Three Notes on Alessio Fiore's Seigneurial Transformation[1]

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Alessio Fiore's 2017 book, now available in a superb English translation by Sergio Knipe, is a major achievement and a milestone in the field.[2] Its elegantly constructed argument runs as follows. The "civil war" of the 1080s in northern and central Italy catalysed the decomposition of the old public order there. Imperial efforts to re-establish control by sidelining mediating organisations such as the marches backfired, and only further hastened the emperor's irrelevance in a world in which power was increasingly based squarely on control of the local territory. To fill the yawning gap in legitimacy, local lords and those subjected to them drew on the political languages (*discorsi politici*) of fidelity, pacts and customs. But above all, the lords turned to a self-legitimating violence. That violence is documented not only in numerous charters and narratives, but also in the nicknames these lords playfully gave one another: Pelavicino ("Flays Neighbour"), Cacciabate ("Hunts Abbots"), Guastavilla ("Wrecks Village").

The result, Fiore argues, was a new political order that more effectively captured the growing surpluses of the countryside. It did so through new jurisdictional rights exercised in the locality, superseding the more limited prospects of rent based on landown-

[1] Thanks to Martial Staub and Emma Hunter for advice.

[2] Fiore 2020; Fiore 2017. In this review essay I refer to the English edition of Fiore's book, but I have also consulted the Italian original, which is largely the same but not quite identical; I provide the Italian of quotations in the notes.

ership. However, the existence of alternative arrangements, represented by collective rural groups on the one hand and the politically old-fashioned region of Friuli on the other, remind us that the eventual overall outcome was not inevitable, even though these alternatives remained marginal. All this played out long before the cities took on their role as dominant actors in Italy's politics.

Even this superficial summary makes it clear that Fiore's book has several distinctive features marking it out from the existing literature. Its scope is noticeably broad compared to the regional focus generally preferred by Italian social historians. Moreover, the book concentrates on the rural hinterlands of northern and central Italy rather than the cities that have tended to dominate Italian historians' attention in this (and not only this) period; this is easily justified, for as Fiore points out, the countryside was at this date economically and socially more important.

Perhaps above all, though, Fiore's book puts strong emphasis on significant and relatively rapid change. That is unusual in a historiography which has for the most part tended towards gradualism, both in the specific context of research on medieval rural Italy, and in work on the "Feudal Revolution" more broadly. That said, what Fiore offers is very far from an unreflective rehearsal of the old orthodoxies of Duby, or of Poly and Bournazel, set in an Italian context. As Fiore points out – and as recently observed by Philippe Buc too – the mutationist argument has come a long way since the 1980s.[3] Fiore's "mutamento signorile" is not simply a break-down but a reconstitution, not an anarchic free-for-all but a new and creative kind of social and political ordering. Fiore's book thus represents a powerful addition to the recent literature which has made the case for far-reaching social change in the eleventh century, against the majority view of the 1990s and 2000s which stressed continuity and gradual evolution, and which still finds plenty of proponents and defenders today, in various forms and adaptations.[4]

[3] Buc, 2019.

[4] For a recent appraisal and defence, see Barthélemy, 2017; cf. the study of the representation of violence in McHaffie, 2018.

To that extent, Fiore's book has a great deal in common with my own foray into the field in *Reframing the Feudal Revolution* in 2013, based on evidence from Champagne and Lotharingia from 800 to 1100.[5] Of course, it diverges from (and improves upon) mine at several points. That is in part simply because Fiore works on a different body of sources. As Fiore points out, developments in northern France doubtless worked differently from those in Italy. But it is also because Fiore centres a particular political crisis, that of the 1080s and 1090s, as the moment when the traditional system crashed in Italy. That gives his work a sharper focus than mine, though Fiore also notes that the changes he studies were "the maturation and radicalization of certain tendencies that had long emerged within the kingdom" (p. 2).[6] Fiore also emphasises the contingencies of the transformation he analyses, in explicit contrast to how he reads my study. I did try to suggest that shared structural changes might have been manifested differently in different political and social contexts, and pointed to the concept of path dependency rather than inevitability, but Fiore goes further here. Finally, whereas my book stressed a process of formalisation, Fiore highlights a process of localisation; in this respect, his book has much in common with recent work on western France by Niall Ó Súilleabháin, as well as older work by historians such as Richard Barton.[7] The two interpretations are by no means incompatible, and indeed are perhaps simply picking up different aspects of a single transformation, but there remains a difference in emphasis.

