

The Medici: Citizens and Masters

Review Number: 1929

Publish date: Thursday, 5 May, 2016

Editor: John Law

Robert Black

ISBN: 9780674088443

Date of Publication: 2015

Price: £29.95

Pages: 444pp.

Publisher: Harvard University Press

Publisher url: <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674088443>

Place of Publication: Cambridge, MA

Reviewer: Nicholas Scott Baker

The name Medici is almost inextricably interlinked with the city of Florence and the idea of the Renaissance in both popular and scholarly imagination. The family dominated the Florentine republic politically for the better part of the 15th century and became, first, dukes of Florence and, then, grand dukes of Tuscany in the 16th. As patrons of art, architecture, and literature they left a rich, material legacy and imprint on the city. Their political legacy, however, has remained disputed and far less clear. In particular, their dominance of, and role within, the Florentine republic during the 15th century has been a matter of historical contestation ever since. The essays collected in this volume, first presented at a conference at Villa I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence, in October 2011, explore this issue in detail.

Like the conference, the volume frames the exploration around the unspoken, but clear, debate between Nicolai Rubinstein and Philip Jones over the nature of the Medici regime. In his 1966 monograph, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici, 1434–1494* (1), Rubinstein undertook a fine-grained constitutional analysis of the Medicean system of governance. He argued for a minimalist interpretation of their rule, stressing the continuity of communal governing structures throughout the century and the family's reliance on constitutionality and legality. Rubinstein stressed that Medici governance was materially different from that of contemporary *signori* such as the Sforza of Milan or the Gonzaga of Mantua. By contrast, Jones in a significant and influential article, 'Communes and despots: the city-state in late medieval Italy' (2) equated the Medici in Florence with the Visconti in Milan. Jones painted with a much broader brush than Rubinstein and argued that no effective distinction existed, in practice, between republican and signorial regimes in medieval and Renaissance Italy. Whatever the constitutional form and structure, he suggested, all regimes in the peninsula were, in practice, oligarchic, with power shared between a narrow group of wealthy families, either feudal or mercantile. From within these oligarchies, despots and *signori* emerged, whose rule depended on keeping the sociopolitical elite mollified. Jones noted that the structures of communal or republican government might endure in many city-states but argued that they did so as hollowed-out shells. The difference of interpretation between the Rubinstein and Jones' theses is captured in the distinction between 'citizens' and 'masters' in volume's title.

In a succinct introduction, Robert Black outlines the history and nature of the Rubinstein-Jones debate and

notes the alignment of other leading scholars of Florentine history within it. For the purposes of simplicity, Black distinguishes these interpretations as ‘republican’ and ‘signorial’, respectively. He concludes the volume’s introduction by suggesting that the contributions demonstrate the continuing vitality of the debate, identifying each author with one or the other position. The introduction makes no claim to synthesis or thesis for the volume but leaves the question in a state of perpetual, creative tension. The reality of the volume’s contents lives up to the creative potential of this tension between the republican/signorial division that Black outlines in the introduction but does not cleave as cleanly between the two poles as he suggests. While the majority of contributors do align themselves with one or the other position, a significant number (eight of 22) instead emphasize the ambiguity of the Medici position in Florence. Moreover, even many of those within either the republican or the signorial camp depict a picture that reflects complexity and nuance as much clarity.

Indeed, on the signorial side of the ledger, only one contributor, Andrea Zorzi, states unambiguously ‘the Medici were indeed signori’ (p. 49). Although he immediately contextualizes this assertion by situating it within the precise, local configurations of power. So, like other princely rulers in north-central Italy who also worked within and manipulated communal institutions, the Medici were signori only so far as the Florentine political culture would permit. Riccardo Fubini instead tackles the Rubinstein thesis on its own ground, to argue not so much that the Medici were signori but rather that their regime was clearly neither constitutional nor republican. During the 15th century, Florence was in ‘a state of permanent and irreversible crisis’ (p. 63) that the Medici exploited by governing through ‘an informal configuration of power’ (p. 62), which Lorenzo hoped to replace with a new constitution with himself as prince or *gonfaloniere a vita*.

