

ARTHUR FIELD, *THE INTELLECTUAL STRUGGLE FOR FLORENCE: HUMANISTS AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MEDICI REGIME, 1420-1440*, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, OXFORD 2017, VII, 370 PP., ISBN: 9780198791089.

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To reconstruct the events that unfolded in Florence over the brief span of two decades preceding the mid-fifteenth century, Arthur Field leads the reader through a remarkably rich intellectual itinerary, animated by encounters, tensions, and interpretative challenges. Following a period of relative ideological indeterminacy, the closing years of the second decade of the fifteenth century witnessed, according to Field, the gradual crystallization in Florence of two competing ideological formations corresponding to the pro- and anti-Medicean political divide. Poggio Bracciolini, Niccolò Niccoli, Ambrogio Traversari, and Carlo Marsuppini – figures « all four very close to Cosimo » (p. 322) – are presented as the principal agents of a far-reaching cultural reconfiguration, one that progressively generated a coherent set of intellectual and political orientations identifiable as a distinctively Medicean ideology. Published seven years ago, the book has lost none of its intellectual vitality or scholarly significance; if anything, it has established itself as indispensable reading for historians of early Quattrocento Florence. Its enduring authority rests on an exceptionally wide-ranging – and at times astonishing – command of both archival and literary sources. Revisiting the work in light of subsequent scholarship, some of which has entered into fruitful dialogue with its arguments, only confirms the solidity and lasting importance of Field's achievement.

The « Acknowledgements » (p. v–vii) open with the central question: « Was there an ideology of the early Medici regime? » – that is, an ideology presumed to have taken shape following Cosimo's return from exile in Venice at the end of 1434. The response advanced is carefully nuanced, resisting rigid conceptual demarcations while remaining, in its general orientation, affirmative, albeit insufficiently conceptualized. At times, the argument risks collapsing into a series of binary oppositions – conservative versus progressive, traditional culture versus radical humanism, vernacular versus Latin, aristocracy versus democracy, Plato versus Aristotle, and so forth – that tend to simplify rather than clarify the

underlying analytical stakes. Field occasionally appears to suggest (most notably in Chapter 4, devoted to Leonardo Bruni; see *e.g.* p. 151) that the mere existence of a recognizable political faction, together with individual adherence to it, suffices to posit a corresponding political ideology. Yet such an assumption would seem to require further theoretical grounding, since it can hardly be regarded as self-evident. Moreover, in a work otherwise marked by considerable sensitivity to the contingencies, intricacies, and ironies of historical processes, the sharp distinction drawn between the theory (« plan or general strategy ») of a political faction and its practical « execution » (p. 5) appears more striking than genuinely illuminating. One early reviewer, Robert Black (*American Historical Review*, 124 [2019], p. 754–755), characterized Field’s approach as informed by a « neo-Marxist paradigm ». The label itself seems to me of limited analytical usefulness, except insofar as it draws attention to certain occasional oversimplifications and sweeping generalizations – perhaps symptomatic of intermittent interpretative impatience – which surface at various moments in the argument and which, in their level of abstraction, recall some of the characteristic tendencies of neo-Marxist historiography in the 1970s and 1980s.

