

Nobles or Pariahs? The Exclusion of Florentine Magnates from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Centuries

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“It is one thing to be one of the Great; it is another to be noble.” The first are perhaps nobles as defined by locality, but they are not loved nor recognized by the People or by the Prince; the others are “well regarded and appreciated,” their nobility being linked not only to their birth but also to the recognition of their titles and merits. According to Bartolo, the Florentine jurist Lapo da Castiglionchio attempted, around 1370, the difficult exercise of combining the rival definitions of nobility that circulated in the Italy of his times, and the justification of his own nobility.¹ He wanted very much to be noble, but not “great”. Who then are these great people from whom these nobles mean to distinguish themselves?

In the political and social vocabulary of the Italian communes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the term great has a very specific significance. The most evident, that from the thirteenth century on, in Florence and in other communes, carries a musty odor of haughtiness and arrogant disdain (*grandigia*, *prepotenza*) quickly detected by the common people. Great in the fourteenth century signifies first of all the wealth and political power of the most prominent families of the city; but it is not neutral, it retains the unfavorable connotation inherited from the thirteenth century, and from ordinary citizens it calls forth a negative judgment: Its use, by an artisan or by a man of the people, remains most often pejorative. It is ambiguous, however, in keeping not only its social or moral but also its political meaning. When Lapo da Castiglionchio invokes the term great, he specifically alludes to the second of these levels by using another word, magnate, that has come to have a special meaning.

In the rather confused mass of powerful and rich lineages, one might in effect distinguish after the end of the thirteenth century a group far better defined, as magnats, a word which takes on a precise technical meaning. Used throughout Europe to describe the highest strata of feudal aristocracy (it will

¹ *Epistola o sia ragionamento di Messer Lapo da Castiglionchio*, L. Mehus, Bologne, ed. (1753), 25–26. C. Donati, *L'idea di nobiltà in Italia. Secoli XIV–XVIII* (Bari, 1988).

keep more or less the same meaning in England until late into the modern period),² *magnas*, which is the Latin equivalent of *grande*, is, in Tuscany, frequently associated with *nobiles* or *potentes*. In thirteenth-century usage, *grande* and *magnas* refer to the same notions of social ascent and supremacy. Nevertheless, after the 1280s, the second usage, *magnas*, is isolated within this group of terms and comes to refer exclusively to the part of the aristocracy, urban or rural, marked and set apart by the Ordonnances of 1293–95. The standard literature has shown the stages of the process by which, inside a larger social stratum—that of the *nobiles et potentes*—and in comparison to all the citizens of Florence, those described as *popolani*, regardless of their social standing, formed a particular group that came to be distinguished and to take on a frankly discriminatory value.³

In effect, the majority of *nobiles et potentes* remained members of the body of fully active citizens, belonged to the polity of the people and were fit to occupy the highest municipal positions. In referring to them, one spoke of *grandi popolani* or *nobiles populares* or *grandi nobili popolani*. On the other hand, the two terms *magnas* (ital.: *magnate*) and *popularis* (ital.: *popolano*) became and remain incompatible. One always excludes the other. In the time in which Lapo da Castiglionchio wrote, the double sense of *grande* was still retained, one could therefore be a *magnate* without being noble or noble without being a *magnate*. Neither term excluded the other; the first is the result of an administrative act, while the other reflects a judgment of style and bearing.

Salvemini saw a vicious circle in the mutual exclusion of definitions of *magnates* and *popularis* that was emphasized as much by contemporaries as by the historians of his own time: The issue of whether and to what degree one is shaped by the exclusion of the other has become, to most authors, no more than a battle of words, “because, given the one, it becomes necessary to grant the other.”⁴ One can escape this vicious circle however, by noting that it is always the *popolari* who define the *magnates* by taking the initiative in providing definitions throughout the turbulent political history of Florence from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. This is precisely what makes it impossible for us to dismiss the definitions of *magnates* and *popolari*. In fact, these

² N. Rubinstein, “Le origini della legge sul sodamento,” *Archivio storico italiano*, 96 (1939), 5–57, in particular 7–8, in which French expressions of the end of the twelfth century are quoted, such as “regni proceres aliosque magnates” and German and Catalan texts (“magnatibus seu militibus”).

³ G. Salvemini, *Magnati e popolani in Firenze dal 1280 al 1295* (Florence, 1899; rev. ed., Milan, 1966). N. Ottokar, *Il comune di Firenze alla fine del Dugento* (Florence, 1926; rev. ed., Turin, 1962). N. Rubinstein, “La lotta contra i magnati a Firenze. I: La prima legge sul ‘sodamento’ e la pace del cardinale Latino,” *Archivio storico italiano*, 93 (1935), 161–172, and “Le origini della legge sul ‘sodamento.’”

⁴ To repeat Donato Giannotti, cited by Salvemini, *Magnati e popolani* (1966 éd.), 21. The text of Giannotti is published by Giovanni Silvano, *Repubblica fiorentina. A critical edition and introduction* (Geneva, 1990 [Bibliothèque d’humanisme et Renaissance, 237], citation p. 94).

words are not pure substances: They take their meaning in a dialectical relationship of forces, just as Salvemini himself first pointed out. Because it is built around the idea not only of exclusion but also those of distance and difference, the meaning of magnate could be constantly revised because that meaning followed from the idea that the people had of itself.

