Review Essay

Petrarch's War: Florence and the Black Death in Context. *By William Caferro*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xii + 228 pp. Maps, figures, tables, bibliography, index. Cloth, $99.99. ISBN: 978-1-108-42401-1.

Reviewed by Robert Fredona

Late in the spring of 1349, Petrarch, famous for his lyrical cries for peace on the Italian peninsula, wrote the priors of Florence urging the city to war. Two of the poet's dearest friends had been attacked while passing through the mountainous terrain controlled by the rural Ubaldini clan, renegade Ghibellines who menaced crucial trade routes between Florence and Bologna and were taking advantage of Florence's vulnerability in the wake of the 1348 outbreak of the Black Plague. The two campaigns that Florence launched against the Ubaldini, one in 1349 and one in 1350, although little known (overshadowed by the plague on one side and, less so, by the 1351–1353 Florentine war with Milan on the other), are better documented than any contemporary war and, as such, serve as the perfect material for William Caferro's new book, *Petrarch's War*, whose declared subject is "contradiction" and whose method, ultimately, is the subjection of received ideas and fashionable methods to interrogation in the face of the experience of rigorous and self-conscious archival research (p. 1). "Archives are subversive," Caferro says, and this is, in many ways, a subversive book (p. 13). Resolutely revisionist and sometimes demandingly démodé—in an age of "big data" and global history and "usable" history—Caferro embraces the problematic and the anomalous, the short term and the small scale. Together with his impressive and prizewinning 2006 book, *John Hawkwood: An English Mercenary in Fourteenth-Century Italy*, *Petrarch's War* secures Caferro's place as one of the most important economic historians working today.

While Caferro has much to say about the relationship of Petrarch and Boccaccio (and the deceased Dante), and about postplague Florence more generally, at the core of *Petrarch's War* is an attempt to insert warfare and the war economy (and war financing) into historical narratives about the plague and, to some extent, about the development of the

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Florentine territorial state. In his view, scholars have been unable to escape Machiavelli's long shadow, casting warfare in moral terms—this is, after all, the purported age of greedy and disloyal mercenary bands and of an "ad hoc," backward, piecemeal, and impermanent Florentine army, both marked by a lack of martial valor—and thus conceiving of it as distinct from the social and economic spheres. The military reality was very different. Infantry captains, like the gloriously named Francesco "Bad Mamma" Bartoli, acquitted themselves heroically, earned bonuses, were singled out for praise by chroniclers, were recruited and retained alongside others for a unit, and served in successive campaigns. They were professionals, as were the mercenaries who made up the Florentine cavalry. And they were part of a much larger "army"—of consultants and provisioners, cooks, accountants, inspectors, carpenters and stonemasons and artisans of every stripe, merchants, an array of specialized messengers and spies, teamsters and muleteers, and even musicians and ribalds (to inspire and insult)—that made the campaigns against the Ubaldini possible and that itself was made possible not by a "military-industrial complex" but by the "fluidity of movement between 'military' and 'pacific' labor" and between the city and countryside (p. 81). On the basis of meticulous research in the rich budgets and records of the wages of Florence's public workforce, including soldiers (and, crucially, not the day wages of the construction trades long preferred by cliometricians interested in long-term patterns), Caferro describes a war economy wholly embedded in the social and political: the city appropriates revenues from Orsanmichele, the city's preeminent charitable institution, to pay for the war; soldiers lend money to the war effort by investing in the city's public debt and bring their profits into the countryside and mountains, where they live and which were then being transformed into the periphery of a regional state; monks play key roles in the city's fiscal and military apparatus, monitoring the army's arsenal and traveling along with the army in the field; a tax redirects money from the war effort to Florence's new university (*studio*) and to the upkeep of its cathedral but is then, predictably, siphoned back into the war; tax breaks are given to settlers in towns near the border with the Ubaldini. The Florentine war economy was one in which a great deal of the "spent" money was actually "recycled" back into the Florentine population and civic structures, not by well-functioning markets but by active policy and an ethic of communal service largely alien to our own day.

The crux of *Petrarch's War*, where its historical and methodological ambitions most clearly overlap, is Caferro's treatment of wages. Where economic historians have tended to focus on "real wages, standards of living, and the 'basket of goods' used to determine them," and on generating "usable" statistics and clean data sets, Caferro dwells at length on

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the difficulty of calculating and understanding nominal wages even over limited periods of time (p. 114). He revels instead in the messiness of historical variables, accessible only to scholars immersed in abundant archival records and the historical and linguistic contexts that produced them, rather than in transhistorical market forces and generalizable trends. Among the historical variables affecting wages are currency (moneys of account versus specie; the currency cited in budgets versus the currency used in payment, and changes in both), taxation and tax exemptions (temporary and long term), the source of wages (communal revenues versus private institutions), the nature of communal budgeting (bimonthly versus annual, by activity rather than by employee), the length and stability of employment, the fragmentation of work patterns, wage stagnation and "stickiness," status, skill, danger, and the conception of "occupation" itself. Instead of usable data, Caferro provides the reader with anomalous details. In order to call into question the very notion of "occupation" in late medieval Florence, for example, he describes how cooks, bell ringers, and servants from the staff (*famiglia*) of the Florentine priors were entrusted with critical ambassadorial duties during the conflict with the Ubaldini. One servant (*donzello*), Piero Alderotti, went on embassies in 1349 and 1350 to the Pope in Avignon, the *signore* of Milan, the King of Hungary, and the Holy Roman Emperor. Another, Giovanni Paoli, bell ringer of the palazzo of the priors, known by the nickname Schocchino (little idiot) and later Schocco (plain idiot), was sent to Hungary in 1349 but continued to work for the republic for another twenty years, serving on a mission to negotiate with Francesco Carrara, the *signore* of Padua, in 1370. The radical constriction of the labor supply and acute danger of travel in post-plague Europe might explain the early anomalies, but the continued service suggests, for Caferro, that "communal bureaucracy was personal, permeable, and, above all, not readily understandable in modern terms" (p. 177).

