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978-0-521-53117-7 - Family and Public Life in Brescia, 1580-1650: The  
Foundation of Power in the Venetian State

Joanne M. Ferraro

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

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### THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

#### THE ITALIAN REGIONAL STATE

Two central questions have left their imprint on the literature of Italian regional states over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: did their formation in the fifteenth century mark the beginning of political decline, or did this development signal the dawn of the modern state?<sup>1</sup> Both queries were tied to the broader task of comparing the Italian peninsula's political development to that of the western European states in general. The move, in starts and stops, of the northwest monarchies in the direction of centralization has served as a model for historians attempting to chart the course of the Italian regional states through the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries.

One view, launched with Sismondi in the nineteenth century, proclaimed the decline of communal power and the rise of lordships in the fifteenth-century Italian cities as the beginning of (political and moral) decadence.<sup>2</sup> At the twilight of the nineteenth century Volpe

<sup>1</sup> E. Fasano Guarini, "Gli stati dell'Italia centro-settentrionale tra quattro e cinquecento: continuità e trasformazioni," *Società e Storia* 21 (1983): 626. I am indebted to the following sources for this historiographical essay: M. Berengo, "Il Cinquecento," in *La storiografia italiana negli ultimi vent'anni* (Milan: Marzorati, 1970), vol. 1, pp. 483–518; G. Chittolini, "Alcune considerazioni sulla storia politico-istituzionale del tardo medioevo: alle origini degli 'stati regionali,'" *Annali dell'Istituto Storico Italo-germanico in Trento* 2 (1976): 401–419; Fasano Guarini, "Stati," pp. 617–640; E. Fasano Guarini (ed.), "Introduzione," *Potere e società negli stati regionali italiani del '500 e '600* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1978), pp. 20–45; J. S. Grubb, "When Myths Lose Power: Four Decades of Venetian Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* 58 (1986): 60–86; J. S. Grubb, *Firstborn of Venice. Vicenza in the Early Renaissance State* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. ix–xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Sismondi's work, *Storia delle repubbliche italiane dei secoli di mezzo* (Capolago: Tipografia E. Libreria Elvetica, 1844–1846) is reviewed in Fasano Guarini, "Stati," pp. 617–619.

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[More information](#)

and Salvemini reiterated this pronouncement, linking the origins of decline with the arrest of bourgeois development, a stance that has also attracted the sympathy of twentieth-century historians studying failed transitions.<sup>3</sup> Aristocratization, refeudalization, a weak bourgeoisie – common themes in Italian historiography into the 1970s – all obstructed state growth.<sup>4</sup> When compared to northwest Europe, the Italian regional state experienced delays and failures.

Another view emerged by the second decade of the twentieth century that challenged the assumptions underlying the decline argument. It raised doubts about the notion of communal liberty. Questioned as well was the use of the urban venue as a primary index of progress or regression in the Peninsula's history. The focus of this line of thought, the internal structure and functions of the postcommunal polity, was broader; and the aim was not to illuminate decline but rather to discover the antecedents of the modern state. Forerunners of this approach, Anzilotti (1910) and Ercole (1914) argued that the rise of lordships in fifteenth-century Italy was a step in the direction of more progressive forms of government.<sup>5</sup> It was Federico Chabod, however, who determined the methodological course this line of inquiry would take when he set out to test for modernity with an examination of the bureaucratization of the sixteenth-century Milanese state.<sup>6</sup> Chabod's aim was to illuminate centralizing tendencies, an objective that was in full synchronization with post Second World War debates on the strides and limits of state development in western Europe. It was also in harmony with currents in post Second World War Italian historiography attempting to locate the origins of unification during the Risorgimento.

Not every Italian regional state, however, lent itself to Chabod's test for modernity. Unlike Milan or Florence,<sup>7</sup> some Italian regional states

<sup>3</sup> See Fasano Guarini, "Stati," pp. 618–619.

<sup>4</sup> See M. Berengo, *La società veneta alla fine del Settecento* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1956); A. Ventura, *Nobiltà e popolo nella società veneta del '400 e '500* (Bari: Laterza, 1964); R. Romano, "La storia economica. Dal secolo XIV al Settecento," in *Storia d'Italia* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1974), vol II, pp. 1,813–1,931; R. Romano, *Tra due crisi: l'Italia del Rinascimento* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1971).

