From Revolution to Transformation and Back Again

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There really was a "feudal revolution". Not in southern France at the dawn of the second millennium, but in rural northern Italy around the year 1100. This is Alessio Fiore's striking thesis in his newly translated book on the "seigneurial transformation" – or, "if we like it better", "the feudal revolution."[1] The revolution Fiore describes consists in the profound reorganization of the political and social order in northern and central Italy between 1080 and 1130, which primarily meant a "parcellization of power" and the rise of violence as the dominant form of lordship.[2] According to this account, the 1080s witnessed the collapse of a public order formed by essentially Carolingian institutions, the privatization and localization of power and a militarization of politics.[3] Fiore states that these processes should be described as a "feudalization" because the spread of fiefs and the associated practices of personal fidelity played a central role in it,[4] while the transformation it triggered was so abrupt that it is to be labelled a "revolution."[5]

This is an important and not uncontroversial statement, given

[1] Fiore, 2020, p. 264. Cf. Fiore, 2018.
[2] Fiore, 2020, pp. xx, n. 20, pp. 231, 247, 252.
[3] Fiore, 2020, p. xx, 4-6.
[4] Fiore, 2020, pp. 157-162.
[5] Fiore, 2020, p. xx, n. 20, quoting West, 2013, pp. 261-262. Both refer to Anderson, 1974, pp. 147-153.

the deadlocked state of the debate on the "feudal revolution."[6] Our assessment of Fiore's stimulating contribution to the revitalization of debates on social change and the organization of medieval polities will start from our own field of work, that is, the (academic debate on the) transformations that occurred around the year 1000, with some input from the theoretical framework of our current academic home, the Collaborative Research Centre "Threatened Orders."[7] In what follows we will combine the critique of the "feudal revolution" model with our reading of the "seigneurial transformation" in order to show how older critiques remain relevant to the new thesis.

The "seigneurial transformation" (1100) and the "révolution féodale" (1000)

The rise, fall, and rise of the "feudal revolution" as a framework to explain the transition from the early to the high middle ages is a complex story.[8] Germinating in Georges Duby's 1953 thesis on the Mâconnais, the term originally described the (alleged) abrupt breakdown of late Carolingian structures in the region between 980 and 1030.[9] The violence and scope of this transformation, which Duby called a "silent revolution" (révolution sourde),[10] were greatly expanded in the following decades, most notably by Pierre Bonnassie and in Duby's own monographs, and in this form became hegemonic in French historiography from the 1960s onwards.[11] According to this "revolutionist model", the outstanding feature of the revolution and the new society it produced was increased aristocratic violence against the peasantry; unprecedented agricultural

[6] Tedesco, pp. 144-145.
[7] CRC 923 "Threatened Order"; Barthélemy, 1997; Bois, 1989.
[8] Cf. Fiore, 2018, pp. 33-34.
[9] Duby, 1953.
[10] Duby, 1953, p. 151.
[11] Fiore, 2020, pp. xviii-xix; cf. Mazel, 2010, pp. 438-440; Duby, 1978, pp. 183-199; Bonnassie, 1990, pp. 265-358.

growth in the tenth century, combined with the erosion of public (i.e. royal) authority, supposedly led to intense competition within the aristocracy for the new surplus. From this perspective, the new, violent political order was the product of permanent competition for control over the skimming of profits from peasant communities, a system described by revolutionist historians as a form of internal plunder.[12]

However, this thesis met with a backlash in the 1990s. Guy Bois' *jusqu'auboutist* formulation of this transformation[13] and an article by Thomas Bisson contending that elite violence became the primary form of power around 1000 at the expense of more "accountable" forms of authority[14] – "power survived, what collapsed was government"[15] – quickly escalated into a spirited debate on the whole model.[16] What changed, critics asserted, was not so much the quantity or character of violence, but the norms thereof: while violence had already been a frequent mode of political dominance in the Carolingian world,[17] perceptions of this practice and thus ways of writing about violence changed as new norms of just (and unjust) violence developed as part of a movement of religious reform.[18] The most pointed and extended critique of the "feudal revolution" model came from Dominique Barthélemy,[19] who described the transition from a Carolingian to a high medieval world as a process of innumerable and almost imperceptible "adjustments",[20] recalling Marc Bloch's slow transition of one feudal age into another.[21]

