The Seigneurial Turn, the Church and National Historiographies

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Alessio Fiore's important book on the transformation of the Italian countryside in the decades between 1080 and 1130 is a bold contribution to longstanding historical debates, suggesting what he calls a 'seigneurial transformation' in Italy at that time. He portrays the nearly complete collapse of the essentially Carolingian political order of the kingdom of Italy during that period and the fragmentation of power into smaller seigneurial units; a radical break marked, among other things, by a significant increase in violence.[1] The fact that Fiore avoids the term feudal (thus ridding himself of all its distracting historiographical associations) does not mean, however, that the developments he describes are not remarkably similar to those posited mainly by scholars of medieval France (both from France and from the English-speaking world). Building on the work of Georges Duby, they argued for a "mutation" or "revolution" *féodale* or a "feudal revolution:" a crisis in royal legitimation of power structures, an increase in violence, more localized and oppressive forms of lordship and an increasing importance of bonds of fidelity and pacts. In contrast to these works focussing on France, Fiore points to a well-documented turning point: the civil wars of the 1080s and 1090s between supporters of Henry IV and their enemies and the devastating conse-

[1] Fiore, 2020.

quences in the Italian countryside. His argument is similar to the recent work of Chris Wickham on the origins of the urban communes, but focussed on the little-studied countryside.[2]

Intersecting Trajectories

The following remarks are the product not only of reading Fiore's book, but also of my own work on conflict and change in the exact same period in the German region of Alamannia/Suebia and the French region of Anjou with its neighbour.[3] My book had three aims. First, it is an attempt to contribute to the study of medieval conflicts on different levels, from local property disputes to arguments about a monastery's status and civil wars. Secondly, I sought to ascertain whether conflicts were treated differently in the regions I studied. Thirdly, I contrasted the different national historiographical narratives associated with the period under study – the investiture struggle in the German tradition and the feudal revolution in the French model. Apart from the regions studied, there are clear differences in approach. Alessio Fiore's work starts with a clear thesis – namely, the emergence of a new form of rural lordship in the decades around the turn of the eleventh century that was localized, violent and based on fidelity and violence. The cause (or catalyst, insofar it was based on developments that had started earlier in the eleventh century) was the complete breakdown of the political structures in the kingdom of Italy during the civil wars of the investiture struggle in the 1080s. Fiore then proceeds systematically to support his thesis (with very strong arguments, one might add). In contrast to this approach, my own work started from the observation that while historiographical narratives about social and political changes in France and Germany in the eleventh century differ sharply, both traditions emphasize the violent and conflictual nature of the

[2] Wickham, 2014, pp. 29–55; 2015, pp. 6-9.
[3] Kohl, 2019.

changes (traditionally associated with the year 1000 in France and the late eleventh century in Germany). Still, there are clear similarities in our results; for example, both books stress the disruptive nature of war for political systems.

Reading Fiore's book and necessarily comparing it to my own work has inspired a number of thoughts, in spite of (or because of) the obvious differences in our approaches, the regions and the themes of our studies. In what follows, I have structured my remarks according to two issues: first, the role of the church (or rather the religious sphere) and changes linked with the Gregorian reforms; second, national historiographical traditions.

The church and the religious sphere

During the Gregorian reforms, the understanding of what constitutes the church, what separates the secular from the religious and the role of the clergy and the pope changed fundamentally. These were not issues of ideology only, but had very real consequences for contemporaries. They caused conflicts and outright wars (such as the Italian civil wars of the 1080s and 1090s) and even altered people's way of thinking, making it possible for the first time to consider the secular and the religious spheres as distinct entities in Christian Europe. Fiore's work on the emergence of a new type of lordship makes an essentially secular argument, even while resting heavily on the civil wars of the 1080s and 1090s during the so-called investiture conflict between supporters of the popes and Henry IV to explain the declining importance of royal power and legitimation. The causes of these wars, however, are not relevant to Fiore's argument, only the fact of war itself, its duration and its destructiveness. As to Fiore's particular topic, namely the emergence of a new type of rural lordship in the kingdom of Italy in the period around 1100, this is entirely convincing. However, if one takes into account eleventh- and twelfth-century society as a whole, a society deeply religious in thought, language and action, it is worth examining the relationship