<sup>5</sup> Fasano Guarini, "Stati," p. 620.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 619; 622–624. See F. Chabod, *Lo stato di Milano nell'impero di Carlo V* (Milan: Tuminelli, 1934); F. Chabod, "Ya-t-il un État de la Renaissance?," in F. Chabod, *Scritti sul Rinascimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), pp. 593–604; F. Chabod, "Usi ed abusi nell'amministrazione dello stato di Milano a mezzo il '500," in *Potere e società*, ed. E. Fasano Guarini.

<sup>7</sup> Litchfield advances our knowledge of the legacy the Florentine ducal bureaucracy of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries bequeathed to state-builders of the Risorgimento. R. Burr Litchfield, *Emergence of a Bureaucracy. The Florentine Patricians, 1530–1790* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 6–8.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

3

did not establish bureaucracies. Moreover, even those that did had to contend with local forces in peripheral areas. Thus Marino Berengo's study of the eighteenth-century Venetian state served as a case study not of modernization but of decadence.<sup>8</sup> *La società veneta alla fine del Settecento*, published in 1956, was a watershed for Venetian studies as the historical landscape shifted for the first time away from the islands of the lagoon to that of the territorial dominion.<sup>9</sup> Berengo established a new field of inquiry, one that was in synchronization with the broader interest in the workings of the postcommunal polity. He described the Venetian Republic as a "fragmentary" and "disorganic state,"<sup>10</sup> without executive structures or a bureaucracy in the provinces, where feudal privilege and a backward, landed economy prevailed. There were deep fissures between the Venetian ruling class and the mainland aristocracies, who were excluded from central government and hostile to Venetian intrusion in the affairs of city councils; and between the provincial aristocracies, allowed ample local authority, and the disenfranchised. The Venetian ruling class failed to repair the gaps between capital city and provinces, between privileged and non-privileged groups, between Venetian economic interests and those of the provinces, a failure that prevented unification and modernization.

Elsewhere Berengo, while acknowledging Chabod's contributions to the study of state development, also found his methodological focus rather limited. He drew attention to this in 1967 with an important essay on Italian historiography since the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> It was insufficient to study the centralization of Spanish governors, Berengo noted, for there was a plurality of powers in the Milanese (and, by implication, Italian) regional state. More attention should be devoted to investigating the centrifugal forces that opposed centralization: fiefs, groups, provinces, cities.<sup>12</sup> In this context, the process of aristocratization in the Italian cities was a fundamental line of inquiry, and a number of significant studies on the subject had already begun to be published, particularly for the Veneto and for Tuscany. Many more would emerge in the following decade both for these regions and for Lombardy, the Papal States, and Liguria as well.<sup>13</sup> Berengo's own path-breaking examination of aristocratization in sixteenth-century

<sup>8</sup> See Grubb, "Myths," pp. 70–71; 74–76; Grubb, *Firstborn*, p. xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Berengo, *La società veneta*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, chs. 1 and 2.

<sup>11</sup> Berengo, "Il Cinquecento," pp. 483–518.

<sup>12</sup> Fasano Guarini, "Stati," p. 625.

<sup>13</sup> For a review of the literature, see C. Mozzarelli, "Stato, patriziato e organizzazione della società nell'Italia moderna," *Annali dell'Istituto Storico Italo-germanico in Trento* 2 (1976): 421–512.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Lucca was among the first,<sup>14</sup> together with Angelo Ventura's *Nobiltà e popolo nella società veneta del '400 e '500*, a pioneering study of the inner workings of the Venetian territorial state.<sup>15</sup> Though several of Ventura's arguments have subsequently been adjusted and others continue to be controversial,<sup>16</sup> *Nobiltà e popolo* remains a standard work in the field.

