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From the Bottom Up: Influence on the Upper Class by the Florentine Underground in the Renaissance

Keri Heath

Lorenzo Medici, Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio, Leonardo da Vinci: these great men paved the way toward artistic and societal revolutions of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries and serve as symbols of the power of Renaissance Florence. But the real history of the city was not solely held by the artists, merchants, and wealthy. Contrary to popular belief, the Florentine "underground" had a considerable influence on the politics of the ruling citizens as an increasingly drastic gap between the rich and the poor created class tensions that forced the ruling class to consider the demands of the working class. Although the upper and lower classes of Renaissance Florence led physically and socially separate lives, the ruling class's preoccupations with the demands of the poor underground played a significant role refocusing the political attention of the elite towards the lower classes.

Upper Class Attitudes

To understand the class divisions within Florence, it is important to take note of the social and economic structures prevalent within the city. Florentine social classes were primarily based on constructions of wealth, with the rich magnate occupying the ruling seats, and a middle and lower class occupying a spectrum of economic statuses falling beneath them. The individuals making up this "underground" came primarily from the Ciompi class who were "the most numerous class of day-laborers (dismissible without notice) in Florence's chief industry" of cloth manufacturing, among other occupations.¹ The term "underground" also denotes a lack of direct connection to the popular proceedings within the city, an association that includes criminals and members of the popolo minuto, or lower-middle class. For this reason, the term "underground" will be used here to refer to Florentine individuals who had no formal representation or influence on the politics or proceedings within the city.

The first significant demonstration of the power this "underground" possessed came during the Ciompi revolt of 1378. During the events of that summer, when the wool workers managed to gather their power together to overthrow the government, the Signoria and other magnates became acquainted with the power the lower classes had when bonded together. For the first time during the Renaissance, the ability of the populo minuto to "make certain demands by means of petitions, which were just and reasonable" became apparent.² While the events itself shook the magnate, the demonstration of mob power within Florence firmly stamped terror into ruling minds, a fear that continued throughout ensuing centuries as the effects of this revolutionary event continued to reverberate in the magnate's minds. The revolts of 1378 demonstrated, among other things, the strong sense of identity that the lower classes could create, an identity that Samuel Cohn, Jr. describes as similar to that of working class unions during the industrial revolution.³ Indeed, the growing communal identity of the lower classes was an increasing concern of the magnate, a threat of uprising and social disorder that had to be worked into their policy planning.

Now more on the minds of the oligarchy, the poor began to create anxiety and fear for the magnate, who were already dealing with political strife within their own social class and threats from outside the city. This fear aggravated a more and more prejudiced view of the lower classes, whose "evil" and "laziness" increasingly became a matter of fact in the minds of the ruling class. By the end of the fourteenth century, the oligarchy began to "assimilate the undisciplined and undisciplinable poor to the familiar image of the rogue" and to associate poverty with criminal intentions.⁴ Labor soon became the only role that upper classes believed the lower classes should possess, a mindset that led to increased class tensions later in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. This pervasive view of evil trickled into court records, public

dealings, and urban development. Indeed, in the court trial of Giovanni and Lusanna, in which the later accused the former of breaking their marriage contract, the lower social status of Lusanna contributed to the factors leading to her eventual loss of the case, by the determination of the Pope. While Giovanni was declared by all but the plaintiff to be an honorable man, many wished for Lusanna that “the devil take her soul for she has brought shame and dishonor to [the] family.”⁵

The Lusanna story also indicates the classifications of good and evil that the magnate assigned to male and female members of the *popolo minuto*. While men who did not have a job were considered lazy and a detriment to society, women who actively left their home on a regular basis became associated with promiscuity and prostitution. Such conservative views were also applicable to wealthy women, but “the poor did not and could not possess honor.”⁶ To regulate the roles of poor men and women within Florence, the government issued strict sumptuary laws restricting the clothing that certain classes could wear, claiming to protect the populace against “the barbarous and irrepressible bestiality of women, who, not considering the fragility of their nature . . . force their men . . . to submit.”⁷ The assumption of guilt is evident in the strong hatred communicated in court records such as this one. This visual separation preempted other forms of separation between the wealthy and the underground.