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[12] Bonnassie, 1976, pp. 540-544, 554-556, 573-574; Duby, 1978, pp. 187-189.
[13] Bois, 1989; Goetz, 2004, pp. 37-39. See the special issue on the "An Mil", Médievalés, 21, 1991 for collected critiques of Bois.
[14] Bisson, 1994, p. 18, p. 39. See also Bisson, 2009.
[15] Bisson, 1994, p. 42 and his cautious reflections on the term "revolution" at p. 40; see also Bisson, 1997, p. 224.
[16] Reuter, 1997, esp. at pp. 178-175, 182; White, 1996, pp. 205-223, esp. at pp. 213-219, 222, and the diverging statement of Wickham, 1997, pp. 198-208, esp. at p. 197.
[17] West, 2013, pp. 54-57, p. 259, makes a strong case for this view; cf. above Tedesco, p. 141.
[18] Brown, 2011, p. 126; Mazel, 2010, p. 146; cf. Bisson, 1994, p. 21; Bisson, 1997, p. 225.
[19] Barthélemy, 1992, esp. at pp. 769, 775; Barthélemy, 1997, pp. 16, 28
[20] Barthélemy, 1992, p. 775.
[21] Bloch, 1939.

Alessio Fiore's *Seigneurial Transformation* is the most provocatively revolutionist text in a recent movement – to which Charles West's "softer" reframing of the feudal revolution also belongs[22] – that looks back towards Duby and the school he founded[23]. In particular, Fiore's interpretation owes much to Bisson's writings on the transformative force of violence: he describes the breakdown of a long-established form of public order and its supplantation by a new, local mode of political organization in which sheer violence represented not irregular oppression but (political) power in itself.[24] Fiore describes this new, oppressive order as an institutionalized system of "internal predation" and "plunder" of the peasantry,[25] echoing the theories and language of previous mutationists.[26] Moreover, his discussion of networks of power leans heavily on such terms as "feudal" and "fidelity", his description and reading of which recall classical interpretations of the development of feudo-vasallic institutions.[27]

The seigneurial transformation thesis therefore strongly resembles the traditional feudal revolution model.[28] This raises the question of how well the former withstands the arguments articulated against the latter. Did the scale of violence really change dramatically and did this constitute a ground-shaking reorganization of the sociopolitical order? Does the dichotomy between Carolingian "public" order and seigneurial "private" disorder help us understand the history of northern Italy at the turn of the twelfth century? And, if these phenomena can be called a "seigneurialization" of society, what exactly was "seigneurial" lordship?

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[22] West, 2013, p. 262.
[23] On Duby's interpretation, see above p. 156: "métamorphose" (Duby, 1953, p. 151). For the relationship between Duby's ideas and Bloch's work on feudalism, cf. Mazel, 2010, p. 637; Lauranson-Rosaz, 2001, p. 21.
[24] Bisson, 1994, pp. 6-7, 12-14, 18-20, 31; Fiore, 2020, esp. at pp. 3-6, 247; cf. Bisson, 2009, p. 41, here esp. at p. 46.
[25] Fiore, 2020, p. 233.
[26] Cf. Duby, 1978, pp. 187-188, cf. Fiore, 2020, p. 197, quoting the English edition, Duby, 1980, pp. 190-205.
[27] Fiore, 2020, p. 154-155, 162. Cf. Fiore, 2018, p. 50.
[28] Cf. Fiore, 2018, p. 65.

What changed (ca. 1100)? Revolution and violence

The first question in a debate on a "feudal revolution" is, of course: "What changed?" What changes took place around the year 1000 – or 1100 – that constituted such a deep rift that it can be called a "revolution"? A proper first answer would be knights and castles, as these two phenomena are usually taken as the foremost signals that a feudal revolution has occurred.[29] Orthodox theory took the appearance of these phenomena as indicating that the early medieval public order had disintegrated; the small landowners so characteristic of Carolingian society saw their status degrading as society became sharply divided into nobles and dependants, the former dominating the latter through violence.[30]

This is precisely what Fiore argues happened in northern Italy between 1080 and 1130: "the radical change in the structure of castles, which grew larger and sturdier, the boom in the number of *milites* […] and the new centrality of the discourse of violence constitute convergent data."[31] On a local level, the seigneurial transformation is characterized by the passage from traditional Carolingian-style demesnes to what Fiore terms "territorial lordship." Channelling Duby, he insists that this new lordship was "no longer based on personal status and land ownership, but rather territorial."[32] But exactly what is territorial about the changes Fiore describes is sometimes unclear, as in his use of the term he tends to fluctuate between focusing on geographically defined rule and familial-aristocratic networks of power.[33] He is clear, however, that this new form of lordship was characterized by the militarization of society and rising violence.