between changes in the contemporary religious sphere (the Gregorian reforms or church reform) and the developments described by Fiore or the proponents of the feudal revolution. Traditionally, research on the feudal revolution tended to see the Gregorian reforms as something distinct from (or irrelevant to) contemporary socio-political changes. This has changed only recently, above all through the works of Florian Mazel, who has drawn attention to the links between the two phenomena.[4] A 2021 volume building on Mazel's work, edited by Tristan Martine and Jérémy Winandy, poses the question whether the Gregorian reforms were in fact a "révolution totale", implying that its consequences extended far beyond the religious sphere and constituted a social, political and intellectual rupture.[5]

Taking this link between social-political and religious developments seriously may perhaps cast light on the forms taken by the new seigneurial form of lordship. One possibility would be to explore the fact that the concepts central to Fiore's argument such as *fidelitas* are infused with religious significance. This is especially clear with regard to oaths. Oaths are often called *sacramentum* in the sources, linking them directly to sacraments such as baptism or communion. The validity of oaths and the pope's claim to be able to dissolve them were among the most hotly debated issues of the reform age, following on Gregory VII's actions against Henry IV in 1077.[6] During the Lenten synod of that year, the pope not only deposed and excommunicated Henry but also absolved all subjects from their oaths to him. The claim of the power to dissolve third-party oaths implicit in these actions (and explicit in the 1075 *dictatus papae*) occupies a central place in numerous polemical treatises of the period. Henry's supporters claimed that the pope was guilty of innumerable acts of perjury, since he had led people to break their oaths to the

[4] See for a synthesis Mazel, 2011, pp. 235-280.
[5] Martine and Winandy (eds), 2021. This volume includes an introduction by Florian Mazel at pp. 15-27.
[6] Struve 1989, pp. 107–32.

king. This was apparently quite a convincing argument, and it forced Gregory's advocates to go to considerable lengths to rebut it, showing how important the issue was and how deeply convictions about the permanence of oaths ran. The religious nature of oaths and fidelity was clear to contemporaries, and when Abbot Guido of Farfa absolved his subjects *de fidelitate vel sacramento* they had sworn to him,[7] they were certainly quite conscious of the fact that *sacramentum* and *fidelitas* also linked them to God.

Alessio Fiore's characterization of fidelity as essentially meaning that a person linked by fidelitas to someone else had to go to war for him is also interesting in this respect, providing a link to the papacy's turn towards more belligerent policies against its enemies.[8] It is hardly a coincidence that this was also the period during which supporters of Popes Gregory VII and Urban II began labelling themselves as "fideles" or "milites" of Saint Peter, indicating that they would fight for the Apostle and his earthly representatives.

Another interesting avenue to pursue lies in what might be called a conceptual turn in the decades either side of 1100. During this period, previously imprecise and ambiguous concepts were sharpened and became more abstract, making it possible for the first time to distinguish precisely between spiritual and temporal goods ("spiritualia" and "temporalia") or between specifically royal rights ("regalia") and others. This tendency was certainly a cause of many of the conflicts of this period – if a bishop's staff is no longer seen as an ambivalent symbol of authority both in spiritual and in temporal matters, but as a pastoral symbol only, it becomes (more) problematic when a king – now clearly identified as layman – hands it to a newly elected bishop. At the same time, these conflicts accelerated the process of defining and specifying terms and concepts, because they also offered means for resolving them. The ability to define categories such as *temporalia* and *spiritualia*, as Ivo of Chartres did in the 1090s, made it possible to find new ways of conveying both spir-

[7] Fiore, 2020, p. 174.
[8] Althoff, 2013.

itual and temporal authority on bishops and abbots in separate acts. This is exemplified in the Concordat of Worms, according to which the king had no role in conveying the staff to the bishop-elect, but instead handed over a sceptre as a symbol of the bishop's temporal authority.