Ventura, largely in sympathy with Berengo's characterization of the eighteenth-century Venetian state, traced the process of aristocratization in the Venetian mainland cities back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Particularly after 1509, Venice endorsed aristocratic rule, which was largely corrupt, at the expense of the popular classes. Yet at the same time, Ventura maintained, state intervention progressively reduced local freedoms. Themes of decline and of an incapacity to build a modern state again colored the literature. Decadence was linked in Ventura's case to aristocratization; in Berengo's Lucca to the extinction of free republics and a crisis of liberty. Berengo concluded in his 1967 review essay that power constricted throughout the Peninsula during the sixteenth century, and within some regional states more flexible political forms declined as the state pushed for more control. Though local freedoms were eroded, however, centralization did not take place.<sup>17</sup> Hence the historiographical problem remained that of locating power within the Italian regional state and, more broadly, of reconstructing the sociopolitical structure of the ancien régime in Italy. This is an area of inquiry not just for Italian historiography but for that of Europe as a whole. It has already been widely established that many South German, Spanish, French, Swiss, and Dutch cities moved, whether from feudalism or from communalism, towards oligarchy by the sixteenth century. Yet their differing relationships with princes, monarchs, and dominant cities and their own individual systems of power require further exploration and comparison.

For the Italian peninsula, historians throughout the 1970s and 1980s have been researching the plurality of powers within the regional states. Peripheral areas have attracted major attention.<sup>18</sup> Studies have focused on ruling orders, on the workings of provincial magistracies, and on the

<sup>14</sup> M. Berengo, *Nobili e mercanti nella Lucca del '500* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi (Toso), 1965).

<sup>15</sup> Ventura, *Nobiltà e popolo*.

<sup>16</sup> For reviews of Ventura, see C. Clough in *Studi Veneziani* 8 (1966): 526–544; G. Cozzi in *Critica Storica* 5 (1966): 126–130; A. Tenenti in *SS* 4 (1966): 401–408; and, more recently, D. Hay and J. Law, *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance, 1380–1530* (London: Longmans, 1989), pp. 113–116; Grubb, "Myths," pp. 76–78; Grubb, *Firstborn*, pp. xiii–xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Berengo, "Il Cinquecento," pp. 491–492.

<sup>18</sup> Fasano Guarini, "Stati," p. 625.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

5

relationship of rural institutions with those of both urban centers and the state. The result has been to produce some new conceptualizations of the study of the regional state. Ornaghi, for example, has emphasized that the state did not control all political power and that politics was not necessarily synonymous with the state.<sup>19</sup> Thus we find a shift in focus as historians attempt to locate centers of power and politics throughout the regional state. Of note, the work of Giorgio Chittolini investigates how powers outside urban centers affected the evolution of political institutions.<sup>20</sup>

The paths of investigation charted by Berengo, Ventura, and Chittolini and pursued by a number of recent scholars have all given direction to my study of the Brescian ruling class, an attempt to illuminate the systems of power in an important area of the Venetian territorial state. The issues Stuart Woolf raised about representation in the Italian, and more specifically Venetian, state also helped put this study of Brescia on the drawing board. How did Republics behave towards peripheral areas? To what degree were the latter integrated into the state? What institutional dependence was left at the local level? How far were various social classes able to make their voices heard? Were there pressure groups in the capital city? To what extent did the central government use local representation for justice, taxes, and defense? What were the limits of state authority? How far were local rivalries encouraged to redress local authority?<sup>21</sup> In much of Europe, urban centers had to defend their political and economic privileges either before the newly rising aristocratic monarchies or before great princes. On the Italian peninsula, by 1559 Milan, Naples, Sicily, and Sardinia had become Spanish viceroyalties. Even independent Papal Rome was at times under the weight of Spain. Other centers, such as Genoa, Antwerp, Augsburg, Holland, Strasbourg, and Ulm resisted absorption but at the same time linked their economic fortunes to the more

<sup>19</sup> L. Ornaghi, "'Crisi' del centro statale e 'disseminazione' di centri politici. Note su un indice di trasformazione dello Stato moderno," *Quaderni sardi di storia* 4 (July 1983–June 1984): 49–50.

<sup>20</sup> Chittolini, "Considerazioni," p. 407; G. Chittolini, "Le terre separate nel Ducato di Milano in età Sforzesca," in *Milano nell'età di Ludovico il Moro. Atti del convegno internazionale 28 febbraio-4 marzo 1983* (Milan: Biblioteca Trivulziana del Comune di Milano, 1983), vol. I, pp. 115–128. In this last article Chittolini draws attention to the importance of territories that became detached administratively from urban centers during the Visconti and Sforza lordships.