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[29] Cf. Tedesco, p. 142; Brown, 2011, p. 99; Mazel, 2010, p. 9; Howe, 2010, pp. 869-870; Dunbabin, 2000, p. 43.
[30] Poly-Bournazel, 1980, pp. 482-483; Bonnassie, 1976, pp. 875-877; cf. Barthélemy, 1997, p. 20.
[31] Fiore, 2020, p. 249.
[32] Fiore, 2020, p. 58; cf. Duby, 1953, p. 321.
[33] Fiore, 2020, pp. 22-23; 50-5; Kohl, 2011.

Fiore starts his discussion of the role of violence in the new political order with two examples of the use of violence by local power holders, both from *querimoniae*, i.e. charters recording juridical pleas.[34] The first is a 1096-1106 complaint of the inhabitants of the village of Casciavola against the lords of the Castle of San Casciano;[35] the inhabitants describe acts of savage violence committed during frequent raids by the lords, such as the beating of pregnant women as they gave birth or children being tossed onto dung heaps.[36] The second complaint was filed by the monks of Colitbuono (Tuscany) in 1171, apparently in Florence, against a family of local aristocrats who had seized a church from the monastery. Members of the family reacted to the monks' complaint with a series of brutal attacks, smashing faces against walls, whipping and humiliating monks and, notably, killing "all the hens" of the monastery.[37] Fiore convincingly interprets these acts as "rituals of violence" that expressed political power, and his examples paint an impressive picture of the brutality of aristocratic violence in rural northern Italy in the twelfth century.

However, critiques from the 1990s of Thomas Bisson's assumption of a disruptive rise in violence could be transferred directly to Fiore's argument,[38] especially those that question the causal relationship between increasing reports of violence and a supposed actual and unprecedented rise in aristocratic violence. Regarding the violence of which noblemen in (southern) France are regularly accused in sources from the decades around 1000, Timothy Reuter, for example, noted that "beating up the peasants in one's own neighbourhood or district is not the same as beating up the monks of the neighbouring monastery."[39] That is, the mistreatment of the villagers

[34] Fiore, 2020, pp. 226-227.
[35] Petrucci et al., 2004, n. 18 (aa. 1098-1106 c.), p. 156. Fiore, 2020, p. 229 n. 12.
[36] Cf. Fiore, 2020, p. 229, cf. to this case and its source further pp. 54-55, 222-223, 228, n. 7.
[37] Florence, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Diplomatico, Vallombrosa, sec. XIII (a. 1171 c.). Fiore, 2020, p. 230, n. 14.
[38] See above p. 157, n. 16.
[39] Reuter, 1997, pp. 177-195, p. 181.

of Casciavola and the attacks on the monks of Coltibuono are not necessarily identical phenomena: the former can convincingly be interpreted with Fiore as a "visiting card" laying claim to a village,[40] while the latter likely was an attack by the lords on their social equals.[41] Similarly, when Fiore later argues that the spread of the "language of fidelity" within ever greater social circles indicates the increasing transmission of a mode of political organization first pioneered by lay, private lords in the vacuum left by the breakdown of public power,[42] it can be suggested that oaths of fealty taken between lay lords, between bishops and to urban communes as a whole, each affect the content of the "language of fidelity" and should be differentiated accordingly.

Furthermore, the misdeeds that Fiore classes under "languages of violence" are strikingly reminiscent of the acts of violence which castellans and knights were accused of in southern France around the year 1000: they rob, expropriate, beat and torture peasants, burn their villages and sometimes kill them.[43] In a poem included in his *Historiarum libri quinque*, the Burgundian monk Rodulfus Glaber, in the 1030s, deplored the vanity and wildness of nobles from southern France, who, he said, swarmed through France and Burgundy after the marriage in 1003/4 of King Robert II with Constance of Arles:

> A thousand years after the birth of the lord by a virgin, men are led to commit the gravest wrongs. In this life tyrants with unnatural bodies are created, incompetent men with shortened clothes and without peace. Fraud, theft and all infamy reign the world, Now the sword, plague and famine rage all about.[44]

Glaber is a key source in the feudal revolution debate, and the

[40] Fiore, 2020, p. 234
[41] Reuter, 1997, p. 181.
[42] Fiore, 2020, p. 154-177.
[43] White, 1996, pp. 210-211; p. 210 n. 20, provides an "inventory" of aristocratic acts of violence, cf. also Brown, 2011, pp. 103-124.
[44] Rodulfus Glaber, *Historiarum libri quinque*, III c. 8 (§40), ed. Bulst, France, Reynolds, 1989, pp. 166-168.