The volume is structured in three parts. The first (p. 3–72) reconstructs the « political and social background » and consists of two chapters: the first devoted to the period 1378–1426, and the second to the crucial years in which the political reputation of the banker Cosimo de’ Medici was formed (1426–1434). These pages are particularly compelling, grounded in a meticulous reading of chronicles and archival sources. Field’s use of literary materials that have often been neglected by historians – such as Giovanni Gherardi’s *Rime* and, more broadly, the late-Gothic literary corpus already explored by literary scholars including Domenico Guerri and Antonio Lanza – is especially effective in illuminating specific aspects of the period, often with clarity regarding the meanings contemporaries attached to individual events. The awareness of the historical mutability of political labels (*e.g.*, p. 9 on ‘Guelf’) is salutary. The handling of archival documentation, including a careful study of the ‘Pratiche’ (*i.e.*, *ad hoc* committees of citizens or municipal officials tasked with drafting resolutions for the ‘Priori’, who would then decide on their adoption), is likewise useful. Occasional analogies with contemporary decision-making in departmental or board meetings are lightly drawn but not without heuristic value, insofar as they help to animate the reader’s historical imagination (*e.g.*, p. 17). The incidental analysis of « social mobility » (p. 19 ff.), conducted in critical dialogue with Anthony Molho’s reconstructions, invites broader reflection on the interpretative possibilities – and limitations – of archival evidence, while the discussion of political intimidation (p. 61), grounded in surviving documentation, offers yet another instance of the author’s keen eye for historically revealing detail. At the same time, these chapters tend at times to adopt an incipiently teleological perspective, rereading half a century of

Florentine history in light of Cosimo's return in 1434. While such a retrospective optic is not in itself illegitimate, it is not always counterbalanced by an equivalent emphasis on contingency and on the openness of alternative historical trajectories. One may note a tendency in this section towards a certain determinative framing, where a more fine-grained analysis might have yielded additional insight. One example may suffice: Field's use of the notion of « consensus » is judicious, yet it remains insufficiently differentiated, without fully unpacking the heterogeneous components and shifting configurations this concept may have encompassed at different moments.

The second part (p. 73–229), entitled « Traditional Culture », is divided into three chapters. Chapter 3 (« Traditional Culture and the Critique of Radical Humanism », p. 75–126) reconstructs the so-called anti-Medicean ideology set in opposition to the radical humanism of Niccolò Niccoli and Poggio Bracciolini, and identified, in Field's account, with Coluccio Salutati and his circle. The cult of the *tre corone* – Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio – is closely associated with this cultural tradition. Texts such as Giovanni Gherardi da Prato's *Paradiso degli Alberti*, rediscovered and edited by the formidable Russian scholar Alexander Nikolayevich Veselovsky (p. 77 and *passim*), are appropriately cited as representative expressions of this intellectual milieu. The author returns to this interpretative framework in Chapter 5, devoted to Francesco Filelfo (« Francesco Filelfo, Oligarchic Virtue, and Medicean Vice », p. 187–229), who is presented as an ideological ally of the late Bruni. This aspect, while certainly not the only original element in Field's interpretation, is nonetheless the only one explicitly acknowledged as such by Robert Black's otherwise restrictive assessment. The reader learns a great deal from the manuscript sources examined throughout this chapter; one need only consider, for instance, the perspicuous remarks on money (p. 215–216). Between these two chapters lies one of the most fascinating sections of the book: Chapter 4, « Leonardo Bruni and Civic Humanism » (p. 126–186). Bruni emerges here as the locus of a complex intellectual trajectory: from a youthful standard-bearer of progressive humanist culture, translator of Plato, and associate of Poggio and Niccoli, to a later figure increasingly estranged from the Medici milieu and more receptive to Aristotle, oligarchic political sensibilities, and the cultural prestige of the *tre corone*.

The third part, entitled « Medici Culture » (p. 231–327), consists of two richly detailed chapters followed by a brief concluding section (p. 320–327). Although Chapter 7, « Poggio and the Ideology of the Medici Regime » (p. 276–319), carries the principal argumentative burden of the monograph and offers the clearest formulation of its central thesis, many readers may ultimately find themselves more deeply engaged by the literary felicity and psychological acuity of the preceding chapter, « The Man Who Was Nothing » (p. 233–275), devoted to Niccolò Niccoli. This remarkable biographical portrait – subtle, many-sided, and

