In 1923 in the *American Historical Review*, Charles Homer Haskins published an assessment of American scholarship in European history. One of the early PhDs in history from Johns Hopkins, Haskins had undertaken post-doctoral work at Paris and Berlin, taught at Wisconsin and Harvard, employed his knowledge of medieval history to help convince Woodrow Wilson to support the creation of what would become Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, founded the Medieval Academy of America, and served as dean of the Graduate School at Harvard. He was the premier Europeanist among the first generation of professional historians in the United States. Haskins was keenly aware of the anomalous position of an American working in European history, of both the nationalistic impulses that directed most historical research toward the United States and the differences of identity that kept the American scholar at a distance from Europeans. He endeavored to convince his compatriots that “European history is of profound importance to Americans” and to declare intellectual independence by raising scholarly standards in the New World without embracing imported European ideologies. “Shall we participate fully and directly in all phases of the historical activity of our time, collecting and sifting the sources for ourselves, making our own generalizations and interpretations, contributing freely of our thought as well as of our labor to the general advancement of historical knowledge and historical understanding? The question concerns the future of American scholarship, its dignity, its independence, its creative power.”

Haskins fought indifference to his endeavors from those who wanted to leave the bitter memories of an oppressive Europe behind, but he himself partook of a quaintly Protestant American conception of European history that sweetened the virile achievements of Northern Europeans, especially the Norman conquerors. He exemplified the peculiarly American scholarly complex, overtly manifest as the grandiose notion that Americans could somehow tidy up the intellectual space so

1 Charles H. Haskins, “European History and American Scholarship,” *AHR*, 28 (1923): 215–27. I wish to thank William Monter and John Martin for their criticisms of earlier versions of this article and Lynn Schibeci for her assistance in compiling the figures for Tables 1 and 2.


3 Nine out of ten PhD dissertations written during the 1880s and 1890s were in U.S. history, and even Haskins wrote his on an American topic. John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (1965; Baltimore, Md., 1983), 37.

long cluttered by ideological differences among Europeans, a notion that hid, perhaps, the secret awkwardness of the provincial intellectual, that furtive wavering between a defensive superiority and feelings of inferiority, born of the presumed inadequacies of American archives and education in European eyes. Haskins’s triad of concerns about the future of American scholarship—"its dignity, its independence, its creative power"—spoke to what we would now figure as a tension in the construction of identity, to the problem of knowing an Other, whether cast as an indulgent cultural parent, a naughty combative sibling, or a strangely distant foreigner.

What was true of European history in general has been especially true of Italian Renaissance history in particular. Why should Americans study it? The most common answer has been that the experience of the educated-in-the-classics, civic-minded, self-governing citizens of Renaissance Italy spoke a message that Americans can best understand, a message about the ideological and institutional underpinnings of republics. That answer has been codified in that curious American curricular artifact, the Western Civilization course, first developed during the decade surrounding World War I and relentlessly promoted by James Harvey Robinson to provide a “usable past” for Americans who had been suddenly jerked out of their provincial isolation by the events of the twentieth century. In the great drama of Western Civilization, the Italian Renaissance formed Scene One of the turbulent Act Three, “The Modern World,” which reached its climactic and final moment with the United States as the dominant world power. As this familiar answer has become less tenable in recent decades, some have gone so far as to erase it entirely by reinterpreting fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italian culture as tethered to either the distant Middle Ages or the primitive Mediterranean village described by anthropologists, a move that defamiliarizes the Renaissance, making it seem alien to contemporary sensibilities. From this point of view, the Renaissance becomes a playground for postmodernists, a mental world of signs disconnected from signification; a social space of ambiguous, disharmonious practices; and a time of oligarchs and princes whose authority derived solely from their self-representations.