accuracy of his depiction of an explosive increase in violence has received intense critical scrutiny.[45] Similar caution should be used regarding the "seigneurial transformation" around 1100. While anti-mutationists like Dominique Barthelémy have pointed out that very similar acts of violence are also attested for the tenth and even ninth centuries, as Fiore admits for the Carolingian period in Italy,[46] the latter's explanation for the rise of violence still draws on traditional mutationist arguments concerning the year 1000:[47] in a context of strong economic growth, local elites capitalized on the weakness of central power to impose levies on the peasantry through violence in order to capture surplus which could escape traditional rent.[48] This should give us pause: it is not that the sources invent the violence they describe, nor that everyday medieval life was mostly peaceful – rural populations were probably often subjected to brutal mistreatment by elites, around the year 1000 as around 1100.[49] The debate in *Past & Present* should lead us not to negate historical change by levelling the scale of violence with violent counter-anecdotes from earlier times,[50] but to reflect on the interpretation of our sources. Plainly, we cannot take them entirely at their word. As Timothy Reuter noted with timeless acumen, most people today would find it difficult to accurately describe the level of violence in contemporary society, and we have no reason to believe that medieval writers were significantly better placed to diagnose their own.[51]

Critics have argued, instead, that new ways of writing about violence must be understood as phenomena in themselves, that is, as new ways of *perceiving* a mode of violent domination that had ex-

[45] Cf. Dalarun, 2014, esp. at p. 55-57. For Glaber's work and the debate on the feudal revolution, cf. Barthélemy, 1999, esp. pp. 9-11, 140.
[46] Barthélemy, 1996, p. 198; White, 1996, pp. 218-221; Reuter, 1997, p. 178. Cf. Fiore, 2018, p. 59.
[47] See above pp. 156-157: agricultural growth of the 10th century.
[48] Fiore, 2020, p. 58.
[49] Cf. West, 2013, p. 150.
[50] Cf. Reuter, 1997, pp. 177-195, at p. 178.
[51] Reuter, 1997, pp. 178-79.

isted at least since Carolingian times.[52] Thus, an increase in documentation of violent acts cannot simply be taken to indicate the replacement of an essentially peaceful social order by an essentially violent one.[53] Rather, the sources containing the descriptions of violence were themselves part of processes that renegotiated norms of political dominance.[54] This is what "threatened orders" call a "re-ordering": when established routines such as keeping the peace or political decision-making cease to function, individuals and groups express alarm and try to develop new ways of guaranteeing these common goods.[55] As people start to reflect on the dysfunctional elements of their social order, those elements become especially visible in times of threat, whereas they often remain invisible as long as they are taken for granted.[56] The changes of the central middle ages may be part of such a "re-ordering": long-established modes of political dominance were called into question and were thereby transformed; descriptions of aristocratic violence can thus be understood as part of the described modes of communication and the establishment of new routines.

Violence as order

The perspective of violence as an expression of "threatened orders" and as a mode of communication sheds a different light on Fiore's "seigneurial transformation:"[57] accusations of violent acts reported in *querimoniae* can be understood as part of new ways of dealing with violence, which was now recorded in new ways because it mattered in new ways. Once royal authority ceased to provide an effective source for norms of legitimate power, the malfunctioning

[52] White, 1996, pp. 206-207. Reuter, 1997, pp. 178-179. Cf. Tedesco, p. 141.
[53] Brown, 2011, p. 126.
[54] Reuter, 1997, pp. 184-187.
[55] Frie-Kohl-Meier, 2018, p. 5.
[56] Frie-Kohl-Meier, 2018, p. 7.
[57] Fiore, 2020, pp. 149-150.

of established social institutions was intensely discussed and alternative ways of providing such norms had to be put into practice. In his contribution to the debate in the 1990s, Stephen D. White situated these new norms in the context of practices of conflict resolution based on regulated and thus normalized forms of violence: attacking someone else's possessions, villages and peasants meant entering into and negotiating conflict with another lord.[58]

In transferring conclusions from the context of the "feudal revolution" of the year 1000 to Fiore's thesis, there is, however, one significant difference concerning the source base of the two processes. Whereas Fiore is able to rely on prolix charters, the detailed descriptions of exactions for the years around 1000 are all from narrative sources, as mentions of violence in charters from the time are typically short and dry. A charter from Cluny from 994, for instance, simply states: "I, Durannus, give some of my property in the county of Macon in compensation for a serf that I killed." Another from 1040: "Leodbald illegally took it all [the land] from Saint Peter [i.e., the abbey of Cluny] and gave it to Gauzerannus as compensation for his relative named Berengar, whom he had killed."[59]