narratively compelling – arguably constitutes, together with the previously discussed Chapter 4, the most accomplished section of the volume. However, Chapter 7 advances considerably broader ambitions. « Poggio’s work may be viewed – Field writes – as a sort of ‘embryonic’ form of a Medici party ideology, even if this was not his [Poggio’s] intention » (p. 315). What is at stake, then, is an *intentio operis* rather than an *intentio auctoris* – the latter being, in this case, far from unequivocally recoverable. Even so, the reader is left with a certain sense of perplexity by the end of the discussion. Poggio’s *De nobilitate* (1440) is paraphrased at considerable length and presented as a cornerstone of the broader argument. Yet Poggio is credited with introducing conceptual innovations that were, in fact, already present in the juridical and philosophical debates of the Trecento, beginning with Bartolo da Sassoferrato. Field does cite the famous epistle on nobility by Lapo da Castiglionchio the Elder (p. 99), but Chapter 7 does not appear fully to integrate either its implications or the wider tradition to which it belongs. The notion that one of the principal definitions of nobility – the juridical one – necessarily entailed forms of variability dependent upon political geography had already been clearly articulated by Bartolo and subsequently reiterated for more than a century in disputes concerning ‘true nobility’, debates effectively ignited, in the Florentine context, by Dante’s canzone *Le dolci rime*. Very little of this broader intellectual background enters Field’s reconstruction. Although he does invoke an important classical authority, Juvenal, the specifically medieval and early humanist genealogy of the debate remains largely unaddressed. As a result, what may legitimately be understood as a contribution – certainly not the most radical one – to a long-standing and highly stratified discussion is ultimately presented as an epoch-making ‘deconstruction’ (p. 322) of the traditional idea of ‘natural nobility’.

The book perhaps still lacks the *extrema manus* and, taken as a whole, may not persuade even all of its most sympathetic readers. Allow me, therefore, to indicate a few examples of what I have referred to above as the author’s occasional lack of patience. These concern three related aspects: first, an approach to textual analysis that oscillates between meticulous close reading and, at times, a more cursory treatment that can occasionally prove misleading; secondly, a bibliographical coverage that is extensive, though not always fully up to date or sufficiently attentive to certain important strands of critical scholarship; and finally, a certain degree of historical myopia.

Let us begin with the first point. Field can be exact to the point of pedantry, as illustrated by the numerous precise qualifications, corrections, and self-corrections scattered throughout the volume (see, for instance, p. 293, n. 83; p. 304, n. 143: « my summary of this may be misleading »; *etc.*). Yet this very scrupulousness sits somewhat uneasily alongside interpretations that are, at times, advanced *a volo d’uccello*, with a breadth and rapidity that occasionally

outpace the evidentiary nuance displayed elsewhere. On p. 108, in summarizing *Il Paradiso degli Alberti*, Field writes: « When at the Paradiso villa the Paduan Biagio Pelecani, a great natural philosopher, outlined the Aristotelian teaching on human happiness [...] Luigi Marsili remarked that Christian theologians argued similarly ». In the text itself, however, the master from Parma is explicitly corrected by Marsili, who criticizes Aristotle's position in the light of Augustine and the Christian doctrine of original sin. On p. 140, while discussing Bruni's claim in the *Historiae Florentini Populi* that « the Romans borrowed so much from the Etruscans in terms of law and religion », Field feels compelled to remark that « to modern sensibilities it is rubbish ». I am not entirely sure what is meant here by 'sensibilities'; but if the discussion is framed in properly scholarly terms, one need only recall the research synthesized by Marta Sordi in *Il mito troiano e l'eredità etrusca di Roma* (Jaca Book, Milan 1989), which in several respects lends support to Bruni rather than to Field's quick dismissal. At p. 138, n. 56, Field emends the 'ragioni' of a source to 'regioni', rendering it as « regions of the Empire ». Yet *ragioni* is perfectly acceptable in its transmitted form and need not be understood in a geographical sense; it more plausibly refers here to « claims », or, in a juridical register, « rights ».