Despite these prejudices, there were several attempts prior to the seventeenth century to give relief to the poor. The church provided social welfare, meals, and workhouses for disenfranchised individuals. Confraternities distributed alms; at times, members of the underground who were wrongly accused in court even found a friendly witness to testify for their innocence. When one Angelo di Taddeo Gaddi was accused of violently attacking a man, a witness provided testimony that “Angelo attacked Miniato because he had been most grievously injured by him [and] . . . is a pauper and cannot pay that fine.”⁸ While many of these efforts were headed by the church, powerful families within Florence also sponsored many poor relief efforts. The Medici, who were eager to equate their name with good fortune for the masses, were especially active in this regard. Cosimo Medici “made loans to impecunious farmers with undowried daughters” and sponsored work projects to benefit the *popolo minuto*.⁹ These efforts helped ensure the Medicis’ political stability and brought the favor of the populace to their side.

While this poor relief may have been enacted out of some sympathy, it is also one of the first examples of social control methods used to quiet any uprisings of the poor class. These efforts became much more difficult in the sixteenth century when the population of Florence grew and became less manageable. Attitudes about poor relief shifted from individual aid toward population appeasement and control. More and more, views toward the poor tended to be practical: ensuring that the wrongly accused stayed out of the jails also secured their continued production in the city. A rising population control saw “the development of more systematic and more discriminating poor relief, and of attitudes to the poor which were more practical but less humane.”¹⁰ The government’s attitudes toward the poor focused on productivity and separation, a theme that would continue in other control efforts. After 1621, these efforts were still in existence, but with less fervor.

Social and Physical Separations of Rich and Poor

However, the fact that the underground was not being provided for is clear from the revolts that ensued throughout the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. The economic recession of the fourteenth century reverberated harshly on the *popolo minuto*, evident by the fact that “poverty rates of 50 to 70 percent maintained pressure on wages.”¹¹ The effects of the plague, the economic downturn, and a lack of representation in the political sphere all contributed to the discontent stewing in the minds of the populace. While Niccoló Machiavelli, author of *Florentine Histories*, did not necessarily condone the violence used by the Ciompi, he did admit that “we are on our way to a sure acquisition, because those who could hinder us are disunited and rich.”¹² The Signoria’s refusal to fully address these demands, or provide fairer taxes, more relief during the plague and the famine, and increased support of those in power, ultimately led to the Ciompi revolt and increased the gap between the wealthy and the poor.

Even after the Ciompi revolt, political revolts continued into the fifteenth century, if only in smaller, more personally centered struggles. The fear of this is shown by one warning to the lords of Florence that “if [they] don’t do something, [they] will discover that no one in Florence will be able to save [them and] . . . there will be an uprising.”¹³ Grain workers, cloth laborers, and other poor workers who felt uncompensated by the government’s policies continued to protest the actions of their government. The Signoria and other ruling bodies took responsive action, in some cases ordering that “since not all are quiet, and in order to

instill fear into some, foot soldiers should be hired.”¹⁴ The continued fear of the upper class is clear from these warnings. While the revolts and uprisings of the post-Ciompi era were more controlled and less impactful than that of 1378, the government evidently still worried about a repeat of those events.

The reasons for this fear were well grounded. During the Ciompi revolts, the underground of Florence for the first time “had some form of illegal institutional continuity, betrayed in their flag” and developed a community identity amongst the protesters.¹⁵ This identity came largely through the validity that the lower classes attempted to add to the campaign. The use of their flag, uniting the various guilds under one order, was perhaps the more important step toward creating a community among the protesters. To the protestors, the flag—one of the most notable that was used had the word “liberty” on it—represented a bonding of their various guilds under a common goal. Indeed, under this flag, the Ciompi were more loyal and disciplined than under the flag of their own guilds.¹⁶ Uniting under Michele di Lando and the Otto government also allowed the Ciompi to believe in their ability to unite as a force and to “cut across old communal networks of association, [which] challenged the domination of a state that was still medieval.”¹⁷ This growing sense of identity terrified the upper class, as they realized the ease with which the Ciompi could gather support and form a revolt against the power of the wealthy.