The term magnate refers, therefore, to an undesirable judicial and political status that was progressively constructed in the last decades of the thirteenth century and finalized in *les Ordonnances de Justice* of 1293–95 (C. Lansing 1991).⁵ Its limits are drawn and fixed by a theoretically irrevocable list: We will find it in fact copied from one revision to another up to the statutes of the fifteenth century. By the end of the thirteenth century the names of about seventy lineages in the city of Florence and those of an equivalent number in the *contado* are listed in the statutes of the *podestat*; when necessary, the family name of a member of the local aristocracy could be verified in order to apply the appropriate measures and sanctions anticipated in the *Ordonnances*. The term magnate stigmatized some of the best families in the city for more than two centuries. What were the criteria for applying such a negative distinction?

ENTERING AND LEAVING A MINORITY

Born of the need to isolate and thereby to identify a group whose behavior made it an enemy of the regime of the Arte, the families of Florentine “magnates” were also defined by the popolo of those times as being particularly inclined towards violence. The best indication of this violence and arrogance is the bearing and use of arms.⁶ Those who bore arms were first of all members of the knightly class, which is why the only truly clear criterion for defining the magnates is to discern the presence of a knight in a lineage. Indeed, this criterion marked the initial formation of the group but disappeared rather quickly at the beginning of the fourteenth century, when the Commune and the people themselves created knights.

Although the term *nobiles* lost, in thirteenth-century Florence, the meaning it had in feudal society, becoming diluted and colorless to the point of seeming useless when it was necessary to define the terms of exclusion, the popolo constantly characterized the magnates in terms of violence, regarding that to be the prerogative of the ancient nobility, and linked violence to the condition of the *milites*, the warriors on horseback, who were ill-constrained by the ideals of ancient chivalry. The situation is paradoxical, for the group of “magnates” defined by the list of Statutes of the *podestat* had long been shown to be a heterogenous group containing a mish-mash of authentic feudal lin-

⁵ C. Lansing, *The Florentine Magnates: Lineage and Faction in a Medieval Commune* (Princeton, 1991).

⁶ Rubinstein, “Le origini.”

eages, families of ancient consular aristocracy, and lines enriched by commerce and banking in the thirteenth century.⁷ In short, it contained a social spectrum that seemed absolutely comparable to that of the families of the *Popolo grasso* which monopolized the power in the government of the Arte from the end of the thirteenth century. In other words, the people cut the *membra domorum magnatum* from its own body.

The part was not completely severed, however. First of all, being named a magnate did not amount to a proscription and did not eliminate from the commune people designated on the basis of their family (or rather their lineage). The magnates were not rebels, exiles, nor utter outlaws. They remained citizens, could still appear before the tribunals to defend their rights, and retained the same civil rights as other citizens; but for them the penal procedures were quicker, and the sanctions harsher. Their political capacity was diminished, for they could neither rise to the leadership of the Arte a loss because of their group's singular desire to be elected to the highest governmental positions, nor to positions within the People's Council because of their exclusion by definition; magnates could, however, participate in political life at many different levels. They could sit on one of the principal city councils, the Communal Council. Also, separately from the *popolani*, they were in charge of the *Parte Guelfa*, the aristocratic association which defended the Guelf ideals as well as the class interests of all the *Grandi*. They remained military leaders, directed communal militias, or fought with them on horseback in battle. The Commune sent those reputed to be sufficiently loyal to command important strategic posts of the *contado* or to administer justice in its name in the localities of its territory.⁸ It counted as well upon their imposing bearing when sending them abroad on diplomatic missions or assigning them to prestigious appointments in foreign cities. The magnates are, therefore, belittled as citizens, but they were not entirely excluded from political life. They were a constrained minority, but an active one.

They were all the more difficult to disregard in the life of the Commune, since many bonds between *grandi popolani* and the magnates were formed in the thirteenth century and continued to be formed in the centuries that followed. *Grandi* formed bonds of an economic nature which were so strong that it is difficult to agree with Salvemini that it was above all their status as grain producers that brought about the ire of other *popolani* in the thirteenth century and caused their segregation. The majority of the urban magnates' lineages were profoundly implicated in the banking and in the commercial life of the city before and after 1300; they were doubtless landowners and especially in

⁷ Salvemini, *Magnati e popolani*: S. Raveggi, M. Tarasi, D. Medici, R. Parenti, *Ghibellini, Guelfi e Popolo grasso. I detentori del potere politico a Firenze nella seconda metà del Duecento* (Florence, 1978).

⁸ Cf. M. Becker, *Florence in transition*, 2 vol. (Baltimore, 1967–68).

cities landlords and proprietors who even owned entire neighborhoods. Some of them were moreover associated with the *popolani* through mutual commercial contacts, a characteristic that persisted into the middle of the fifteenth century. Although these business contacts were solidified through numerous marriage alliances, this was not a situation of group endogamy but a unique phenomenon because it involved members of a single group.

In the everyday life of the neighborhood, these mutual connections translated into multiple interdependencies. There were cases of many popularis who vouched for the magnates in legal acts which concerned them. A frequent example was the appearance of a *fidejussores* of the *popolani* at the posting of bail and at the ceremony of oath required of the magnates annually. Donato Velluti and his cousins, for example, intervened in this capacity many times, and not solely because their allies, the Frescobaldi, occupied such a prominent place in the *Cronica domestica*.

