefited immeasurably from engagement with the extensive analysis of the “learned connections” of Florentine diplomats and other officials undertaken by Brian Maxson.[4] Using these data, he could have plotted the associations of numerous members of the governing class with exponents of the humanist movement rather than relying on a handful of key figures. Had he done so, he would have found—as Brucker already intimated—that members of the regime readily adopted humanist learning from at least the 1410s onwards, and indeed that proficiency in humanistic discourse increasingly became a requisite for a political career, before and after the Medici ascendancy.[5] But the weasel word here is “radical.” Field would presumably counter that he did not claim that the oligarchic regime opposed humanism, just that they liked “traditional”
humanists: the Petrarch of the *Remedies of Fortune*, not the one who bewailed the inequities of the modern world; Bruni once he had distanced himself from his *Dialogues*, and wrote the biographies of Dante and Petrarch instead.[6] Fine. But if any appreciation of nonclassical culture renders one a “traditionalist,” then who exactly, and how many—humanists and statesmen alike—qualify as “radicals”?

If, like dogs and their owners, scholars resemble their humanists, Field’s determination to topple the ever-respectable Bruni, hero of Hans Baron, in favor of the more personable Poggio must inspire sympathy.[7] But his depiction, in the following chapter, of Bruni as an aristocratic stooge is unconvincing. Bruni cultivated both sides, as Field’s own meticulous evidence shows, and if he ingratiated himself with the Albizzi more, this is because they were the leading faction during the decades in which Bruni strove to establish himself as Florence’s foremost intellectual.[8] Poggio, on the other hand, remained employed in the papal curia until he was in his seventies, while Niccoli had no political career at all: as such, their priorities were different. (It may be noted also that Bruni was the same age as the aristocratic Palla Strozzi, while Poggio was a decade younger, and Cosimo de’ Medici younger still; these differences would have been evident when the former three first sought out Salutati.)

Just like Bruni, Cosimo had his finger in many pies, including, initially, the Florentine career of Francesco Filelfo, who arrived in the city in 1429. Much hinges, for Field, on the animosity arising in the late 1410s between Bruni, joined in due course by Filelfo, and Niccoli, still close to Poggio as well as associating with the monk Ambrogio Traversari and the young Carlo Marsuppini, all of whom (also) had ties to Cosimo. Marsuppini in particular, who was paid significantly less by the Florentine *Studio* than Filelfo, had his reasons to be resentful of the new arrival. The ruckus left an ample literary trail in the invectives and satires directed by Bruni and Filelfo at Niccoli, and by Filelfo and Poggio at each other. The difficulty lies in their interpretation. Humanist invective is not to be taken at face value, and Field would have done well to engage with a number of studies on the genre published in the last decade by Marc Laureys and others.[9] More pertinent still, no amount of erudite mud-slinging in itself demonstrates the role of politics, let alone of ideological differences, which is Field’s explicit aim. This is not to deny that the stakes were high; witness Filelfo’s knifing by a Medici hitman in 1433 and his hasty retreat from Florence when Cosimo was recalled from exile in 1434. It is just that, as Field himself notes in the conclusion to his chapter on Filelfo, “one wonders whether, on his arrival in Florence, more substantial Medici patronage and different reactions from humanists and others would have created a different figure entirely” (pp. 228-29). Here, it seems, the political is personal.

The third part of the book must then establish that the “Medicean” humanists in fact had an ideology. But Niccoli famously wrote nothing, Marsuppini very little, and Traversari authored exclusively translations, so that the burden of formulating one falls squarely on Poggio. (Also in consequence, the chapter on Niccoli contains a lot of material already discussed regarding Bruni and Filelfo, and later repeated for Poggio.) Field postulates three domains where Poggio provided intellectual foundations for the Medici regime: the definition of nobility, the role of money in society, and political legitimation (p. 295). The former point is made primarily by reference to Poggio’s dialogue *On Nobility*, in which Niccoli, debating Lorenzo de’ Medici (Cosimo’s younger brother), shows it to be a social construct. Marsuppini’s poem on the same theme, dedicated to Poggio, lends support, although it is less clear what Poggio’s dialogue *Whether an Old Man Should Marry* and his *Facetiae*, entertaining though
they are, contribute to this topic (pp. 303-7). The question of money is addressed by means of Poggio’s first publication, a dialogue, *On Avarice* (completed in 1428, but existing in an earlier version also), the only work in which he touches on the matter. This enterprise is complicated by the fact that, as Field knows, the Medici “had only just begun to coalesce as a party” by that date (p. 309). The text is also difficult to interpret, since it is unclear whose viewpoint is presented as correct (if indeed there is one simple answer: John Oppel, whose article on the work Field strangely does not cite, argued for a combination of those of the main and of the last speaker).[10] Field settles on the final contributor as expressing Poggio’s own opinion, namely that wealth is useful for society as long as princes and prelates do not succumb to immoderate desires. This he calls the “embryonic” Medici party line (p. 315).