It is for this reason that the Florentine underground was so influential on the upper class. Though some historians choose to focus only on the upper class as the driving force of social structure during the time, “a statistical analysis of social networks of association among laborers and artisans . . . have shown that their social structure and community organization were not so static as historians have assumed.”¹⁸ In addition to encouraging some social welfare programs and reforming of the tax code, the effects that the underground’s uprising had on the government were significant in furthering the political progress of Florence. In response to the revolts, the government established the Otto di Guardia in 1378 to use a network of spies to detect plots before they could come into fruition. In addition, the government granted amnesty to many political exiles, a measure they would have never taken without their desire to control the lower classes. These policies contributed to a new political environment within Florence. A tense political atmosphere of secrets, plotting, and distrust emerged among the magnate, one that Buonaccorso Pitti demonstrated in his own diary. When Pitti and his brother agreed to help the Abbot of

S. Piera a Ruota in Valdambra instate one of their sons as abbot, “henchmen contrived to implicate him in a sham conspiracy” and “would not rest until by force or trickery they had got their hands on the abbey.”¹⁹ This political environment of conspiring was born partly from this Otto network, revealing the effects of the poor on Florentine policy. 1494 saw another result of the government’s efforts to prevent future revolts with a more democratic government, and while the oligarchy may have quickly reinstated itself, the episode revealed a shifting mentality within the city.

The magnate also addressed their fear of the lower classes by creating new policies that developed rituals of separation within the city. First and foremost, the government forced the Ciompi “to give over their flags to the Palace . . . [because] understanding that obedience to this demand would destroy their occupational identity.”²⁰ Separated from their unifying flag, the poor were forced to recognize the leadership of magnate. In addition, the ruling body used rituals such as feasts, religious holidays, and processions as means through which to unify the city, more specifically the poor towards the main culture of Florence. Parades that celebrated Florence and Christianity were especially popular because these universal ideals could appeal to the entire city and thus were key to the magnate’s attempts to bring the populace back under their control. However the government recognized the gamble they were taking by relying on processions to increase public unity: processions “were absolutely necessary for social order yet endangered it, for the procession was a social order.”²¹ While the processions could bind together the poor under the banner of Florence, it also gave the *popolo minuto* a gathering place to breed further discontent. Still, the magnate was willing to take this risk in order to preserve the current balance of power.

These social separations were coupled by similar physical manifestations of the magnate’s fear. While not an intended measure of separation put forth by the government, the urban geography of Florence began to reflect the desire of the upper class to separate from the underground, with the poor pushed the margins of the city and streets increasingly segregated by economic status. Through the use of mapmaking, powerful families and government officials were able to paint a new image of the city. Figure 1²² especially shows how a certain powerful family was eager to create “a new Medici Florence, a city reborn with the arrival of the Medici dukes” and revealed how urban constructions of the time were “outdated modes of cartographic technique that favored bias and fictive distortion to symbolize the city.”²³ Yet, these constructions, however inaccurate to the



Figure 1: Stefano Bonsignori, Plan of Florence, 1584.

layout of Florence, did demonstrate a trend within the city towards pushing the poor further towards the margins, away from the eyes of the magnate. Evidence in the 1427 catasto shows that a household's address and gross income had a significant correlation. Though the neighborhoods did see a degree of overlap between classes, "the physical changes accompanying the street's transformation into a genuinely patrician thoroughfare resulted in the displacement of the poorer families into surrounding backstreets and alleys."²⁴ This physical separation, though not an intended effect of the government's efforts, clearly revealed the mindset of the wealthy and showed how the lower class was ostracized.

It is important to note, however, that in spite of the increasingly physically divided nature of Florence, evidence shows that there was no true central underground for the city. Crime did not center around one specific street or area.²⁵ Instead, gambling, prostitution, and theft took place across the city. Thus the above discussion serves not as an attempt to point out one neighborhood as more likely to revolt than another—for, indeed, the levels of class wealth did overlap within individual neighborhoods—but to show the separation that the wealthy began to put between themselves and the poor, without the insistence of the government.

The Poor and Criminality

The lack of one central, physical underground, of course, does not imply the nonexistence of a criminal underground at all. Despite the efforts of the upper class, the lower classes still felt dispossessed and attempted to meet their own needs and create their own political activism through criminal activity. Probably the most prevalent of crimes, grain revolts and other similar events throughout other industries continued to cause strife for the upper class. In addition, those who were especially desperate could take the example of one house owner who had "six little shops beneath that house which are rented to prostitutes, who usually pay from 10 to 13 lire per month."²⁶ Though criminalized by the magnate, these and other illicit activities were the product of a society in which every citizen was not provided their necessary resources. Some acts of crime were also assigned to the lower class through societal norms, such as adultery or the case of the ten-year-old daughter of Niccolò Soderini who "was discovered wearing a dress made of two pieces of silk, with tassels."²⁷ The girl violated sumptuary laws and thus the magnate assigned to her the status of a criminal, a label that reflected the upper class' perceived criminality of all the popolo minuto.