THE GOOD USE OF A MINORITY

To repeat an expression of Maurice Kriegel,⁹ the magnates were negatively privileged, in the sense that their status, defined by restrictions and by negative dispensations under common law, benefited them in a certain way. The magnates formed neither a caste nor a minority confined to activities which are looked down upon. On the contrary: They were given honorary functions and were what we would call representatives of the community. In fact, the complicity between the *popolani grassi* and the magnates was often denounced by the members of the minor *Arte*, or the *minuti*. They knew well that in a *popolano grasso* unwittingly slept a magnate (and as we will see, in more than one magnate slept a *popolano* who was not always *grasso*, but who would like to have been so!). The constraints which bound magnates and against which they often rebelled can neither offset nor efface all the signs of their position of dominance—the bearing of arms, solidarity and vendetta, positions of leadership—no more than the essence of their prestige: the antiquity of their stock, the wealth that allowed their generosity. The communal power made use of them only to better control them.

The magnates of the fourteenth century were not subject to exclusion but to exception. Maintained because of pressure from the popular classes, the magnate status was often put under scrutiny, becoming definitive only in those moments when social and political struggle intensified; and its forms never ceased undergoing revision. Florentine leaders close enough to the magnates to be able to understand their reactions and to exercise pressure upon them

⁹ M. Kriegel locates, in the central Middle Ages, the logic of a politics of states placing the Jewish communities at their service and wonders: "The conjuncture of a social insertion *negatively privileged* and of the exercise of defined economic functions justifies referring to the notion of a caste" or, rather, "of a group forming a caste in the interior of society organized according to principles of stratification different from those which govern the societies of caste."

were without a doubt convinced that the magnates, being in a position of relative exteriority, could be useful in serving the community. One might add that the success of the status of a magnate consisted of bringing together political limitations and judicial constraints. In this way magnates were rendered socially very vulnerable. Their interests depended strongly on the protection of their counterparts among the *popolani* who were in power and, in the end, of the state that was produced little by little out of partisan struggles. The magnates' negative privileges rendered them harmless and allowed them to exercise honorary and representative functions in the community and in the Popolo to which they did not belong but which were given to them if they were sufficiently loyal. Assignments to these functions were not simply tossed to them as a bone to soften their resentment for being excluded from the real positions of power in the city. Instead, duties in these functions had to appeal not only to the magnates' vanity and vainglory. In order to grant honor, to honor a partner, one must take the notion of honor seriously. The citizens selected the diplomatic magnates to be assigned with the defense of the People's honor because the magnates were in the best position to know what honor meant. I can only refer to the superb analysis of R. Trexler.¹⁰

HOW DOES ONE LEAVE A MINORITY?

Placed partially on the margins of political life, Florentine magnates saw themselves as being restricted to the fringes primarily when they were implicated in a violent affair involving the popolani. The Ordonnances intended above all to protect the popolani from the oppression of the powerful designated as magnates. This protection, as I have said, is based on the principle of exceptional measures. In fulfilling their duties, the magnates established a distance between themselves and the popolani. This allowed either the mitigation of the punishment inflicted upon the popolani offender facing a magnate or on the contrary increased the punishment facing a magnate who victimized a popolano. During the fourteenth century many deviations from this rule can be observed. Little by little a custom developed that created *ad hominem* just such a difference between the two parties. Depending on the case, for example, a popolano might be at least temporarily declared a magnate for the purpose of a harsher punishment or a magnate might become temporarily a popolano when facing another magnate as an adversary.¹¹

Before they even considered using the royal route of *popularitas*, that is, asking for the transfer of an individual or a family into the ranks of the popolani, magnates made use of the exception, which for a long time seemed to be the best—or the only—way of escaping the constraints of their position.

¹⁰ R. C. Trexler, *Public life in Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1980).

¹¹ C. Klapisch-Zuber, "Vrais et faux magnats. L'application des Ordonnances de justice au XIVe siècle." Atti del XV Convegno internazionale di studi *Magnati e popolani nell'Italia comunale (Pistoia, 15–18 mai)* (1995).

Many—especially after 1340—asked to be granted a measure which either disregarded or transgressed deliberately the indelible mark of their birth for a particular matter. As a minority within their own minority they did not enjoy to the same extent the advantages of the status of *popolani*. Not surprisingly, under these circumstances many of those who first seized on the possibilities offered by the Ordonnances and used the discriminatory measures for their benefit, took the next step and asked to become *popolani*. In the forties, the *popularitates* realized that the number of many families of magnates who had become inoffensive had declined and that, a great number of those, often reputed to be of Ghibeline tradition, had been admitted into the ranks of the people, sometimes in exchange for coin of the realm. In the following decade governmental authorities granted the changing of the status bit by bit [*au compte-goutte*] to the magnates who distinguished themselves by serving the community. Only after 1360 did the privileges of *popularitas* multiply and begin to reduce the size of the magnates as a group. The erosion of this group, which took on the aspect of an epidemic, was strong enough to make the total drop by 1,200—from some 1,400 men taking the annual oath at the beginning of 1340 to 200 between 1382 and 1384, a time when we can still count them in this way. Cosimo the Old granted almost all of the last magnates—231 men—the status they sought.¹²

The status itself was still used, to my knowledge, until the end of the fifteenth century as a weapon against political enemies, but this practice was not new, as additions to the number of magistrates began in the 1310s with the Bordonis, accompanied proscriptions throughout the last decades of the fourteenth century. What remains is that the designation of magnate, tarnished by the extensions given to it since the fourteenth century (it allowed one to force the parents of a convict to bear witness against him or to bring sanctions against recalcitrant taxpayers), was above all blurred by the evolution of mentalities. Among the magnates, this was because they sought to align themselves with the behavior of their fellow citizens during the entire second half of the fourteenth century; among the *popolani grassi*, this was because what separated them from the older group of magnates became less important than what was keeping them together, insofar as the ensemble of ruling classes had supplanted the middle classes or kept them on the margins of real power. The two factions of the dominant class found it in their interests to cooperate openly after 1390 rather than to maintain an artificial division.