Nevertheless, at their heart I think the two books have a great deal in common. They agree that there was an eleventh-century political reconstitution which operated from the ground up, edging out central authority; that this reconstitution can be put into a wider chronological and geographical context; and that the shifts in the

[5] West, 2013.
[6] Fiore, 2017, p. 5: "La piena maturazione e la radicalizzazione di tendenze già da tempo in atto nello spazio del regno".
[7] Ó Súilleabháin, 2020. Cf Barton, 2004.

patterns of documentation not only reflect but were part of those transformations, not orthogonal to them. This is an analysis which all those working on the period will have to engage with, and one that puts Italy at the heart of the evolving debate.[8]

Reading Fiore's book led me to think about three issues in particular (the three notes of my title). The first is the question of the role of the church in the "Feudal Revolution", an issue on which I have continued to reflect since publishing my own book.[9] Fiore's feudal revolution strikes me as profoundly secular in nature, perhaps even more than was mine in 2013. The "bad customs" (*malae consuetudines*) which appear in documents from the period to describe demands and practices imposed by lords have been read by some historians as primarily a rhetorical device, an iconoclastic monastic re-framing of traditional power relations. However, they are for Fiore what they were for Georges Duby and Thomas Bisson: the imposition of genuinely new demands by aggressive elites, not merely fantasies dreamt up by zealous monks abusing their power over the historical record.[10] The peasants of Casciavola, for instance, who complained around the year 1100 about the "bad customs" freshly imposed by the lords of San Casciano in a famous case that has also been studied recently by Peter Coss, were quite specific about the extortions that had been introduced; they were moreover appealing not to reformed monks, but to the commune of Pisa.[11]

In general, the church (or churches) move in Fiore's account on the same plane as everyone else – their leaders are occasionally aggressors, more often victims. They drew on the possibilities afforded by the changes Fiore analyses much as did everyone else, as exemplified by Pope Gregory VII's appropriation of the language of fidelity in defining his relationship to archbishops, in a new form of

[8] For a recent review article, see Tabarrini 2020; for a parallel attempt to centre Italy in the Feudal Revolution, see Wickham 2014.
[9] West, 2018.
[10] Bisson, 2009.
[11] Coss, 2020.

an oath first attested in 1073. It is not a coincidence that Fiore's analysis is underpinned by a secularisation of the "Investiture Quarrel". Traditionally seen as a quarrel over "the right order of the world", in Gerd Tellenbach's famous formulation, it appears here in the very different guise of an Italian civil war, of significance primarily for its practical disruption to political order, not for its ideological content.

This is entirely convincing. All the same, I wonder whether there may not be more to be said. Fiore identifies four political "languages" of fidelity, pact, custom and violence, which lords put to work to build their local dominance in the absence of a co-ordinating central authority. All four of these concepts had deep religious, and specifically Biblical, resonances (cf. the work of Jehangir Malegam on peace).[12] It is surely important to think about the implications of this when tracking the rise of a language of fidelity, for instance, in the course of the twelfth century. If Pope Gregory VII was borrowing a language of fidelity in devising a new form of oath, so too acts of *fidelitas* sworn by the laity had strong religious underpinnings. What is more, it must surely be relevant that some of the currents of religious thought in the eleventh century challenged conventional assumptions about the public. For example, monks at many wealthy and influential monasteries in the eleventh and twelfth centuries energetically defended their right to exclude public officers from involvement in their affairs, turning instead to internally-appointed advocates to deal with those matters which monks themselves could not (predictably enough, these advocates soon presented a new kind of problem).[13]

At a more general level, the "investiture quarrel" was certainly at one level a civil war, and it can be helpful to think of it as such; but it had religious elements too, some of which focused on delegitimising imperial and public authority. One may wonder whether some of these elements contributed materially to the corrosion of the old ideologies of public order. The relation between the develop-

[12] Malegam, 2013.
[13] For a sketch of this development, see West, 2017.

ments studied under the banner of "Gregorian reform" and those studied as "Feudal Revolution" is still obscure, but we should be open to the possibility that what prevents it from being fully appreciated is an artificial historiographical division of labour between historians of the church and social historians. Exciting work by Thomas Kohl and Florian Mazel is showing how the idea of "reform" was interwoven with conflicts over "secular" power; this is a problematic which would repay further study.[14]

A second issue is that of the economy. Fiore's account centres on "political language", but has as its backdrop sustained and significant economic growth in the Italian countryside. At the most abstract level, his processes of localisation are attempts to top-slice peasant income more effectively – or, put more neutrally, to align the distribution of the proceeds of economic growth with evolving political hierarchies. Here his book is in dialogue with Chris Wickham, who theorised economic growth in the early Middle Ages as driven by seigneurial pressure, rather than by commercialisation as such.[15] But what is not quite clear is whether the logic of the economy as a whole shifted through the process that Fiore describes. Is what he describes simply a change in how elites capitalised on their dominance, or does it reflect a more fundamental shift in economic organisation and production? Put differently, was this feudal revolution only a struggle over distribution, or did it also have an impact on production and exchange? As yet the study of the structure of the eleventh-century economy in the Mediterranean and north of the Alps is still relatively underdeveloped, though forthcoming work by Wickham promises to shed a new light on it.