The prevalence of these crimes was not hard for the wealthy to believe. In fact, "by the sixteenth century, poverty had become associated with sin, a totally new development."²⁸ Separated from the wealthy through their clothing, address, and political representation, the popolo minuto took on the role of the scapegoat or the "other" in the eyes of the magnate. Francesco Guicciardini in his account of the Florentine poor called the class "an insane animal, full of a thousand errors, of thousands of confusions, without taste, without refinement [diletto], without stability."²⁹ Reactions such as this further reveal assumptions about the poor's evilness and the ease with which the magnate associated them with criminal activity.

In order to deal with this "criminal poor," the government created a new judicial system as part of the Otto di Guardia that focused more on approval from the masses than it had in the past. While certain crimes, such as rape, adultery, and sodomy, increased after the installation of the Otto, most crimes, such as homicide and theft decreased from the 1350s to 1380s. The magnate's new judicial system attempted to reduce "the number of witnesses reluctant to testify in criminal and civil cases"³⁰ and to keep urban peace "through systematic court initiative rather than by private agreement or clan agreement."³¹ These attempts to make the justice system more accessible to the lower classes serve as

another example of the shift in awareness the magnate were making. In order to ensure the satisfaction of the poor and prevent popular uprisings, these methods became a common feature of Florentine courts.

The lower classes also began to be associated with sorcery and the occult. While Florence did not experience a witch frenzy like other European cities did, there is no doubt that it was touched by the fear. In one 1375 case against the condemned witch Monna Caterina di Agostino, the women's acts were said to have caused "disorder, tumult, and scandal . . . in the city of Florence between the citizens of this city."³² While this reaction may seem somewhat melodramatic by modern standards, the issue was obviously of grave seriousness to the magnate at the time. Other instances show that "the authorities viewed these cases with the utmost gravity [and] . . . in both cases, the principals were sentenced to death."³³ Through these incidents, the upper class assigned devilish characteristics to the poor. These trials reveal an obsession on the part of the magnate to characterize the unholy, criminal nature of the poor and to separate themselves from the "other" of the popolo minuto. What this criminalization ultimately reveals, however, is the fear that the magnate felt towards the poor. Stemming from the enormity of the 1378 Ciompi Revolt, the upper class began to see the popolo minuto as a disrupter of the social order of Florence and feared the political upheaval that a unified force of the poor could cause to the system. Because of this preoccupation, the actions of the poor forced the ruling class to shift their political attentions toward issues of the less wealthy. This influence on policy and political thought played a significant role in the development of the Renaissance, just as much as the influence of Lorenzo Medici, Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio, or Leonardo da Vinci.

Endnotes

- ¹ "Ciompi," in *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. J. R. Hale (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1981), 85.
- ² "The Demands of the Ciompi, 1378," in *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Document Study*, ed. Gene Brucker (Buffalo: Harper & Row, 1971), 236.
- ³ Samuel Kline Cohn, Jr., *The Laboring Class in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 133.
- ⁴ William J. Connell, ed., *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 314.
- ⁵ Gene Brucker, *Giovani and Lusanna* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 78.
- ⁶ Connell, *Society and Individual*, 304.