This trend of creating and defining less ambivalent categories is, to my mind, also visible in the developments that Fiore describes, such as the tendency to fix local customs in writing. Perhaps even the new category of *dominatus loci* as a unified type of lordship itself may be seen in this light. Pursuing this link between these developments on a more local as well as political and intellectual level might be able to expand our understanding of changes in European societies during this period.

National historiographies and European history

The study of history as a discipline is inextricably interwoven with nineteenth-century nationalism and the emergence of the nation states. It is therefore not surprising that the different national narratives on the course of (national) history that arose then persist until today – although they have, in every tradition, also been questioned and rejected by many historians. Together with language barriers, they have made it difficult to compare and evaluate differences and common traits of historical developments throughout western and central Europe in the decades around 1100. At the same time, engaging with these different traditions can be extremely fruitful and shed new light on much-studied regions and events. Alessio Fiore's work is a case in point. He successfully applies and adapts a model of historical change developed in French historiography – the "mutation féodale" or "mutation de l'an mil" – to the kingdom of Italy. Fiore's millennium is not the year 1000, as pointed out above, but the civil wars of the 1080s and 1090s between Henry IV's enemies and his supporters. In pointing to the collapse of the public structures during these years (with, among other things, the end of

the "placitum") as a precondition for the rise of new political entities, he adapts an important narrative of Italian historiography, although his interest is not in the well-studied urban communes but in rural lordships (which in turn, again connects his study to several works on medieval France). The view of the civil wars of the investiture controversy as a decisive turning point in history evokes obvious ties to German historiography, which has long stressed the disruptive effects of the conflicts and wars of this period for the empire's political system on both sides of the Alps. However, it has focussed on the highest political levels of popes and emperors and on the changing roles of princes and bishops in the political system. Socio-economic changes and political developments on the local level were traditionally of less importance – and they are, on the whole, less well documented in the German realm than in either Italy or France. Another difference between the German "Investiturstreit" narrative and others is that in it, the eleventh-century church reforms (or Gregorian reforms) occupy a central place. Indirectly, the fight against simony and clerical marriage and ideas of 'libertas ecclesiae' as well as the introduction of reformist popes, who eventually escaped from imperial control during the minority of Henry IV, are the causes of the political upheaval. In contrast to this, the historiography on both France and Italy has tended to regard the Gregorian reforms as distinct from political developments, although this has recently changed, as mentioned above.[9]

Conclusion

Alessio Fiore's work shows how fruitful it can be to adapt historiographical ideas developed for other regions, as I myself attempted to do for Germany and France, and to cross the borders of tradition and language. This is especially true for regions such as Germany, France and Italy, which shared not only an adherence to

[9] Mazel, 2011, p. 245.

the Western Church but also a common past in the Frankish empire, which – for all the obvious differences – gave them similar structures, in political, religious and social structures, in thought and in practice. Indeed, it was routine for some members of the elites to move back and forth between the realms, suggesting that despite some misunderstandings they were generally able to understand and manipulate the political systems in other regions. Margrave Azzo, for example, who died in 1097 as a very old man, was the father not only of Fulco of Este, who became the first Margrave of Este and established a long-lasting territory. Azzo's oldest son Welf inherited the rights of his mother's family and became Duke of Bavaria, while Azzo's attempt to install his younger son Hugh in the county of Maine in western France was only briefly successful. Nevertheless, Azzo and his sons were clearly able to navigate the political world throughout the post-Frankish kingdoms.[10] Historians should take this seriously and – perhaps – attempt to follow Azzo and his sons across the boundaries of language and historiographical tradition. Even if misunderstandings are bound to happen when confronted with strange concepts and models (not to mention vocabulary, cases, accents and Umlauts),[11] there is too much to be learned to not even try.

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[10] Kohl, 2020, pp. 1–12.
[11] Such as the Umlaut generously added to my name in Fiore's preface – all the more deservedly as I have, myself, bestowed incorrect accents on colleagues' names on several occasions.

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