It is not my intention to write the history of Italian Renaissance historiography in the United States, which has been ably traced by Anthony Molho, but to juxtapose generations of historians, principally the founding generation active in the decades immediately following the inauguration of the AHR in 1895 with the most recent ones, which have enormously expanded the field under the influence of the great academic émigrés from Central Europe and, more recently, the influence of the new questions of social and cultural history. Given the modest size of the first generation of professional historians in the United States, it is
surprising that Italian Renaissance studies had much of a place in their efforts. When the American Historical Association was organized in 1884, there were only fifteen professors and five assistant professors in the entire country who devoted themselves exclusively to teaching history, only five or six of these pursued serious scholarly research, and only about thirty graduate students were enrolled in all the universities that granted higher degrees. Although it is hard to imagine that any period of Italian history could occupy many in this tiny group of historians, as early as 1896 Haskins called for the establishment of an American School of Historical Studies in Rome to provide a research base for Americans to exploit the Vatican and other archives and libraries in Italy. (Even the Europhilic Haskins felt the need to justify such a school by pointing out how useful the Vatican collections would be for the study of American history.)

By the end of World War I, the situation was little changed: no American spent extensive research time in an Italian archive, and the only coherent strain of American interest in medieval and Renaissance Italy was literary, chiefly in Dante and Petrarch. In his review of American scholarship on Europe, Haskins noted sporadic efforts for Siena, Genoa, and Norman Sicily, but he pointedly ignored William Roscoe Thayer’s Short History of Venice (1908) even as he praised Thayer’s biography of Cavour. Renaissance art history was largely confined to non-academic connoisseurship under the powerful guidance of the expatriate Bernard Berenson.

Unpublished sources in the United States were few. The founding generation completely ignored the most extensive collection of Italian historical manuscripts in the United States, owned by Syracuse University, even though the library had

---


TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AHR Articles, 1895–1994, Total Number of Articles by Subject*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Medieval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Continental Renaissance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Protestant Reformation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. English to 1660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Enlightenment/French Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Modern Italian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The definition of the subject of an article has been taken from the title, and when an article covers more than one field it has been counted more than once.

been put together by the most famous historian of the age, Leopold von Ranke, whom the AHA had elected at its second annual meeting in 1885 as its sole honorary member.12 Given this situation, the quantity of work produced by the first generation is indeed noteworthy. The articles published in the American Historical Review over the past century provide a crude measure of the interests of American historians in the various periods of European history. Articles dealing with some aspect of the Continental Renaissance, in which Italy predominates, have seldom been as numerous as those in medieval history, English history to 1660, or the Enlightenment and French revolutionary periods, but there have been about twice as many on the Renaissance as on the Protestant Reformation or modern Italy (see Table 1). With the domination of Protestantism in American life and the overtly anti-Catholic tone to much turn-of-the-century historical writing, one would not expect a preponderance of articles on the Renaissance over the Reformation, but this fact probably points to the awkwardness of a national historical association devoting publishing space to religious topics and the desire of the professionals who presided over the AHR to avoid sectarian wrangling.13 The distribution of the subjects of articles over time also shows in a


13 Congress granted a charter to the American Historical Association in 1889, which put it under the supervision of the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and obliged Congress to pay for the printing of the Annual Reports of the association. Congress was loath to use tax monies to support the discussion of any aspect of Christianity, and the possibility of running afoul of Congress meant that when the AHR was founded in 1895, it was kept legally independent of the AHA. Jameson, “American Historical Association,” 13–17. The AHA program committee in 1901 resisted accepting “so controverted a field as the Reformation” for the annual meeting. Novick, That Noble Dream, 58. Following Leonard Krieger’s estimation, Novick argues that before World War II most of the American scholarship in modern European history was clustered in the Reformation and the French
rough way changes in the interests of American Europeanists (see Table 2). During the first two decades of the journal, English history far eclipsed all other contenders, with medieval history, assiduously promoted by Haskins at Harvard, a distant second. Renaissance studies, however, claimed a respectable place, with some sixteen articles and numerous reviews appearing in the first twenty years of the journal. After World War I, interest in Renaissance topics plummeted and virtually disappeared from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s. A second renaissance of the Renaissance materialized during the 1970s, a resurgence of interest so extensive that during the last twenty years articles on the Continental Renaissance have exceeded even Tudor-Stuart history, once the mainstay of early modern historiography. Comparing the generation of a century ago with recent ones thus offers an opportunity to evaluate the two reigning moments of American interest in Renaissance Italy.