- ⁷ “The Social Rationale, 1433,” in *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 181.
- ⁸ “The Excuse of Poverty,” in *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 176-77.
- ⁹ Gene Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 159.
- ¹⁰ “Poverty, Relief of,” in *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Italian Renaissance*, 266.
- ¹¹ Yves Winter, “Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising,” *Political Theory* 40, no. 6 (2012): 741.
- ¹² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, quoted in Winter, “Plebeian Politics,” 758.
- ¹³ “Justice for the Poor,” in *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 234.
- ¹⁴ “Plague, Famine, and Civil Disorder,” in *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 230.
- ¹⁵ Richard C. Trexler, “Follow the Flag: The Ciompi Revolt Seen from the Streets,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 46, no. 2 (1984): 389.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 366.
- ¹⁷ Cohn, Jr., *The Laboring Class in Renaissance Florence*, 206.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.
- ¹⁹ Buonaccorso Pitti, “The Diaries of Gregorio Dati,” in *Two Memoirs of Renaissance Florence*, ed. Gene Brucker, trans. Julia Martines (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1967), 89.
- ²⁰ Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), 346.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 340.
- ²² Stefano Bonsignori, *Plan of Florence*, 1584, in Adam Drisin, “Intricate Fictions: Mapping Princely Authority in a Sixteenth-Century Florentine Urban Plan,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 57, no. 4 (May 2004), 42.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 43-46.
- ²⁴ Nicholas Eckstein, “Addressing Wealth in Renaissance Florence: Some New Soundings from the Catasto of 1427,” *Journal of Urban History* 32, no. 5 (July 2006): 723.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 720.
- ²⁶ “Profits of Prostitution,” in *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 190.
- ²⁷ “Prosecutions and Penalties, 1378-97,” in *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 181.
- ²⁸ Connell, *Society and Individual*, 304.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 308.
- ³⁰ Marvin Becker, “Changing Patterns of Violence and Justice in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Florence,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18, no. 3 (July 1976): 290.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 290.
- ³² “The Enchantress,” in *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 261.
- ³³ Gene Brucker, “Sorcery in Early Renaissance Florence,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 10 (1963): 13.

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The Ospedale Degli Innocente: A Microhistory

Hannah Hunt

In many history courses, the Ospedale degli Innocenti is presented as an architectural feat, summarized as the first designated orphanage in western Europe, and passed over. Scholar Eugenio Battisti writes, “In [1419] the Silk Guild began building the Spedale degli Innocenti in Florence. . . . The Innocenti is included in every survey and handbook of architectural history. It is also Brunelleschi’s architectural debut and, as such, is expected to shed light on his later development. What’s left to be said?”¹

What’s left to be said? A lot.

What Battisti and others overlook is the fact that the Innocenti did much more for the city of Florence and held a life of its own that extended far past Brunelleschi’s arched loggia. It became a small city in itself, run by administrators with the aims of helping orphaned or abandoned children become integral members of Renaissance Florentine society by the time they reached adulthood. The Innocenti provided jobs for community members and its residents, grew wheat for the community, and helped encourage female residents to work in household services to support meager dowries for their marriages—to name a few functions.

Many, however, assume the building was nothing more than a single-purpose orphanage, housing the abandoned youths of Florence. It is important to realize that this building played a large role in capturing the culture of Florence, and to understand the origins of the Innocenti as a whole to see how it fulfills its role as an institution and microcosm of Florentine society. This was most obviously seen in the building’s conception, headed by the Silk Guild, its construction, run by Filippo Brunelleschi and Francesco della Luna, its roles as an orphanage, seen through the increase in baptisms across Florence due to its opening, and the economical roles it took on in providing positions to the women of Florence as well as giving back to the community.

The Need for the Innocenti

The socio-economic roles of Florentine guilds play a large part in the creation of the Innocenti. The city’s Silk Guild, despite some monetary issues in the early years of construction, wanted to supply Florence with a dedicated home for the orphans of the city. The future tenants of the Innocenti came from everywhere: they were the children of slaves and the illegitimate offspring of prostitutes, they came from impoverished homes that could not support another mouth to feed, sometimes after the deaths of their parents, and from the highest ranks of Florentine society such as: the “Adimari, Bardi, Capponi, Cerrentani, Medici, Della Stufa, Pitti, Rucellai, Ridolfi, Salviati, Strozzi, Tornabuoni, and Vespucci.”² These children were brought to the Innocenti to escape the entrapment of slavery during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century due to their “mixed” breeding.³ They would be absolved of their mixed-class status, so to speak, as the Innocenti was seen as a free-standing and fully legitimate institution of Florentine society, meaning its residences became legitimate citizens of the city state upon passing through the doors.⁴

It is clear how some families—the mothers of those mixed-class children in particular—would view the Innocenti as a refuge. But the need for the orphanage itself arose due to the plague, diseases, poverty, and problems with illegitimacy and infanticide running not only through Florence, but also the rest of Italy. It was not uncommon for a struggling parent to abandon a child due to poverty or illegitimacy. Luca Landucci’s diary provides a record of tragic events from war to famine to plague and flooding that occurred from the mid-fifteenth century to early-sixteenth. One can only assume that the death of loved ones was a prominent cause for abandonment.⁵ Events such as “a bad harvest and a recurrence of plague, [which] intensified the sufferings of the poor,” could also prompt the abandonment of a child at the Innocenti.⁶ Philip Gavitt, who has done