In this strategy of assimilation, the magnates evidently strove to put themselves in the shoes of the people. They mimicked the characteristics that seemed to contradict what was strongest in their own “nature” as magnates, using for their own advantage arguments on which the difference in status had

¹² I will refer on this point to the “Dossier florentin du XIV^e siècle” which Michel Pastoureau and myself have commented on in *Annales*, E. S. C., 1988, no. 2a. 1205–56.

been substantially founded in order to persuade their partners that they were no different. Their speech made it clear how the designations of the thirteenth century were internalized by those who had borne them in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and, finally, how these changed in meaning.

Being Part of a Minority

If it is rather simple to grasp the significance given to the term *magnate* by the *popolani*, the perception of the quality and “nature” attributed to it remains rather obscure. Let us take them at their own word from the discourse in which this term was given different levels of meaning.

In the first, and most basic, level of discourse, the words of convicted *magnates*, repeated by defendants and plaintiffs, have their roots in popular speech. It was, a voice that was, therefore, polemical or aggressive. Whether insults, threats or boasts, the words put in the mouth of the denounced or accused *magnate* are part of the argument of an adversary and quoted accordingly. They paint the portrait of the *magnate* as one might expect to confront him on the streets or the fields of Tuscany: violent, destructive, a thief, rapist, weapon in hand, insult on the tongue. Let us take a closer look at some of these insults.¹³ The most frequent is that of “traitor,” an accusation thrown back at them naturally enough by the *popolani*: the difference is that incriminated *magnates* are traitors to the community or to the people, whereas the insulted [*popolani*] are simply “traitors,” in other words treacherous to their natural superiors.¹⁴ Their threats menace not only life (“I’m going to massacre those peasants,” boasts an Ubaldini in 1366¹⁵) and the property of their victims, as do the Gherardini in 1377, crying, at the expense of their host and in spite of him: “Let us eat, drink and ruin him, for he well deserves it.”¹⁶ They all seem to be certain of their impunity and of silence—the silence that resonates through the Florentine judicial archives that show us frightened witnesses who exhibit little enthusiasm for corroborating such accusations. Frescobaldi knew this well, summing it up with great ease in 1405: “I am more powerful (*maggiore*) than you, and nobody will say a word against me if

¹³ Cf. also the analysis of complaints against the rural *magnates* in C. Carduff, “Magnati e popolani nel contado fiorentino: dinamiche sociali e rapporti di potere nel Trecento,” *Rivista di storia dell’agricoltura*, a. 33:2 (1993), 15–63.

¹⁴ “Riconosci la vita per noi zozzo ladro traditore che tu se,” from the Bardi to the Rignano (Archivio di Stato, Florence (NB: all archival documents are from here), *Esecutore degli ordinamenti di giustizia* (henceforth abbreviated as *EOJ*), 119 bis, Feb. 6, 1349); “sieno morti questi traditori,” from the Rossi to the Castelfiorentino (*EOJ* 119 bis, f. 24, Jan. 24, 1349); “Traditore, e ch’ovene ch’io t’uccida,” from Conti Guidi, to Pieve a Cascia (*EOJ* 1566, f. 4, June 20, 1405); “Traditore, ladro che tu sia”, from Frescobaldi (*EOJ* 1566 f. 15, Sept. 26, 1405).

¹⁵ “Io farò pure stratio di loro contadini,” from Luco Badia (*EOJ* 500, f. 5, Dec. 10, 1366). Threats of della Tosa, Dec. 29, 1344, against a curate: “Se tu entrarai e qua noti passerò dall’atro lato con questa lancia” (*EOJ* 21, f.69).

¹⁶ A Petriolo, “Manichiamo e beviamo e ghiastemiamo chi il’ à guadagniato” (*EOJ* 802 bis, f. 213v, Dec. 5, 1377).

I kill you.”¹⁷ The threats of the magnates repeated in denunciations to the Executor of the Ordinances concern, thus, the popolo in its entirety and the honor of the Florentine Commune to which the “little ones,” the “powerless,” appeal as the only real means of eliciting an official reaction, the only hope that justice will be done and that the affair will not be buried. “In Ferrara, there are no people, filthy dog,” cried a Donati to his victim, finding refuge in that city in 1344¹⁸; and the Bardi repeat it after him, boasting once in 1349 before the peasants whom they ransack that “we have ruined more than once the popolo of Florence, we can very well do it again to those of St. Cristofano of Perticaia.”¹⁹

The oppositions little-grand and weak-strong form the rhetoric of these complaints, almost all of them protected by the anonymity accorded by law to those who denounce the magnates. It is significant, however, that the magnates, in their excessive and foolish pride, took up this language and accord themselves, like the Frescobaldi above, a quasi-physical “superiority” in relation to the popolani. Taller, stronger, bigger, more powerful than the popolani—this language of dimensions, of size, is as pregnant with meaning as that founded upon the opposition of “rich” and “humble” [*du gras et du menu*] which relates to the relationship between people in power and subordinates or proletariat.