The third issue, that of political legitimacy, is addressed only in the book’s last three pages drawing on the *Caesar-Scipio Controversy*, in which Poggio contrasts the virtuous Scipio with the fractious Caesar. Field takes up John Oppel’s argument (from another article, cited not here but in the previous chapter, p. 273) that Poggio’s Scipio stood for Cosimo, and his Caesar for Albizzi (or perhaps for the Milanese duke Filippo Maria Visconti, as argued by Claudio Finzi, uncited).[11] My edition of this text, forthcoming in The I Tatti Renaissance Library, contains an argument against these identifications which I will not repeat here. I note, however, that Poggio’s consistent association of the *popularis* Caesar with the lowest dregs of Roman society and those who desire revolution sits extremely uncomfortably with Field’s portraits of the aristocratic Albizzi and popular Cosimo de’ Medici.[12]

“How, then, could Filelfo argue in the 1430s that ‘without Poggio Cosimo was feeble, maimed, and weak’?,” Field asks in conclusion (p. 317, also p. 229).[13] This citation from Filelfo’s unedited *Oratio ad exules optimates*, advanced by Field as evidence for Poggio’s crucial role as Medici ideologue, in fact pertains to a rather different argument. Inveighing against the beastly immoralities of Poggio, Filelfo asserts that the humanist had proffered himself as guide (“*dux*”) to Cosimo on this path of vice; in that sense, Poggio and his patron had something to give to each other.

Less crucial, but equally misleading are Field’s interpretations of passages from Poggio’s funeral orations for Bruni and Niccoli. He twice argues that Poggio needled Bruni’s desire for money when he depicted him as having chosen the study of law over letters voluntarily; not, as is common in humanist discourse, with extreme reluctance (p. 129n15 and p. 185). What Poggio in fact writes is “he returned—pressed by lack of funds, being a man of only modest assets—to the discipline of civil law, which promises its practitioners wealth and riches. He often complained to me (since we were good friends) that it was against his will and forced by necessity that he abandoned [humanistic] studies.”[14] Regarding Niccoli, Field psychologizes that “there are some bruises that we do not know about: Poggio mentioned a ‘Stoic’ upbringing” (p. 237), when in fact the text clearly shows Poggio praising Niccoli’s natural, almost Stoic, self-restraint. There are also some lapses in Latin translations.[15] The renderings of the Italian are generally good, even though (a minor quibble) the procession of Florentine youths kitted out by the Guelf party in *ciambellotto* were probably not, like sixty John the Baptists, wearing camel skin, but wool cloth laced with camel hair (p. 94).

It is obvious that not just the thinking but much of the writing of this book was done in the early 1990s. Throughout, the text contains references to “recent” literature which turns out to have been published in the 1980s; “very recent” is Robert Black’s *Benedetto Accolti* from 1985.[16] Why was this not edited out by someone at OUP? As a result, much genuinely recent work has been ignored. Particularly regrettable is the fact that Filelfo’s correspondence is cited with the folio numbers of the
1502 edition rather than according to Jeroen De Keyser’s critical edition, which makes it impossible to identify the letters.[17] Perhaps these four volumes came out too late (2015) to be of use to Field, but his attempt to disparage their importance suggests otherwise (p. 187n1). In fact, acerbic asides about the real or perceived shortcomings of other scholars’ work litter the text and are best not repeated here; as is often the case, these reflect worse on their author than their targets (to be fair, they are balanced by generous praise for some).

What to make, then, of this book? It is a repertory of source materials, and provides stimulating food for thought. But it is clear that it must be approached with a thick skin and extreme caution.

Notes


[6]. This distinction is attempted for Petrarch’s *De remediis* on 80n21.

[7]. Field makes much of Poggio’s sense of humor, love of a good party, and “healthy fondness for women,” 303.

[8]. For instance, he deposited money in the Strozzi and the Medici banks, and dedicated his *De Militia* to Rinaldo degli Albizzi, and his translation of ps.-Aristotle’s *Oeconomicus* to Cosimo de’ Medici, 130; 143; 170-72.


[15]. An example of a bizarre mistranslation is Filelfo’s Satyrae, vol. 1, ed. S. Fiaschi (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2005), 1.5, ll. 61-2, “Ut is ait nunquam terras petisse Tonantem / nec genus humanum divina caede redemptum,” which Field renders as “Niccoli believed that ‘the nations never worshiped Jupiter and the human race had not been redeemed by the divine sacrifice,’” instead of “that God had never descended to earth,” etc. (253). It matters, as Field tries to infer from Filelfo’s poem real doubts about Niccoli’s religiosity.

[16]. For example, 19; 77; 198; and 176; R. Black, Benedetto Accolti and the Florentine Renaissance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).


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