<sup>21</sup> S. Woolf, "The Problem of Representation in the Post-Renaissance Venetian State," in *Liber Memorialis Antonio Era. Studies presented to the International Commission for the History of Representative and Parliamentary Institutions*, vol. XXVI, New York: Unesco, 1961 and 1963, pp. 67; 80–82.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

powerful monarchies.<sup>22</sup> Venice remained one of the rare European examples of an independent city republic. It is hoped the study of its relations with its subject territories will contribute to our understanding of its unique position. At the same time it will provide a case study for comparative history with other Italian and western European states.

Currently, models of political decline or modernity are giving way to alternative conceptualizations of the Italian regional state. Waquet, for example, points to the necessity of disengaging political history from a completely linear perspective. There were interruptions and developments that went in indefinite directions. In this context the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Italy may be viewed as centuries of transformation but not necessarily as ones of progress or decline.<sup>23</sup> Chittolini's paradigm for the Visconti and Sforza states is finding broad acceptance: the regional state was neither medieval nor modern nor centralized. Rather, it was rife with local particularism.<sup>24</sup> Ornaghi also emphasizes that political history cannot simply be tied to the central state, as there were other centers of socioeconomic power.<sup>25</sup> In this general framework we can assess intentions and attempts to strengthen state structures while at the same time recognizing the survival of a plurality of powers.<sup>26</sup> Applied to the Venetian state, this conceptualization revises the bipolar approach of center and periphery, creating a broader picture of the centers and systems of power. It is important to note, for example, that the Venetians relied to a considerable degree on the provincial aristocracies to govern local society. Thus Venetian patricians and provincial aristocracies were not necessarily antithetical forces but at times complementary in their functions.<sup>27</sup>

Release from ideological themes such as decline or modernity enables historians to focus instead on the dynamic changes that took place in the systems of power from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The behavior of ruling classes such as the one in Brescia is critical to acquiring a better understanding of the causes of change in the period between the Renaissance and the Risorgimento.

<sup>22</sup> T. Brady, *Turning Swiss: Cities and Empire, 1440-1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 224-227.

<sup>23</sup> J. Waquet, *Le Grande-Duché de Toscane sous les derniers Médicis* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1990), pp. 48-50.

<sup>24</sup> Grubb, *Firstborn*, p. xiv.

<sup>25</sup> Ornaghi, "'Crisi' del centro statale," pp. 49-54.

<sup>26</sup> Fasano Guarini, "Stati," p. 629.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 628.

Cambridge University Press

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Joanne M. Ferraro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

7

## ARISTOCRATIZATION

The problem of how to characterize the ruling elites of north and central Italy has sparked intense monographic study since the Second World War, and particularly over the last three decades. As I have noted, Ventura has produced the standard work on the process of aristocratization in the Venetian territorial state, though there is still disagreement over the question of Venetian intentions.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, Marino Berengo, reviewing Giorgio Borelli's data on Veronese elites, opened new discussion by placing the lifestyles, culture, patrimonial strategies, and political behavior of these families into two distinct categories, patriciate and nobility.<sup>29</sup> The problem Berengo presented was not nominalistic but conceptual. His finely nuanced observations of the diverse lifestyles and traditions of Verona's ruling families prompted historians to move beyond studies of aristocratic closure to analyze more acutely the realities of aristocratization. That is the primary intent of this study. It will focus principally on the behavior of the families who participated in the government of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Brescia.

The book begins by placing Brescia within the context of the Venetian state. A geopolitical and economic survey underlines both the strategic and fiscal importance of this province for the Venetian Republic. Brescia and the Bresciano were among Venice's most prized subjects. The next part of the book conceptualizes the civic leadership, with a profile of its origins and a brief history of the process of aristocratization. Brescian councillors, like their Veronese neighbors, were a hybrid class of nobles and non-nobles that underwent a considerable degree of amalgamation. By the sixteenth century their identity was significantly tied to such professions as law and the notarial arts, professions that were fundamental to the system of municipal power. Part II also examines the relationship between family structure and the local sociopolitical structures. Size, wealth, professional study, and marriage ties were all pivotal factors that helped determine the family's position in public life. Its strength ultimately rested on its continuity over time. What emerges from part II is a picture of an elite which not only distinguished itself from the disenfranchised but also consolidated its own ranks over the course of the sixteenth century. The workings of the family are the prime *modus operandi* behind this

<sup>28</sup> J. E. Law has rejected the notion that aristocratic closure was due to Venetian policy. "Venice and the 'Closing' of the Veronese Constitution in 1405," *Studi Veneziani*, N.S. 1 (1977): 69–103.