Believing That One Is of the People

The second level of language, which is no longer one of aggression and demands of revenge made with hostile intent, is instead that of a discourse of presentation and persuasion. I have already referred to the privileges of *popularitas*, partial or complete, that communal power granted to the magnates. In fact, the introduction of the politics of the restitution of civil rights to the magnates is perceptible from the middle of the century; from 1349, those who could not tolerate being part of that lineage were offered the possibility of separating themselves from it. These “divisions,” like the privileges of *popularitas*, have given us a large number of speeches concerning them that were presented before the communal government and were given in a manner aimed to convince.

The majority of applicants saw themselves, therefore, as driven to flaunt their conformity to behaviors that the popolani valued. The language of greatness is of no use here. Nevertheless, many of them do not shy away from it completely but present it in a Guelf manner intended to be convincing to their partners in the popolo grasso: As Guelf, their ancestors fought against the enemies of the Commune and of the *Parte*; Guelf they will remain, but in

¹⁷ “Traditore, ladro che tu sia, Io son Maggiore de te e non c’è persona che contra a mi dicesse nulla io t’ociderò” (*EOJ* 1566 f. 15v, Sept. 26, 1405).

¹⁸ “A Ferrara non’à popolo, sozo cane” (*EOJ* 21, f. 65, Nov. 25, 1344).

¹⁹ “Noi abbiamo già più volte rotto il popolo di Firenze, bene possiamo rompere sicuramente quello de Santo Cristofano in Perticaia” (*EOJ*. 119 bis, Feb. 6, 1349).

the service of the people. If not greatness, than at least honor is the key word. The honor of the magnates who aspire to being popolano is not incompatible with that of the people.

The introduction of the *arma populi* under their own shield is a very clear sign of the proposal to integrate the people into their military tradition. In fact, since they are obliged by the law of 1361 to change their coat of arms, once they are admitted in the ranks of the popolani, a measure obviously vexing to them, they appropriate for themselves the “coat of arms of the people” (a cross of gules on a silver background) as if they deserved the right to bear it in compensation for services rendered. Indeed, it was customary to confer these on foreign magistrates to thank them according to their mandate—or as if they were given to them in a ceremony that confers the knighthood in the name of the Florentine people. In a desperate effort to reconcile their knightly tradition and their peaceful mercantile occupations, many of them wanted to become *milites populi*.

This aspiration, however, is better seen in the language of signs—heraldic, anthroponomic—than in the speeches themselves. The majority of magnates who wished to normalize their situation as citizens after 1350 kept a low profile. Their speech presented them as nothing more than popolani, men with nothing exceptional about them, who dreamed of nothing more than being able to disappear in the mass. How do they perceive these masses? Their basic vocabulary rests upon the notion of peace: They talk about peaceful personal occupations and quiet relationships with others; their vision of the social world in which they evolve is consensual. These would be the foundations of their reformed behavior, close to the way of living of the popolani, thus worthy of the *popularitas*. These people do not want to be members of a feared minority; they aspire to become part of the peace-loving majority. In sum, they want to be good merchants, citizens with no past(s), men who wear the people’s coat of arms, not only on their shield (as do the proudest of them), but also in their hearts.

Let us listen to some of them. Geri, son of Arriguccio degli Agli, set the tone in 1355: “He lives and intends always to live in a peaceful manner, tranquil and of the people; and it is well known that he exercised his profession in a way common to all the other artisans of the city.”²⁰ Others added an important reason: to become popolani when one is already so in heart and in manners, to renounce explicitly the *mores magnatum*,²¹ allows for a better defense of one’s heritage. Few expressed this hope as bluntly as, in 1372, the tutors of Giovanni di Francesco “Cipolla” Adimari, a little boy of seven who

²⁰ “Semper tamen vixit et vivere intendit pacifice populariter et quiete. et prout omnibus est notorium a pueritia sua exercuit et exercet artem more aliorum artificum popularium de civitate predicta” (*Provisioni, Registri* [Hereafter, abr.: *Prov.*] 42, f. Feb. 26, 1355).

²¹ *Prov.* 70, f. 62v, June 7, 1381, petition of money changers Francesco and Matteo di Agnolo Cavalcanti.

finds himself alone in the world. When these tutors asked that he be granted the status of a popolano, it is "because the affairs of those who are known as magnates are not treated as favorably as the affairs of the popolani, which are handled, thanks to the Ordonnances of the Commune, in a more favorable atmosphere."²²

Another group distinguished itself by the humility with which they asked to become popolani. Their voices were hushed, sometimes plaintive, a sharp contrast to the arrogant tone or the conformity of the majority of demands. In the most neutral form, at least in appearance, the discourse of this group put forward as a pretext the decline of a lineage once strong in numbers. From 1325 on, the decadence or the ruin of ten magnate lineages in the city and twenty-five others in the contado justified, according to Vallani, their massive admission to the popolo. This argument was taken up by the Visdomini, for example, who together presented a nearly unanimous demand to receive their status of popolano in 1372 and then received it on the basis of the argument that they constituted a danger "neither in number nor in wealth."²³ In 1369, the Gianfigliuzzi also claimed they were in a state of "exhaustion of wealth and of people, due to their bad fortune as much as to the very favors granted to them by the people and the commune of Florence, an exhaustion so complete that it might qualify them to join the ranks of the powerless or weak popolani."²⁴ Five members of the Mannelli, another magnate lineage, watched all their cousins acquire the status of popolano but were passed over by this measure because they were regarded "as powerless people not even worth mentioning [to receive this privilege] by reason of their debasement."²⁵