Quantity of scholarly production aside, the important issues derive from other questions: What have Americans found when they looked at the Renaissance? What intellectual purposes do these findings serve? What are the continuities and discontinuities? Even the founding editor of the AHR, J. Franklin Jameson, admitted that in its early years the journal published mostly “second class work,” which amounted to historical bricks accumulated without any vision of an architectural plan for their final assembly; but, in his view, building blocks such as these would eventually find their architect and add up to definitive truths.14 My impression of the work on the Italian Renaissance is rather different. Most noticeable is not so much the slow accumulation of solidly researched, if intellectually mediocre, articles as the decided imbalance between pieces that read like a paper for a Berlin seminar, such as George L. Burr’s comment on how fifteenth-century Italian humanists had coined the term “Middle Ages,” and those that strain to venture sweepingly grand historical claims, such as Louise Ropes Loomis’s attempt to test the hypothesis that “the revival of the study of the classical literatures, in particular of the Greek language and the Greek writers, which marked the opening of the [fifteenth] century, supplied the needed Revolution, the former “often narrowly sectarian” (177). This fact makes the relative absence of articles on the Protestant Reformation in the AHR even more striking.

14 Quoted in Novick, That Noble Dream, 55–56. Architectural metaphors were popular among the first generation—Ranke himself called his sources his lumber—indicating a goal of building a lasting historical edifice rather than participating in an ongoing historical dialogue.
stimulus to the Italian intellect and set it free forever from the bondage of
teleological ignorance and superstition; in short, that out of the revival of Greek
grew the Italian Renaissance.”15 Loomis boldly tested this proposition, which she
found lacking, without any evident knowledge of Greek, but she hardly failed to
ask large questions about the architecture of history.

The strongest trend in erecting grand historical schemes, however, had
American democratic institutions built on the foundations of ancient and
Renaissance Italy, and so overwhelming is the complacency in some of these
pieces that it is hard to tell whether America or Italy is gaining luster from the
association. Molho has noted how the premier historians working in Italy at the
time—Benedetto Croce, Carlo Cipolla, Gaetano Salvemini, Pasquale Villari—and,
one could add, the many fine local historians from Friuli to Sicily, failed to attract
the notice of the AHR.16 Other than William Roscoe Thayer, who lacked a PhD
and never obtained a university professorship but who knew Italy and Italian well,
American historians with professional contacts in Italy seem to have been few. At
the 1904 AHA annual meeting, the classicist Ettore Pais of the University of Naples
discussed the possibilities for employing the methods of the German historians
among the historical sources in Italy. Tailoring his comments to his audience, he
encouraged American historians to work in Italy: “[B]ecause of the similarity
between the character and the history of modern America and those of ancient
Rome, American scholars are especially called upon to study and interpret Roman
life and history.”17 In an AHR review of a book on Lorenzo de’ Medici, James-
Harvey Robinson made Renaissance history relevant by comparing the political
“boss” in fifteenth-century Italy to nineteenth-century America.18 Other pieces
treated the apocryphal Venetian voyages of discovery to America and the
Vespuccian origins of the name America.19 A touristic summary of the history of
San Marino begins with the injunction, “the Republic of San Marino, the oldest
and smallest in the world, deserves on both these grounds the attention of
Americans,” apparently for the cautionary and yet heroic tale it provided of the
vagaries of republican liberty.20 Italy’s history was thus transformed into a subset
of America’s history.

A small group of early AHR articles, which a specialist in Renaissance Italy today
would certainly recognize as serious professional work, constituted the stirrings of
a compelling intellectual moment in the history of republicanism, a preoccupa-

Loomis, “The Greek Renaissance in Italy,” AHR, 13 (1908): 246–58. In a similar vein, Ferdinand
Schevill [Schwill] reviewed James Harvey Robinson and Henry Winchester Rolfe’s edition of
Petrarch’s letters, stating, “the particular problem which the authors set themselves was the
presentation of the character of that man, Petrarch, who led the fight for the rehabilitation, among
the cramped society of the Middle Ages, of the liberating philosophy of the ancients.” AHR, 4 (1899):
514.

