

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Paul McLean. *The Art of the Network: Strategic Interaction and Patronage in Renaissance Florence*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. xv + 288 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4100-0; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4117-8.

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Renaissance Networking

The old saw “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know” certainly applied to Renaissance Italy. Many times, official channels were slow and capricious; those hoping for a timely and positive resolution of a court case, for example, might well have sought someone who could put in a good word to move things along. In other situations, the power of decision making was a perquisite relatively unencumbered by official procedures; positions of employment often fell within the appointive power of an influential individual. To get things done, then, required knowing whom to ask; it also required that the petitioner have something to offer, whether now or later, tangible or intangible, to repay the favor. And of course these urban citizens lived their lives embedded in a number of relationships of different sorts: family, profession, neighborhood, political party, and so on, to a very long list of social groupings and obligations, any or all of whose members might hope to make claims on one another over the course of a career or a lifetime.

Paul McLean has focused on the patronage aspects of this web of relationships as preserved in the letters of recommendation, requests for recommendation, and similar sorts of favors that abound in the Florentine archives. The result is a very readable and highly useful study. Historical sociology made notable inroads into the social history of late medieval and early modern Italy some decades ago; the detailed record keeping and large surviving bodies of documents made quantitative approaches to social behavior possible at a level sel-

dom seen for other parts of Europe at similar points in time. McLean shows that such an interdisciplinary collaboration still has much to offer. In his preface, McLean notes the work’s dual goals. On the one hand, as sociology it is interested particularly in Florence as a case study for testing more general ideas about culture and the construction of the self. On the other hand, Florence is so important a city in its own terms that the results must stand as a contribution to Florentine history. McLean balances these distinct goals throughout the work.

The work begins with a survey of various approaches to networking and of a list of concepts and techniques described by a range of sociologists for building relations. For example, McLean discusses how a person engages in so-called identity qualifying by deciding which of his or her various social roles or identities should be foregrounded or downplayed in a given setting, and then by proceeding to do so. McLean’s specific focus on Florentine letters of recommendation and request then leads him to look at the role of the humanist educators who set a high standard for quality of writing and dispensed rules about the specifics. These men helped establish formal norms for such letters, and the literary skills they imparted aided Florentines in both composing and reading such letters strategically. McLean focuses on an exemplary term appearing frequently in these letters, “honor,” and shows clearly that this and other such concepts held a range of meanings that could not only be invoked but also be discussed and even debated. That is, these letters had

highly formulaic elements—he uses the term “patterned discourse”—and offered a range of creativity, innovation, and possible change as well.

McLean offers quantified analyses of many such terms and techniques employed in various types of letter writing. (Multidimensional scaling, also used to represent the contents of letters, will probably speak more to readers in the social sciences.) Yet to examine so personal and discretionary a phenomenon as patronage decisions requires a finer set of tools than simply those of number. Thus, he also demonstrates an artful attention to the letters and the letter writers themselves. He argues that good letter writers were able to give a shape in their letters to the ongoing relationship between author and recipient, such that the request and its granting would, it was hoped, ring true with the recipient and inspire him to undertake the desired action. The rhetorical tools of the humanists, along with their goals of shaping people’s understanding of their world and bringing them to appropriate action within it, thus had a major role to play in the lives of scholars and of middle-class Florentines. As McLean notes, in Florence these tools served not only social ends, but political ones as well; indeed, political and social goals often overlapped.

A better understanding of these networks pays off in other arenas as well. For example, it complicates claims about modernization in some important ways. First, McLean argues that Florence’s “modernizing” taxation system, as seen in its *Catasto* (tax assessment survey) of 1427 and following, developed along with the more “traditional” personal relationships that managed its administration. A state organized in such a way could take advantage of the close personal connections Florentines had with their government; loyalties of politics and clien-

tage supported one another to lead to high compliance in tax payments, for example. At the same time, such patterns placed limits on the state’s ability to grow; it could not attain a level of exaction or control that might be viewed as too extractive or insufficiently representative, because the same personal ties produced personal loyalties between legislators and those who might be seen as victims of such a system. Thus, Florence moved so far and no farther along the general continuum of early modern state development, and that development did not follow some sort of simple, linear path from traditional to modern (as the terms are commonly used). Further, McLean discusses the concept of the construction of the modern self, an issue important to scholars in a number of fields, and one that dates back to Jacob Burckhardt. While conceding that the kind of evidence used in this study tends to privilege relationship-based presentations of self, McLean suggests that this tendency was a genuine feature of the system, and the “Renaissance Florentine self” bears more resemblance to modern Asian models than to modern Western ones.

McLean maintains a very approachable style in this work despite the presence of sociological categories and terminology, so that the latter generally help to illuminate his concepts without being excessively intrusive for non-sociologists. Indeed, a recurring mimesis of the styles of his letter writers helps keep readers in touch with the sources, their authors, and the goals of their competitive, often anxious urban lives. That touch will surely be welcome by all who have encountered such letters amid their own work in the archives, and ensure that these letters continue to meet their goal of bringing to the attention of influential others these many and various Renaissance Florentines.

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