A third and linked issue is that of the geographical scale of this change. As I mentioned, Fiore's book stands out in an Italian historiographical landscape which tends towards the regional, since it fruitfully synthesises evidence from several Italian areas (Lazio, Lombardy, Tuscany, etc.). But in the conclusion, the book raises the

[14] Kohl, 2019; Mazel, 2010.
[15] Classically now in Wickham, 2005.

question of how the growth in local power it identifies in Italy related to similar changes elsewhere in that part of western Eurasia we now label as Europe: "the crisis of political structures which affected most of the West" (p. 154).[16] As Timothy Reuter pointed out in a classic critique, the concept of feudal revolution was first worked out in a French context.[17] But historians such as Thomas Bisson and, more recently and in a different vein, Chris Wickham, have used it as an interpretative lens for European history more broadly.[18] In other words, though his sweep is impressively broad, Fiore is explicitly offering a case study of a still wider phenomenon.

Just how wide a phenomenon it was, however, is still a matter of debate. A new path of enquiry was being opened up by Mark Whittow, a brilliant historian of Byzantium, whose pioneering work was cut short by his premature death in 2017; he nevertheless published some aspects of his argument in chapters and articles, which are sufficient to give a sense of the direction in which he was headed. This work uncovers a shift in the location and practice of power in the Constantinopolitan empire that was roughly contemporary to that experienced by Fiore's Italian subjects, and one that would have been recognisable to them too.[19]

If Whittow was right, then the question of what underpinned a change of this scale is all the more urgent. Why did local power crystallise right across the western Eurasian peninsula? What was it about the structures of public power, inherited and refined from Roman antiquity, that meant they were unable – or so it seems – to capture and co-ordinate the turn to the local, unable to maintain their share of a growing economic surplus as European-wide production and exchange grew steadily more complex? Put differently, why were local elites across such a wide geographical area in a po-

[16] Fiore, 2017, p. 161: "La crisi dei tradizionali quadri del potere che… interessò gran parte dell'Occidente".
[17] Reuter, 1997.
[18] Wickham, 2016.
[19] E.g. Whittow, 2017.

sition "to create political contexts more suited to their economic requirements" (p. 256)?[20] Why were they not corralled and co-opted by state authorities?

That scale of change presents a challenge to the explanatory framework of Fiore's book, just as it does to the explanatory framework of my 2013 book, which looked to the long-term implications of Carolingian attempts to redefine the exercise of power; for not even the most ardent Carolingianist could plausibly frame Byzantium as an heir to Charlemagne's programme of *correctio*.[21] Ultimately this is a question which we are not yet in a position to fully answer. It seems to me likely that a full answer will require not simply a European but a Eurasian comparative perspective, as R.I. Moore has suggested in several publications;[22] it seems to me likely too that religion, and the form of its institutionalisation, will need to be part of the analysis.[23]

Nevertheless, Fiore's book has moved us a long way further down the road in addressing the problem. And it seems to me too that the time is absolutely ripe for this further enquiry along the trail which Fiore has blazed. Much previous work on the topic has blurred the distinction between public and private authority, which has tended to take the edge off arguments about the feudal revolution. After all, if there was hardly a distinct public authority to begin with, what kind of change should we expect? But while we should always be wary of imposing this distinction on the medieval past, the emphasis in the 1990s and 2000s on how boundaries between public and private were negotiated and permeable may come in time to be seen as "zeitbedingt", reflecting contemporary trends in an age of public-private partnerships. The relationship between the public and the private seems less comfortable and mutually sup-

[20] Fiore, 2017, p. 268: "di costruire contesti politici adatti alle proprie esigenze economiche".
[21] See Sarti, 2021.
[22] E.g. Moore, 2017.
[23] For an illustration of how this might be done, see the fascinating thematic study of Perisanidi, 2020.

portive today than in previous decades. More subtly, the liberal assumption that the private 'comes first' and underpins the public, which has tacitly informed a great deal of historical interpretation – positioning the public as the negotiated convergence of private interests – has begun to be uncovered and critiqued.[24] Discourses of corruption, for instance, suggest that there was a more robust and complex notion of the public in the Middle Ages than is sometimes assumed.[25]

And of course, now there is Covid-19. The impact of the pandemic on historical interpretation (and on the discipline as a whole) is still very unclear, but is likely to be significant in more than one way.[26] At the very least, the last couple of years has reminded everyone that the pace of historical change can pick up, sometimes dramatically so, as existing trends are sped up, abruptly curtailed, and unexpectedly diverted. In the post-Covid age, we may perhaps expect renewed attention to moments and periods in the past when notable transformations were underway, whether contemporaries noticed them or not.

Fiore's work ends with the conclusion that "the process of seigneurial transformation (or, if we like it better, of the feudal revolution) is still an open problem."[27] But he notes too that "…the aim of the present book is not to solve a problem, but to raise it by encouraging observations, critiques, and fresh interpretations" (p. 248). That is the mark of excellent scholarship, and I have no doubt that this is precisely the effect that his book will have.

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[24] Cf. Staub, 2021.
[25] A topic on which I plan more work; for some preliminary foundations, see West, forthcoming.
[26] Patzold, 2020.
[27] Fiore, 2020, p. 264; Fiore, 2017, p. 274: "Quello del mutamento signorile (o se si preferisce della feudal revolution) è, insomma, un problema ancora aperto".

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