Marcello Fantoni

Italian Courts and European Culture

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Renaissance History, Art and Culture

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Per Costanza, perché ha dato un senso alla mia vita.

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There are many people I need to thank: all of whom have helped me or are my friends. Luckily for me, the list would be too long to mention them all, and so I will limit myself to the essential. I thank Fabrizio Ricciardelli, who was a spur and an example. I thank Gustav Medicus for editing the manuscript and for his stimulating questions. I thank Chiara Continisio, who thinks highly of me, because she likes me. And, lastly, I thank Cesare Mozzarelli and Amedeo Quondam from whom I have learnt almost all of the little I know.

Preface

Why write a book on Italian courts? Obviously, I was the first to ask myself this question. What is still left to say that is not already known about courts from the Middle Ages to the Baroque period? I discovered that I had two answers to that question, and – consequently – two reasons for writing this book. The first arose from a realization about what scholarship already existed. Scholars of different nationalities and from various disciplines have used a variety approaches to write about the courts, and their research has grown exponentially in recent decades. Since the mid-1970s, in Italy alone, the study center Europa delle Corti has published more than 150 volumes. There are specialized journals, such as the English-language *The Court Historian*, and research centers like the Residenzenkommission in Germany or the one hosted by the Chatêau de Versailles in France. To which we can add a selection of exhibition catalogues and countless works by art and architecture historians. Literature, too, has been explored in its multiple genres, and so has music and the exuberant universe of pageantry, theater and ceremonial.

Yet, despite this abundance and variety of knowledge, a consolidating theme still seems to be missing – a center of gravity, a unifying theory that could give it all a coherence. In particular, for a long time, the Italian courts were ostracized by historians of the state, who regarded them merely as a hangover from feudalism. This was exacerbated by the tenacious myth of a republicanism that only recognizes the roots of political and cultural modernity in the communal city-states. While those times have more or less passed, it was here that the road came to an end (or led in other directions), which is why, as far as I know, there is currently no alternative reconstruction of the political panorama in Italy between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries – one that could shape new theories about the country's cultural dimension.

The second (principal) question is a rather daunting one: what contribution did the Italian courts make to Europe? If, indeed, it is true that the courts occupied a significant place in Italian history, then it is inevitable that cultural models were exchanged, albeit in very different ways. But a peril lurks here. That of preaching to the converted, so to speak, in proving what we (or, at least some of us) already know: e.g. the cultural primacy of the Italian courts and their influence on the civilization of the ancien régime. This is true, but is primarily the substance of specialist studies. What is missing is an attempt to summarize all this. To do so successfully requires

systematic teamwork. It has already been tried a couple of times. Firstly, by the European Science Foundation, which has produced four volumes, and, secondly, by Il Rinascimento Italiano e l'Europa ('The Italian Renaissance and Europe') project, which has six volumes to its credit.[1] These are certainly important ventures, and there is much to be learnt from them in all sorts of disciplines, concerning all sorts of historical phenomena. It may be, though, that the very approach of these projects and the vast number of researchers involved has left a gap: no one has set out any general theories. In the end, we know what happened, but we know little of the how and why of it happened. If I have tried to provide some answers, it is not conceit on my part, but a desire to spur others on. The novelty is in the sketching of a preliminary collage of facts, trying to find correlations between them, and suggesting a sense in them that is more than the mere sum of their parts. In short, I am simply highlighting the common denominators.

What exactly are we talking about? Some time back, Fernand Braudel authoritatively stated that: 'From 1450 to 1650, in the course of two particularly eventful centuries, the thousand glorious colors of Italy's light radiated far beyond its confines: this light, this dissemination of a cultural heritage that had formed within it, appeared as the characteristic of an exceptional destiny.'[2] This is true, but so is the fact that this history has been broken up into too many stories. So, why retrace this path again? There are good reasons to do so. Firstly, Braudel's work has not been followed up and many historians continue to speak of 'Italian decadence' for the period spanning 1550–1700. In addition, over the years, studies have appeared that have added significant arguments and suggestions to the discourse; so, it is not absurd, fifty years on, to reconsider Braudel's work. Above all, is the issue of periodization, with an Italian golden age enclosed in two centuries, between the Treaty of Lodi (1454) and the end of the Pax Hispanica (c. 1650). As I try to show, on the one hand, the 'dissemination' of Italian culture seems to have put down roots (and located itself) in the spread of humanism at least a century before. On the other, it has been proved that Italy's capacity to export culture continued after the mid-eighteenth century, right up to (and after) the outbreak of the French Revolution. This temporal dilation brings with it consequences that go beyond mere chronology. It paints a different picture of the culture of the ancien régime, a homogeneous culture