The second aspect is equally evident in several places. Notably, the name of Carlo Dionisotti does not appear in the bibliography, despite the fact that a number of his insights into fifteenth-century humanism – particularly concerning the Quattrocento reception of Dante, the debate on nobility, and the tensions between clerical and lay culture – would have been highly pertinent to the present discussion. Francesco Tateo's name is likewise absent, despite the fact that his studies on fifteenth-century dialogues *de nobilitate* remain essential points of reference for any serious treatment of the subject. Nor does the author appear to have engaged with Johannes Bartuschat's research on « The Legend of the Artist » (*Les « Vies » de Dante, Pétrarque et Boccace en Italie, XIVe-XVe siècles: contribution à l'histoire du genre biographique*, Longo, Ravenna 2007), which would have considerably illuminated the significance of Bruni's *Vitae* – works that are not exclusively modelled, as Field implies, on Plutarchan biography. As Lorenzo Tanzini already observed in his review for *Archivio Storico Italiano* (176 [2018], p. 413–414), the volume does not always engage in a balanced manner with more recent scholarship: a broader consideration of recent historiography – including the contributions of a younger generation of scholars such as Brian Maxson, whose work has explored the circulation of humanistic culture within ruling elites – would have further strengthened the analysis and rendered it more fully accountable to the current state of scholarship.

Finally, the third aspect concerns a certain historiographical short-sightedness or, if one prefers, an excessively Florence-centered perspective. Field frequently discusses the Papacy, yet almost always from a Florentine vantage point, without

fully reversing the perspective and viewing Florence, so to speak, from elsewhere. Even when he appears to attempt such a shift, he tends to do so through the eyes of Bracciolini, thereby ultimately reproducing the very Florentine centrism noted above. One may compare, for instance, Field's treatment of Cosimo de' Medici's years of exile with the analysis more recently offered by Tanzini (*Cosimo de' Medici. Il banchiere statista padre del Rinascimento fiorentino*, Salerno Editrice, Rome 2022, p. 94–114), especially regarding the decisive role played by the presence of the papal Curia and the Pope in Florence – a presence initially made possible, and indeed encouraged, by the anti-Medicean faction, yet one that ultimately proved instrumental both in facilitating Cosimo's return and in neutralizing the political maneuvers of Rinaldo degli Albizzi and Ridolfo Peruzzi. It is likewise surprising that, in a study devoted to the crucial two decades between 1420 and 1440 and fundamentally concerned with elucidating the rise of Cosimo de' Medici, the Council of Constance (1414–1418) and the broader international dynamics it embodied receive virtually no attention in their own right (see p. 282–283). Yet it was precisely at Constance that the young banker Cosimo had already begun to construct, with considerable political acuity, the international network of alliances, relationships, and interests that would later underpin his ascent to power.

This having been said, the book advances a thesis of considerable clarity, grounded in a confident and often impressive command of the sources. At times, the sharp delineation of opposing factions, together with the posited correspondence between political alignments and ideological orientations, renders the classification of individual authors somewhat strained – notably in the case of Brunni, whom Field himself treats with commendable nuance, acknowledging both the complexity of the figure and the evolution of his position across Florence's successive political configurations. Yet even where one may hesitate before certain aspects of the interpretative architecture, the argument remains consistently stimulating and intellectually productive. Field has produced a learned, incisive, and often remarkably witty study, rich in insight and animated by genuine historiographical ambition. Above all, it succeeds in raising a series of important questions that deserve – and have indeed already begun to provoke – further investigation. The volume invites two distinct ways of reading, and with them two different judgments of its achievement. Taken as a unified monograph, the book reveals a degree of unevenness that is difficult to overlook. Although its underlying thesis and the sequence of chapters gesture toward coherence, that sense of unity is not consistently sustained in execution. Read instead as a collection of studies on Florence in the first half of the fifteenth century, the volume appears in a very favorable light. Its value then resides less in the force of a single overarching argument than in the richness of its individual insights, findings, and interpretive perspectives. Seen in this way, the work's apparent lack

of cohesion may itself be revealing: the volume's very heterogeneity comes to function as a suggestive intellectual self-portrait, in which it is the breadth of approaches and interests, rather than any single unifying design, that most vividly reflects the distinctive scholarly imagination of its author.