Individually, the magnates marginal in their own families also petitioned to join the popolani into which they are assimilated by their weakness. The most frequent case of marginality is the isolation within the very status of being a magnate. Many of them found themselves the only representatives of their lineage or their branch in the ranks of the magnates and used this argument to rejoin their cousins in the popolani.²⁶ Weakness due to age is sometimes in

²² "Wuia negotia eorum qui dicuntur magnates non eo favore tractantur sicut sunt negotia popularium qui per ordinamenta Communis favorabilibus prosequuntur" (*Prov.* 60, f. 25v–26r, June 8, 1372). What one reads in the petition of ser Giovanni di ser Domenico Foraboschi may also be read in watermark: "ut dictam suam artem liberius exercere possit" (*Prov.* 72, f. 158v, Oct. 21, 1383).

²³ "Divitiis et personis" (*Prov.* 60, f. 128r–v). They take as their name Cortigiani on Feb. 5, 1373 (*Capitoli, Registri* 22, f. 1v).

²⁴ "Sunt tum ob varios fortune casus tum etiam ob gratias a populo et communi florentinis factas olim quibusdam de domo predicta ita extrenuati (*sic*) viribus et personis quod merito possunt in numero impotentum et debiliu popularium aggregari" (*Prov.* 57, f. 12v, June 7, 1369).

²⁵ "Veluti homines impotentes et de quibus propter eorum vilitate nulla mentio facta fuit" (*Prov.* 54, f. 101v–102r, Dec. 29, 1366).

²⁶ Tornaquinci, Dec. 9, 1385 (*Prov.* 74, f. 203r), della Tosa, Jan. 24, 1365 (*Prov.* 52, f. 110r–v; *Prov.* 58, f. 10v, Oct. 24, 1370). G. Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society, 1343–1378* (Princeton, 1962), 156 wrongly asserts that all the Tosinghi were made popolani in 1370. Instead, the

addition to being without kin. Such were the arguments for orphaned children such as Gherardo di Guccio Nerli, a *puer* whose father had shown that he had a peace-loving spirit,²⁷ or Niccolò di Francesco della Foresta, another boy of seven, who, since “almost all the nearest of his lineage and his house” had already acquired the status of popolano, promised to behave like a good popolano upon reaching adulthood.²⁸ If marginality often resulted when relatives were already among the ranks of the popolani, it could also be the result of disagreement with cousins or of poverty and the weakness that are its consequences. Rinieri di Donato Tedaldini saw himself “in a way completely helpless and completely lacking in the favor of his kin or consorts.”²⁹ A bastard of the Cerchi who worked in the humble profession of clog maker claimed his undesirable condition and his poverty as reasons to join the popolo,³⁰ just as did a *lanifex*, who, despite the name Frescobaldi, “was weak and helpless due to his maternal line.”³¹ The Bostichi consider themselves “people long without power and not really magnates, let us say even more so than all the little people by their intentions and their power; for they earn their living by the sweat of their brow as honestly as possible, being licensed as wine merchants.”³²

Whether they put forward their intentions to behave well or to have particular vulnerability or whether they considered themselves merchants, poor artisans, or deposed nobles, all these people presented a negative image of what the word magnate meant to their contemporaries in order to obtain the desired privilege: an excessive sense of honor, a belligerent spirit, a propensity to quarrel with their neighbors, the refusal to submit their economic activities to the restrictions of the Arte, solidarity with groups having too many relatives, excessive urgency, turbulence, and disorder in the management of their estate and their life. Conversely, the proclaimed intention was to “live like a [popolano], a peaceful man, a merchant.”³³ What better recognition of civic and mercantile ideals, even in the old families of magnates, than the retainer voted

applicant of the document of 1370. Simone di Baldo, alleges simply that “omnes ipsius Simonis consortes fuerint et sint populares . . . et solum dictus S. et duo eius nepotes . . . hodie sint et reperiantur descripti pro magnatibus” (*Prov.* 59, f. 261 r–v, March 23, 1372).

²⁷ “Stare intendit ad artem et in mercantiarum exercitio vivere et mori intendit ut quicumque pacificus artifex et mercator, similiterque eius pater quiete vixit” (*Prov.* 70, f. 56v, June 7 1381).

²⁸ “Quasi omnes de sua progenie et domo sunt populares” (*Prov.* 74, f. 203v, Dec. 9, 1385).

²⁹ “Et sit quodammodo omnino impotens et omni favore consanguineorum et seu consortium totaliter destitutus” (*Prov.* 70, f. 71r, June 21, 1381).

³⁰ *Prov.* 39, f. 177r–v, July 27, 1352: a petition of Agnolo, voc. bastardo, di Gianni Cerchi, “artificis pauperis in arte et ministerio chalzolarie seu zoccholarie.”