Franco Franceschi, David Chambers, Jane Black, and John Najemy take a different approach: using coeval signorial regimes – particularly the duchy of Milan – as a metric against which to judge the behavior and attitudes of the Medici. Again the judgment is not that the Medici were signori, but rather that they behaved more like signori and masters of Florence than citizens in a republic. Franceschi, for example, identifies a closer alignment between Medici economic policies and those of the Visconti dukes of Milan than previous Florentine regimes. Chambers, similarly, argues that in their campaign to have a Florentine raised to the rank of cardinal, the Medici acted ‘more as a ruling family than as dominant citizens’ (p. 208), following the pattern of the Gonzaga, the Paleologo, the Aragonese rulers of Naples, and the Sforza. Najemy uses a close reading of books five and six of Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories* to argue that the Florentine political thinker viewed Cosimo il Vecchio de’ Medici and Francesco Sforza as political analogues: rulers who corrupted republics and used public institutions for personal, private benefit. Finally, Black in provocative intervention argues that the Medici actually possessed greater freedom of action and sustained their position more smoothly across the generations than their Milanese allies and counterparts.

For Giorgio Chittolini the more important question is not the nature of the Medici regime in Florence, per se, but rather the nature of governance across all the major cities of north-central Italy: Florence, Genoa, Milan, and Venice. He argues that a broad trend is definable, by which the dominant cities increasingly began to assert *imperium* or princely power over extended, conquered territories. The subtext is the increasing homogeneity and similarity of the nature of government across the four cities, despite their apparent constitutional differences. Gian Maria Varanini provides a republican riposte to Chittolini. He argues that the city-state remained ‘the inescapable point of reference, the true touchstone against which all else was measured’ (p. 37) in the political cultures of the 15th century. The ultimate source of legitimacy and authority for any regime – princely or republican – remained the commune and the approval of the body of citizens.

The claims of the contributors who align with the republican interpretation of Rubinstein are generally less qualified than those of the signorial interpretation, but still scrupulously nuanced. Again, one voice, Dale Kent, stands out as offering the most vigorous and unambiguous republican perspective. She argues that the power of the Medici in Florence (particularly that of Cosimo il Vecchio) needs to be understood and viewed through the lens of *autorità*, the term used by many contemporaries and by Lorenzo himself in 1481 to describe it, and the weight this carried in Florentine political culture. Blending a Ciceronian concept of the

duty a virtuous citizen owed to exert influence on the state with a Florentine sense of the duty owed to fathers and fatherland (*patri* and *patria*), *autorità* was not the sole possession of the Medici nor did it denote princely power: 'while Cosimo enjoyed immense authority over the leading citizens, he was far from exercising absolute control' (p. 235).

Several contributors, similar to those on the signorial side, make perceptive use of comparisons to measure and assess the nature of the Medici regime. Carolyn James, Blake Wilson, and Marco Gentile use northern Italian princely dynasties as a metric to argue that the Medici clearly behaved in a different manner to contemporary signori. While Florence was unique among republican cities on the Italian peninsula for pursuing a polyphonic chapel (the Cantori di San Giovanni), which elsewhere was a mark of 'courtly magnificence, cosmopolitanism, and dynastic ambition' (p. 268), Wilson argues that Medici involvement in this project was distinctly un-princely. Comparing the 1469 marriage of Lorenzo de' Medici to Clarice Orsini with the 1471 union between Ercole d'Este and Eleonora d'Aragona, James argues that that divergent behavior of Lorenzo and Ercole toward their wives reveals a fundamental disjuncture between attitudes and expectations, and so demarcates two different political cultures. Gentile looks not at rulers but at their officers. He argues that the difficulties encountered by Florentines serving as ducal officials in the Milanese state reveals a marked distinction between the political cultures of Medicean Tuscany and Sforza Lombardy. Lorenz Böniger and Amanda Lillie instead measure the behavior and values of the Medici against those of other Florentine patrician families. They map strong continuities that suggest the dominant family shared attitudes and expectations, including a commitment to civic republicanism, with their peers. Böniger argues that in economic matters dealing with migrants or relations with other polities Lorenzo de' Medici did not exercise any power or influence outside of traditional channels. Lillie looks outside of the city of Florence to the patrician villas of the *contado* and argues that the fashion for castellated rural villas in the 15th century represented a complex interplay between the political cultures of magnate and *popolano* families as well as an assertion of loyalty to and celebration of the communal government. In this regard, she suggests, the *popolano* Medici behaved no differently than the magnate Pazzi.