<sup>29</sup> M. Berengo, "Patriziato e nobiltà: il caso veronese," *RSI* 87 (1975): 493–517.



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

constriction of political power, and those workings are most visible in the behavior of the lineage or the even smaller unit of the household.

The third part of the book situates Brescia's ruling families within the Venetian state. Besides controlling urban political institutions, they held strong economic links with the surrounding countryside, the basis of their power, and they enjoyed ample authority in the rural communities subject to Brescia. As such Brescian councillors – and kinsmen whose lifestyles revolved more around the rural hinterland – held substantive political weight over a rich and strategically vital portion of Venetian territory. Part III examines the different ways these families sought to preserve their control over local resources in the specific economic context of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The time frame 1580 to 1650 was chosen with specific criteria in mind: the period witnessed important transformations in the economy that played some role in shaping the behavior of Brescia's – and the Peninsula's – ruling orders. In particular, catastrophic mortality in 1630 seriously destabilized all economic sectors. Brescia's ruling families sought to maximize their income from land, credit operations, and the benefits of office. Their governing methods reflected the symbiotic relationship between family and municipal government. The latter was shaped to a considerable degree by the family's economic exigencies.

Part III also aims to shed light on the relationship between Brescia's ruling families and the Venetian state. Again the time frame 1580 to 1650 was chosen with specific criteria in mind. Historians of early modern and modern Italy have been preoccupied with the role aristocratization played in state formation. Were civic offices less important than rural jurisdictions and country estates? Did urban councils lose their political significance, making way for the growth of state authority? The answers to these questions will vary from place to place. In Brescia the interests of the rural nobility and the citizen elite converged in the communal age and continued to find political, social, and cultural expression in the city during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Venetians relied to a significant degree on Brescian councillors to govern local society. Thus, an analysis of the Brescian civic leadership's weight in public life, relative to that of Venetian authorities, illumines ways in which this important Italian regional state was knit together. Again the family and its thick web of kinsmen and allies constitute the real protagonists of urban history. Venetian statesmen's efforts to govern Brescia required not simply skills of administration but also an acute ability to work through the local social arrangements formed by kinship, clientage, and patronage networks.

The approach of this study is comparative, with urban centers in



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

9

western Europe and on the Italian peninsula in general and with the Venetian state in specifics. The latter now affords a rich historiographical literature to which this author is in debt for its instructive and comparative value. For the Venetian state more work recently has been done on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries than on that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the Lombard provinces have been studied less than those of the Veneto. While that literature provides an indispensable foundation for an investigation of Venetian relations with the Bresciano, the variety of experiences that emerges from studies of different areas, particularly in other historical periods, cautions against generalization. Gaetano Cozzi's work on the legal systems of Venice and its subject cities illuminates some of these differences.<sup>30</sup> The Venetian territorial state was vast, incorporating peoples with different histories and cultural traditions. Venetian Lombardy, far from the capital city and with a clear view of the Milanese horizon, did not witness the same kind of state penetration as the subject cities nearest the capital. Significantly, Venetian patricians did not buy real estate in the Bresciano, as they did in the territories nearest their own urban center, because of an ancient statute which prohibited the alienation of Brescian properties to foreigners. Moreover the physical and psychological distance separating Venice and subjects *al di là del Mincio* prior to modernity, a distance of approximately 160 kilometers that crossed innumerable cultural divides – not the least of which was linguistic – significantly modulated their relationships.<sup>31</sup> Thus it is important to highlight the unique features of the Brescian case in order to appreciate the variety of experiences within this Italian regional state.

<sup>30</sup> G. Cozzi, "La politica del diritto nella Repubblica di Venezia," in *Stato, società e giustizia nella repubblica veneta (secoli XV–XVIII)* (Rome: Jouvence, 1981), vol. I, pp. 79–121.

<sup>31</sup> See G. Cozzi, "Ambiente veneziano, ambiente veneto. Governanti e governati di qua dal Mincio nei secoli XV–XVIII," in *Storia della cultura veneta. Vol IV/II: Il Seicento* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1984), p. 497.

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[More information](#)

PART I

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**THE STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK**

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