³¹ *Prov.* 60, f. 129 r–v, Dec. 21, 1372: a petition of Ippolito di m. Guglielmino. Cf. Brucker, *Florentine Politics*, 155.

³² “Persone diutius impotentes et nedum actualiter magnates, quin ymo animo et potentia plus quam parvuli et de sudore vultus eorum in hiis que honeste possunt et presertim circa artem vinacteriorum in qua matriculati sunt” (*Prov.* 59, f. 235v, Feb. 23 1372).

³³ “Populariter et pacifice et mercantiliter vixerunt” (*Prov.* 59, f. 250v, March 10, 1372, petition of Ghirigoro et Niccolò di Pagnozzo Tornaquinci).

in favor of a certain Tornaquinci! In changing his status, the priors maintained that they were rewarding “the purity of his loyalty, the seriousness of his morals, and the prudence he shows in everything.”³⁴ It is true that, according to the chronicler (and magnate) Giovanni Cavalcanti, the Tornaquinci, “the most noble” of Florentine families, were “in their morals more soft than robust, men a little sleepy and timid.”³⁵

One might notice that there are few statements which refer to explicitly hostile reactions, within the group of magnates, to the movement which brought many of them to adopt a language contrary to their traditions. Even if they did so, was it not without hidden intentions? In 1430 the sons of Andrea di Rinaldo da Ricasoli were granted the status of popolani. They emphasized the spirit of enterprise they acquired in childhood and their devotion to the Florentine *populus*. Their father is not involved in their petition. Luigi Passerini, author of the nineteenth-century history of this family, interpreted the father’s abstention as an explicit refusal to accept the advantages of popolo status and loyalty to a noble ideal, “the quiet awareness of not debasing oneself by refuting the noble blood that runs in his veins.”³⁶ But this late judgment, felt through centuries of the building up and collapsing of the Tuscan nobility, was not perhaps that of Andrea da Ricasoli. For who, if not he, could have prepared the supplication of his sons, all minors at this time?³⁷ Although Andrea, like many other magnates, had to count upon a division of personal positions to secure the future of his sons in the ranks of the popolani while retaining his own status, this did not bar him from occupying important functions of regional command and from keeping up his connections of *consorteria*.

From Magnates to Nobles, an Inversion of the Medieval Scheme

The third level of discourse on the magnates is the historical and genealogical account or juridical rationalization that some of them used concerning themselves. They devoted themselves to it, especially after they were rehabilitated as [popolani], a status acquired, for the great majority of them, with the return of [Cosimo the Old] in 1434. Later, once the court of the great duke aspired to surround itself with a nobility similar to that of other countries, the magnates continued these accounts in order to justify their entry into the ranks of

³⁴ “Quantaque puritate fidei morum gravitate et ex omni parte prudentia . . . cognoscentes . . . et ob id eius vitam laudabilem remunerare volentes et eius consortio populum agumentare” (*Prov.* 51, f. 147v, May 29, 1364, concerns one Niccolò di Ghino, who took the name Popoleschi).

³⁵ “Costumi mansueti più che robusti; . . . huomini sopnolenti et timidi” (M. Grendler, ed., *The “Trattato politico-morale” of Giovanni Cavalcanti (1381–c. 1451). A Critical Edition and Interpretation* (Geneva: Droz, 1974; also *Travaux d’humanisme et Renaissance*, CXXXV:104).

³⁶ *Prov.* 120, f. 472v–473v, Feb. 4, 1430: “Tranquillo nella coscienza di non essersi avvilito a mentire l’illustre sangue che scorreva nelle sue vene” (L. Passerini, *Genealogia e storia della famiglia da Ricasoli* [Florence, 1861]).

³⁷ The oldest, Rinieri, was thirteen; the youngest, four.

the new nobility. From the end of the fourteenth century and into the beginning of the fifteenth, we see, therefore, that many Florentines worked with the idea that the reputation of nobility rested upon the antiquity and continuity of lineage that linked ancestors without dubious gaps—an idea, J. Boutier justly reminds us,³⁸ that will remain valid in the modern reexamination of the criteria for nobility in Florence.

Let us return to master Lapo da Castiglionchio, from whence we started. In his “Epistola” to his son, written in the 1370s, this important member of the very conservative and aristocratic Parte Guelfa wished to justify the nobility of his family in a city where there was no univocal definition of nobility and where the *plebei* ran the state. His position was even more delicate, as his family, of authentic feudal origins, was related to Ghibelines declared to be magnates. Descendants of the ancient lords of Cuona, the Castiglionchio attained their autonomy and later adopted this name to distinguish themselves from the branch that became Ghibelines under the name of da Volognano. The first remain popolani after 1293; the Volognano were labeled as magnates until 1434. Lord Lapo could not challenge the nobility of people like the Volognano, the consorts of whom bear common ancestry with him, without challenging his own. How did he manage to set apart the two branches, the Guelf and the Ghibeline, the popolani and the magnates? His son worried about the near extinction of his own family. “Our race,” responds the father, “has aged and lost its strength well before those who are noble today even came into being.”³⁹ From number, which makes strength, is born presumptuousness, which predisposed one to become Ghibeline and, later, to become a magnate. He proceeds to explain that the Florentines destroyed the castle of Cuona “because the Cuona, on account of their riches, possessions, villages and vassals were made great and powerful; and the branch today called da Volagnano were more powerful than the branch today called da Castiglionchio because they were more numerous and had more possessions, and were more wicked and harmful. Their power and arrogance pushed them into turpitude and homicides to impose their tyranny upon the countryside.”⁴⁰ Those destined to remain popolani, the da Castiglionchio, far from giving themselves over to the misdeeds of their consorts, “were modest and mild people.” Lapo looked, therefore, at the old magnate consorts of his own family through a

³⁸ J. Boutier. *Anatomie d'une noblesse urbaine. Florence, 16e–18e siècles* (Paris, Ed. de l'E.H.E.S.S., 1995).

