

## VIOLENCE IN MEDIEVAL ITALIAN CITIES

LAURO MARTINES, editor, *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200-1500*. (UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies Contributions: V.) Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1972. Pp. viii, 353. \$12.00.

In the opening essay to this collection, J. R. Hale poses two questions: If the clock were stopped about the year 1500, how much violence would we see in western Europe? And what sense could be made of it? Hale's essay provides background for the theme of violence in the later Middle Ages and stands as a balanced survey. He touches most of the appropriate bases emerging with an overview that merits attention. The fifteenth century is seen as relatively free from the collective violence soon to come. The fury of sectarianism and the dislocations prompted by the price revolution were in the offing. After a series of cautious disclaimers, Hale describes the later Middle Ages as being less violence-prone than the centuries ahead. In passing he notes that governments tended to move away from cruel and unusual punishments toward a system of adjudication and compromise of disputes. Except for political crimes, the tendency of courts was to search for modes of settlement and reconciliation.

The remaining essays treat the special theme of violence and disorder in Italy from the thirteenth through the early sixteenth century. With the exception of John Lerner's piece on the Romagna, the contributors focus on urban life. J. Hyde summarizes contemporary opinion on factional strife in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy; he reviews the writings of chroniclers, political thinkers, and poets to determine leading features of judgment on the topic of endemic civil discord. R. Brentano in his study of strife and contention in thirteenth-century Rome correctly points out the implications of Wallace-Hadrill's research for those interested in

the later Middle Ages: the threat of clan violence operated to create government as well as to undermine it. Students of the world of medieval Italian city-states should recognize that urban peace could best be promoted when the clans exercised control over their membership. Modern scholarship dwells too extensively on the divisive features of the politics of *consorterie*. Treaties and agreements between rival clans were the surest guarantee for urban stability.

D. Herlihy presents valuable demographic details in an attempt to confirm his psychological perspective on violence in the Tuscan cities. From his data he constructs a profile of a youthful society rife with sexual frustration and burdened with deprivation. The evidence for Florence does not in fact always support his bold correlations, and even the data presented is not entirely convincing. Most premodern societies would offer the same youthful demographic profile; Florence is surely not unique. Important differences in patterns of violence cannot readily be explained on the basis of a youth culture. Herlihy sees late marriages, a sizable age discrepancy between husband and wife, and other demographic factors as creating a world of adolescence characterized by a frustrated and violence-prone youth. A study of the Florentine court records suggests, however, a substantial decrease in crimes of violence for the period Herlihy surveys. In fact, the age patterns displayed by fifteenth-century Florence differ little from those of many another premodern, traditional society. Peter Laslett, among others, discusses this question in his book, *The World We Have Lost*.

G. Brucker writes on the artisan-worker cadre in Florence from 1340 to 1450, stressing the extreme mobility of the poor and near-poor of the city. He shows that alienation is by no means an exclusively modern urban phenomenon. W. Bowsky's conclusions on *minuti* violence in Siena parallel those of Brucker for Florence: "The poor may riot spontaneously when hungry, but I suspect that in most conspiracies magnates or ambitious *popolani grassi* utilized them for their own purposes." Both Bowsky and Brucker see *minuti* violence as a reflex of upper-class politics. Such a perspective does little to illuminate the question of why violence among workers erupted at particular moments of patrician strife and not at others.

L. Martines provides an introduction and conclusion to this volume, while V. Iardi contributes a long piece on the assassination of Galeazzo Maria Sforza. W. Gundersheimer treats Ferrara from 1440 to 1500 and after, successfully demonstrating that capital punishment was reserved primarily for those convicted of crimes against the state. S. Chojnacki

describes the Venetian judicial system of the fourteenth century as bringing to trial for capital crimes noble and commoner alike. The above two studies suggest that a decisive change did occur in the pattern of urban violence with the taming of the nobility. One difference between Italy and the north of Europe may rest in the fact that the urban patrician of the Italian town was more likely to be brought to justice than his northern European confrere. The implications of modifying the behavior of an urban aristocracy are of course far-reaching for any student of Renaissance culture.

Hale's overview may well obtain: the fifteenth century was a time of decreasing urban violence with the nobility tamed and worker unrest diminished. It may be that what Braudel described as the golden age of the worker with its steady wages and stable prices brought a greater measure of tranquility to the urban scene. My own impulse would be to accent the rise of state power and the decline of quasi-autonomous forms of political association. Much collective unrest in the cities during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was the consequence of the activities of numerous armed familial and corporate associations. These armed societies were, I believe, the model for early worker movements. Interestingly enough, many of the leaders of the Florentine Ciompi were ex-mercenaries, as has been shown by Brucker. Practice in warfare and militia duty served to school *minuti* in the arts of organization and urban combat. Likewise, the *consorterie* of the nobles were associations for clan defense. During the fourteenth century these armed societies lost much power along with the decline of the rural and urban militias. By the early fifteenth century the territorial (or regional) state had a virtual monopoly of force and could keep the public peace with deadly effectiveness.

Of course the question remains: against whom were the energies of the state directed? Judging from the conclusions of several of these studies, one can surmise that the victims of this fierce justice were the politically seditious and the vagrant of the cities. Evidence from fifteenth-century Tuscan court records bears this out. What is not developed in these studies is the very important theme of mechanisms for arbitration and conciliation. Even the complex system of making bail and posting bond is not amplified. In the fifteenth century variegated procedures for restoration of the criminal back into society were widely practiced—not only in Italy but throughout Europe. It would appear, then, that the power of the state was effectively combined with traditional strategies for resolving disputes; in tandem, the carrot and the stick worked well to dampen the level of urban

violence. Several of the present studies discuss sixteenth-century Italian social theory pertaining to the nature of urban crime and justice. The statements of these theorists support the notion that state power coupled with appropriate techniques for rehabilitation of the outlaw served the Italian city-states quite well.

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