Then there are those contributors who emphasize the ambiguity of the Medici position in Florence and use that to analyze their position as neither republican nor signorial but something that avoids easy categorization. Unsurprisingly, several of these contributions examine the representation – visual and literary – of the Medici. Francesco Bausi, Paola Ventrone, Paolo Orvieto, and Alison Wright examine aspects of Medicean patronage and iconography and reveal a complex, ambiguous interaction between republican values and princely ambitions. Bausi traces the changing literary depiction of the Medici as 'defenders of Florence's free institutions and republican traditions' (p. 239) from unambiguous association with heroes of Rome's ancient republic to a more complicated portrayal as 'civic princes'. Ventrone argues that throughout the 15th century, the Medici carefully kept their image in public festivities and spectacles understated and in keeping with tradition. However, she observes that the accompanying literature to such festivals, from the mid-15th century, points to the increasingly self-conscious exclusivity of the regime: 'the Medici continued to be formally *primi inter pares*, but the number of *pares* (equals) continued to shrink' (p. 264). Orvieto uses the Foucauldian concept of 'discourses of power' to delineate intersections and collaborations between religious culture and Medici political power. He traces a trajectory of advance and retreat from princely claims by the family across the 15th century. Wright argues that Medicean iconography was constructed around a complex set of claims about the past and the future, an iconography that was subtle and even deliberately ambiguous in that it both legitimized Medici rule but also tied their own interests to those of the Florentine republic, linking the stability of the two together.

Melissa Bullard, Alison Brown, and David Peterson all draw attention to the marked differences in understandings of the role of the Medici when viewed from outside rather than from inside. Bullard argues that in the 15th century, as a direct result of the ambiguous position of the Medici in the city, Florentines developed 'a heightened political consciousness' becoming highly skilled in 'conscious political posturing for particular ends that relies upon subtle, quite deliberate manipulations of language' (p. 52). In this regard, Bullard argues that ambiguity, rhetorical and political, was more beneficial to Lorenzo de' Medici than open rule as a signore would have been. Brown uses balance as the key explanatory term to interpret and explicate

the government of the Medici: balance between the competing polities of Renaissance Italy, balance between the competing demands of other families and individuals at home, balance between these two roles, and balance between the princely and republican demands of each. Welcomed as princes by other Italian signori, in Florence the Medici possessed limited freedom of action as brokers (*mezzadri*) holding a balance of power and negotiating between competing claims, which they could never all always satisfy. Considering ecclesiastical policy rather than diplomacy, Peterson presents an equally complex picture. He suggests that, in comparison to previous Florentine regimes, the Medici more actively attempted to sanctify and legitimate not only Florence and its government but also their own personal dominance in the city through their interactions with the church.

Finally, Stephen Milner, in one of the most original contributions to the volume, sketches out a 'metahistory' of the debate over the position of the Medici in 15th-century Florence, arguing that the scholarly controversy of the 20th century replicated the rhetorical forms of classical antiquity and Renaissance humanism. Moreover, he demonstrates that the Rubinstein-Jones debate actually forms part of a continuum of rhetorical controversy that began in the 15th century itself, although in the latter, he notes, it was not a question of intellectual inclinations but one of 'political life and its stability' (p. 294).

The cumulative impression of the volume is a multi-faceted, kaleidoscopic view of the 15th-century Medici regime in Florence. As the reader progresses from one chapter to the next, the perspective, object of analysis, and conclusions shift, sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically. Depending on the question asked, the data analyzed, and the interpretation offered the Medici appear as either citizens 'with a certain authority' (as Lorenzo de' Medici himself put it in 1481) or as masters of the city and its government. But rather than suggesting that the question – and the Rubinstein-Jones debate – is all simply a matter of perspective, the conclusion drawn from the volume is a nuanced and complex one about the ever-elusive, ambiguous nature of the Medici regime that resists easy categorization and definition. The book's multi-faceted presentation is its real strength. The reader gains a unique, multi-dimensional image of the Medici in the 15th-century Florence and is left to weigh and balance the competing claims and interpretations. The overall emphasis on ambiguity (even from those contributors who more clearly align with either the Rubinstein/republican or Jones/signorial theses) ultimately recommends the need for historical scholarship of the Medici to move beyond fixed definitions or historiographical models. Rather than measuring the Medici regime against concepts such as veiled or crypto-signoria, the collective weight of the volume recommends a careful analysis of the specificity of context – both institutional and cultural – and the subtleties of meaning within this context when analyzing Renaissance Italian politics, not only in Florence but everywhere on the peninsula. The contributions of Brown, Fubini, Kent, Milner, and Zorzi, in particular, provide fine examples of what such analyses might look like. Moreover, the broad, comparative approach taken by most of authors and sweep of its contents should attract (and will reward) the attention of scholars (of history, literature, and the arts) not only of Florence but also of Renaissance Italy more broadly.

Notes

1. Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici, 1434–1494* (Oxford, 1966, 2nd ed., 1997).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Philip Jones, 'Communes and despots: the city-state in late medieval Italy', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, fifth series, 15 (1965), 71–96.[Back to \(2\)](#)

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1929>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/153791>