³⁹ “Ancora, come appresso leggerai, questa tua origine se nobile fu, è si invecchiata, che quasi è venuta in oblivione; e quasi la nostra progenie prima invecchiata et estenuata fu, che molti che oggi sono nobili, avessero principio: e per tanto convien e a te fare pensiero e proposito per tua virtù ritrovarla” (*Epistola*, pp. 9 and 51).

⁴⁰ “Perciocchè i detti da Cuona per le dette loro castella, tenute, e ville, e fedeli erano fatti grandi et potenti: e il detto lato che oggi si chiama da Volognano, era assai più possente che l'altro lato, che oggi si chiama da Castiglionchio: perocchè erano più delle persone, et aveano più tenute, ed erano più maligni et malferati. E per loro potenza a superbia cominciarono a fare delle cose sconcie, omicidj, forze et tirannie per lo paese” (*Ibid.*, 33–34).

perspective commonly used to define them in the thirteenth century. At the time when the Parte Guelfa, of which he was one of the active captains, devoted itself to hunting down Ghibelines, it was not detrimental to him if he shook off his burdensome relatives, exaggerating their traits as needed.

An anonymous chronicler of the Tornaquinci family, writing about the same time, did not have the same problem. He put together a few family traditions and dissected various documents concerning its lineage, which was never tainted by ghibelinism and which indeed did not fail to be of the good party of black Guelf.⁴¹ Many of its numerous branches did choose to join the people (under various names), but only while maintaining a certain complicity with the old Tornaquinci and their other separated cousins. The anonymous person who wrote at a time when the first magnate in this family stepped forward and crossed the threshold to join the people, did not report the divisions and clashes in this wide group of relatives. His entire work consisted, on the contrary, of putting forward an image of unity which was not erased by the dispersion of branches and of rights. And no more than Lapo da Castiglionchio did he boast of their incredible antiquity, a nation which will nourish, from the end of the fifteenth century, the imagined idea of the old families, the *famiglie*, as they began to be known, to designating the lineages of very old stock. With the Tornaquinci, we observe, rather, a progressive absorption into a political community, a gentle integration which allowed every chance for their beneficiaries in the era of the grand duke to take their place in the new Florentine nobility. Without either effacing or renouncing their membership in the community but instead taking advantage of it (for the Tornaquinci were already in the priorate from 1282 to 1292), they could have argued that if they could not occupy those high offices, which was the decisive criterion determining nobility, it was their status as magnates that made it impossible after the Ordonnances. Unlike Lapo da Castiglionchio, who as a popolano could count all his ancestors and relatives, who were priors or judiciary gonfaloniers since the end of the thirteenth century, the Tornaquinci became like other ancient magnates, obliged in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries to put forward their nobility, which became an impediment because they were then obligated to prove, in a somewhat absurd fashion, that their nobility was often more ancient than that of the “powerful popolani who had held the reins” of power in the city during the fourteenth century.

Later, as a pretext, some will cite magnate ascendancy, although none existed, in order to explain not having attained higher offices in the communal government. In this way the da Filicaia vindicated an honorable antiquity of 600 years for their family while recognizing that they could not count priors

⁴¹ Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, ms. 1885. G. Pampaloni, “I Tornaquinci poi Tornabuoni fino ai primi del Cinquecento,” *ASI*, 126 (1968), 331–62. P. Simons, “*Portraiture and patronage in Quattrocento Florence with specific reference to the Tornaquinci and their chapel in S. Maria Novella*” (PhD, Melbourne, 1985).

among them because they were descended from magnates.⁴² Sometimes, on the contrary, they were explicitly exempted from having this label attached to their consorts who became magnates, as the (Tedaldi) della Vitella, whom the most ancient rolls recognized was independent, “*popolani et chase per sè*”! With a certain artfulness they doubtless hide the fact that if they did not attain the priorate from its beginnings in the fourteenth century, it was because that office interested them less than commerce or the lucrative positions in higher administration.⁴³ In their own manner they prolonged the ambiguous process of Andrea de Ricasoli, mentioned above, who played all the angles. Henceforth, they would completely reverse the stigma of the condition of magnate.

In the process of recuperating the rights of the active citizen or the entry into the nobility of the grand duchy, the use of the position of magnate allowed, therefore, a complete reversal of argumentation. For a long time magnates who wished to collaborate with the popular regime fought to refute the image that people had of them, arguing their conformity to the reigning model in the mercantile society. In the princely and courtly context of the modern period, the “negative privileges” of the old magnates changed in meaning. Becoming positive, they helped to constitute a new group enclosed within its specific characteristics, a minority to be sure, but not an imposed one: a consensual minority.

⁴² Boutier, *Anatomie d'une noblesse*, ch. 1.

⁴³ L. Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists, 1390–1460*. (Princeton, 1963), 217–8 (with minor errors); Brucker, *Florentine Politics*, 383n.