This last point is crucial because the alterity of the past cannot but militate against the exuberances and optimisms of economic history as it is often (and most fashionably) practiced today and against the "derivative synthetic 'empiricism'" at its core (p. 180). And it has become clear by now that such empiricism tends to rely on a relatively uncritical assurance that data are available enough, translatable enough, usable enough, and comparable enough across space and time to talk about "big structures, large processes, and huge comparisons" (as in the wonderful title of a 1984 Charles Tilly book). Though plucky in spirit, Caferro is clearly not an optimist: "as scholars seek ever grander and more relevant conclusions," he warns, "the danger is that the realities will recede further into obscurity" (p. 185). Florence was precociously numerate—

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and perhaps precociously "statistical," as Jacob Burckhardt argued nearly 160 years ago (*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*); the resultant and ready availability of countable quantities among its vast archival riches, like the famed 1427 cadastral survey used by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber in their 1978 masterpiece *Tuscans and Their Families*, has profoundly embellished its historiography and enhanced ours. Caferro uses this to his advantage in his short book, itself rich with data and rigorously quantitative, for Florence (even if it has fallen out of fashion) can, at its best, serve as an almost unique laboratory in which the abundantly quantitative and the abundantly qualitative can be put in experimental contact with each other for a period as chronologically "other" as the fourteenth century. In *Petrarch's War*, Caferro—whom I like to imagine briefly looking up from the manuscript on his table at the Florentine state archive to survey a historiographical world in which "data" seems to have triumphed—presents the results of a particular historical investigation but also presents a cautionary tale about how we use numbers from a complex past. He sees the danger of teleology lurking in the statistical impulse, in putting goals before methods and resting assumptions upon assumptions, and in the tacit congruity of the numerical and the modern; he sees the danger of disembedding data from the particular times and places that generated it. Numbers, we all know, often have a kind of clarity and austerity that historical reality does not, a point made abundantly by the *sfumato* effects in Caferro's picture of Florence's army and war economy, where the lines between the pacific and military economy are blurred, blended, and hazy, if they exist at all. None of Caferro's critiques of quantitative approaches is wholly new, but what makes them so striking and potent is that they clearly were not his goal from the start but flowed from his methods; he shows by doing, accentuating the many puzzles and inconsistencies that emerged from diligent archival research, originally meant (as he tells us in the introduction) for another project entirely, contextualizing them across disciplinary and thematic boundaries. He subjects his own research to forensic autopsy before an audience of prospective (probably wary or hostile) viewers.

During the intrastate war against the Ubaldini, the Florentine army fielded a contingent of stonemasons, who marched under the *bandiera del guasto* and were tasked with destroying Ubaldini fortifications. In *Petrarch's War*, Caferro has similarly advanced under a "banner of destruction," tearing down walls between long-compartmentalized subjects (plague, literature, war, wages) and obliterating historiographical commonplaces and methodological certainties. Though Caferro is a respectful and even mild-mannered polemicist, make no mistake: *Petrarch's War* is a polemic, an intraprofession war waged on many

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fronts, with skill and daring. But destruction is not, assuredly, its final aim. The 2014 *History Manifesto* of Jo Guldi and David Armitage was immediately met with a barrage of criticism (much of it petty and unfair), but none can doubt that its platform of big, global, long term, and relevant is now fully in vogue and powerfully ascendant in the historical profession. *Petrarch's War* is also a manifesto of sorts; its call is for historians of the big to get the small right, to get their facts straight, and to understand the contexts that produced their data. The qualifiers presented by the quantifiers, Caferro suggests, are often deemphasized and forgotten in the rush to boldly answer big questions and situate grand narratives. Never a contrarian for contrarianism's sake, Caferro does not call for a rejection of long-termism or an embrace of short-termism—for big and relevant ideas can be found in both scales—but rather to ground the former on a firmer foundation, one of deep contextualization and of a discriminating openness to the small, the anomalous, and the contradictory. Caferro embraces the spirit of Italian *microstoria*, with its insistence that *micro* describes not the subject matter (as is often the case in Anglophone "microhistory" and the various forms of *Alltagsgeschichte*) but the scale of analysis, and yet his concerns are even more fundamental. In an important 2011 essay, Francesca Trivellato—who herself had achieved prominence with what she called "a global history on a small scale" (*The Familiarity of Strangers* [2009])—asked, "Is there a future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?" And what about "a local history on a small scale"? Does it have a future? Is there a future for a study of two years in one not-yet-global city in a not-yet-globalized world? Is there a future for the old-fashioned archival historian who seeks depth and not breadth? Is there, put simply, a future for nuance in the age of "big relevance"? Caferro cannot answer these big questions. His methodological concerns are closer to the ground, his counsel likely less seductive than that of his targets. He calls for us to slow down, to remain curious, and not to smooth out the wrinkles of historical context in the rush for relevance, "even"—and here's the rub—"if the payoff for our scholarly careers is greater" if we do not (p. 21).

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