Consequently, the argument of an extremely high level of violence as a distinct marker of social disorder around the year 1000 can only be supported by linking these documentary sources with narrative texts. This points to different mechanisms of conflict resolution: while it seemed important to describe the violations in the *querimoniae* that Fiore quotes, this was not the case in southern France a hundred years earlier, where malfunctions of the established order were discussed in historiographic and hagiographic narratives that formed part of debates which associated new norms of peace-keeping with ecclesiastical reform.[60] The narratives that detail the conflicts of the "seigneurial transformation" come, instead,

[58] White, 1996, pp. 213-215; Reuter, 1997, pp. 181-182.
[59] Chartae Cluniacenses, ed. Bernard-Bruel (1876-1903) no. 2254, vol. 3 p. 384; no. 2946, vol. 4 p. 147 ed. Bruel (1876-1903); cf. Bois, 1989, p. 229, n. 24.
[60] Brown, 2011, pp. 126-127. Cf. Reuter, 1997, p. 185.

from documents that offer the viewpoint of a party to a conflict and are therefore part of a strategy to bring a conflict to a favourable end:[61] as a medium in a process of conflict resolution and (re)negotiation of social practices, their description of certain acts as "violent" are also attempts to have these categorized as illegal.[62]

Detailed portrayals of violent acts similar to those cited by Fiore were very common in western France and in Swabia around 1100, as Thomas Kohl has shown, and seem to have played an important part in the conduct of conflicts on a narrative level,[63] as Fiore states for his sources in Italy. Complex narratives thus seem to be one aspect of the wider development of conflict management in middle Europe around 1100. The important role of accounts of wrongdoings in the settlement of disputes shows that violent conflicts were not carried on in the complete absence of any external institutions of conflict resolution. In fact, we only know of them because they were brought before tribunals. Elites fighting each other were surrounded by a "set of vertical and horizontal relationships" that put increasing pressure on them as they moved through the stages of a dispute, ultimately urging them to end the conflict in mutual – though not necessarily equally beneficial – settlements.[64] The 70 years that separate the two cases cited by Fiore should be taken as an indication that violence is not by default a destabilizing factor, but may, on an intermediate level, be an important element in stabilizing a specific – violent – social order.[65]

Conclusion

Summing up, Fiore's *Seigneurial Transformation* can be seen as a veritable re-edition of the classic mutationist model, postponed to

[61] Fiore, 2020, p. 228.
[62] White, 1996, pp. 206-207.
[63] Kohl, 2019, p. 139.
[64] Brown, 2011, pp. 106-110.
[65] Kohl, 2019, p. 139, p. 473.

the year 1100. In our view, Fiore must therefore engage with the fundamental critiques which that model has sustained: a tendency to underdetermine and reify certain concepts such as violence, public/private, the state; an approach to quantitative arguments based on anecdotal evidence;[66] an underestimation of the discursive quality of documental sources. We think Fiore does not do these critiques full justice when he briefly refers to the "feudal revolution" as a settled academic dispute; when Bisson is credited with an authoritative reinterpretation of the phenomena in question with no discussion of the fact that he is a prominent mutationist whose 1994 reflections on the "feudal revolution" triggered the deconstruction of the whole concept;[67] when the transition from more formulaic and terse charters to more flexible and narrative documents is noted, but the possibility that this *mutation documentaire* may be partly responsible for the increase in reports of violence, as in France, is not addressed.[68]

To be clear, Fiore's work is an invaluable contribution to the history of high medieval northern Italy and of feudalism, and anyone interested in these issues should read it conscientiously. However, since it is presented as a contribution to the debate on the "feudal revolution", its strong claims about swift and dramatic transformation in the eleventh century must be subjected to the same critiques that were levelled against the mutationist model. In our view, the analytic potential of the "seigneurial transformation" would only be strengthened by taking into account the anti-mutationist arguments of the past.

We end with a broader question: How revolutionary is the "seigneurial transformation"? Fiore's re-edition is not the first time the model of the feudal revolution has been temporally displaced: Timothy Reuter relocated it to the end of Carolingian military expansion in 800,[69] while for Dominique Barthélemy the traditional feudal revolution simply rehashed the Blochian feudalization-cum-

[66] Reuter, 1997, p. 178.
[67] Fiore, 2020, p. xix.
[68] Fiore, 2020, pp. 152-153, cf. p. 5.
[69] Reuter, 1990, pp. 391-405, p. 405.

dissolution of the Carolingian realm in the later ninth century.[70] The result is that historians have at various times described a rather similar set of violence-laden transformations for every century or so from Charlemagne onwards. Such regular changes cannot possibly all be revolutionary; revolutions are by definition the exception, not the rule. Perhaps we are not witnessing the repetition of social processes, but rather the recycling of historical models.

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[70] Barthélemy, 1996, pp. 197-205, at p. 199.

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