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1   The first of the two projects is entitled 'Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe' and the volumes were published between 2006 and 2007. The works of the second, sponsored by Cassamarca, were published from 2005 on.

2   Braudel, *Out of Italy*, p. 3.

that endured. Moreover, the process also acquires significant value for the construction of modernity and of the European identity.

In addition, Braudel believed that the conditions that allowed Italy to play this guiding role were to be found, above all, in its economic superiority (which he extends to the mid-seventeenth century), while I prefer to identify its primary cause and catalyzing force in the political dimension and, in particular, in the universe of the courts. Finally, I think that the essence and unifying element should be sought in classicism. If this is true, then we should ask why and what functions it performed. To what extent, then, was adopting the lessons and models of the ancients simultaneously an element of homogeneity and a break with the Middle Ages? Moreover, it was those very Italian courts that, from the early fifteenth century, brought classicism (the child of humanism) back into vogue and encouraged the infusion of many different cultural expressions. And it was politics that classicism supplied – first in Italy and then throughout Europe – with a reliable system of values and symbols based on which it was able to define itself. What was the relationship, then, between classicism and politics? And how and why did politics adopt these new codes? These are other questions that need to be asked.

Meditating on how to tie up these loose strands, I felt the need to try and (re)define the framework and content of the rich, multicolored world of the Italian courts and the propagation of their culture. But – and here lies a second danger – how do we curb the uncontainable bibliography, and how do we embrace the quantity and complexity of the subjects? How do we account for it all in a coherent summary? Without losing ourselves in the multitude of clues, but taking them as a starting point, we need to trace a context that will allow us to evaluate the importance, the modalities, and the meaning of the phenomenon. A certain adroitness is also necessary in discerning what pertains to the court and what does not, if only to circumscribe the enquiry. We cannot lump everything together indiscriminately. Where possible, I have chosen to remain at a safe distance from the myriad specific studies, trying, at the same time, to trace as clear a picture as possible. Exemplification is a bottomless pit, which I have peered into, so to speak, where necessary, doing my best not to fall in. In any case, the point is not to accumulate examples, in the illusory quest for completeness, rather it is to understand what was happening. At the same time, it meant finding the right balance between eschewing the obvious and not making any assumptions; between avoiding commonplaces and only addressing the specialist. In short, I wanted to write a book that was properly documented and at the same time readable.

But this is not just a compilation. On the contrary. The reconstruction of the overall picture reveals (as some have already noted) the fallaciousness of a number of the interpretive paradigms that our reading of the ancien régime is based on. Along the way, we will see some of our historiographic certainties wavering: from evaluations of whole eras of Italian history, to theories of the alleged twilight of the Italian Renaissance in favor of its migration to the Protestant north, to the genealogy of modernity and its supposed roots in the city republics. That is not to say that these cruxes can be dealt with exhaustively, but nor can they be wholly evaded. Finally – and this might be an additional question: what need is there, in the twenty-first century, for a book on such a remote past? Tackling this question would take us on a long journey. But I think that anyone who picks up this (or any) book already has an answer. At least, I hope so.

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I.

Republics and Princes

Abstract

Until a few decades ago, scholars used to place republics at the center of the political and cultural Italian history between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This interpretation has now been revised. However, we are still missing a reconstruction of the alternative scenario that this would imply. Discussing this historiographical process and reconsidering the Italian geopolitical system under the new perspective of the centrality of the courts is a necessary premise to explain how Italian princely courts became culturally central and capable of exporting to Europe their 'political language.' In fact, princely courts carpeted the peninsula from Sicily to the Alps and maintained their cultural supremacy from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century.

Keywords: republics, courts, historiography, political geography