16 Molho, “Italian History in American Universities,” 211.

17 See the report on the meeting in Chicago, AHR, 10 (1905): 501.

18 Review of E. Armstrong, Lorenzo de’ Medici, and Florence in the Fifteenth Century, in AHR, 2 (1896):
134–35.

Zeno in the North Atlantic about the End of the Fourteenth Century and the Claim Founded Thereon to a Venetian
Discovery of America: A Criticism and an Indictment, in AHR, 4 (1899): 726–29; and Edward G. Bourne,
“The Naming of America,” AHR, 10 (1904): 41–51.

tion that in many ways undergirded much of the work of American italianisti until very recently. This American moment—or, as J. G. A. Pocock might have it, “Atlantic” moment—had two strains. One traced the genealogy of republican thought from Marsiglio of Padua (1270–1342) to Fra Paolo Sarpi (1552–1623). The other analyzed the political and institutional record of the Italian city-republics in a way that most obviously differentiated U.S. scholarship from its European, especially Italian, counterparts. Arthur M. Wolfson, a teacher at the De Witt Clinton High School in New York City, directly engaged the presumed connection between the institutions of late medieval Italy and modern America.

In all political communities where the franchise has been granted to any considerable part of the people the process of voting, of arriving at a decision on some controverted subject, has occupied no small part of the time of the constitution-makers. Every American, every Englishman knows, almost by intuition, what we mean by *viva voce* voting, by division, by the ballot ... Few men are aware that after the decline of the states of antiquity nearly all the forms of voting lay in abeyance for six or seven centuries, to be revived or rediscovered by the communes of northern Italy ... The present writer ... sees no reason to doubt that the revival of all forms of voting used in modern times is due to the activity of these towns of Italy.

Besides examining the technicalities of various forms of voting, Wolfson framed his analysis in terms clearly derived from American constitutional thought. It is true that medieval statutes betray a concern for refining voting procedures so as to prevent violence, but Wolfson Americanized these statutes by depicting them as attempts to guarantee the rights of minorities and to prevent “all sorts of interference with the full exercise of personal liberty,” a concept that did not exist in medieval or Renaissance Italy. The culmination of Wolfson’s history of voting was the Italian invention of the secret ballot, the presumed key to the success of American democracy.

Ferdinand Schevill, who became the most accomplished professional historian in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century specializing in medieval and Renaissance Italy, took his PhD at Freiburg in 1892 and taught for many years at the University of Chicago. Schevill framed his work as an investigation into “the constitutional evolution of the medieval communes of Italy,” which culminated in “an epoch of democratic experiments unparalleled in fervor and abundance of life, unless we travel back to the old city-states of Greece and Sicily.” Among Americans, Schevill had a matchless command of the


25 Under the spelling Schwill, “The Podesta of Siena,” *AHR*, 9 (1904): 247. His extensive bibliography includes *Siena, the Story of a Medieval Commune* (New York, 1909); *The First Century of Italian Humanism* (New York, 1928); *History of Florence from the Founding of the City through the Renaissance* (New York, 1936), republished as *Medieval and Renaissance Florence*, 2 vols. (New York,
sources, although he typically worked from published ones, and he insisted in Rankean fashion that history be "truth," taken from "scholars and historians in command of a method of investigation calculated to yield a full and satisfying knowledge." His transmutation of medieval merchants into capitalists and medieval statuti into constitutions betrayed, however, the same American anachronisms of his less sophisticated contemporaries. In his mature work from the late 1930s, he persisted with this formulation, organizing his widely read history of medieval and Renaissance Florence as a succession of beleaguered democracies that struggled against foreign tyrants for independence and native oligarchs for liberty.

One historian of the founding generation exhibited a different intellectual orientation. Inspired by knowledge of Italians rather than the rigors of the German historical seminar, William Roscoe Thayer paid attention to the continuities of Italian history by writing about themes from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, eschewing the periodization schemes of the Western Civilization model, even as he, too, Americanized Italian history. Described at a banquet in 1920 as the "Americano-Italianissimo" of Boston, Thayer first studied Italian in Siena as a student on the Grand Tour. He spent an extra year at Harvard beyond his BA, doing graduate study in literature and fine arts with Charles Eliot Norton and James Russell Lowell, an experience that left him with a lasting antipathy to Germanic theorizing. After toying with a teaching career, Thayer turned to the placid life of a gentleman scholar, writing poetry and literary essays, editing a magazine for Harvard alumni, producing histories of Italy and the United States, and serving as one of the last AHA presidents who was not academic. His vast bibliography includes the famous essay "Dante in America," studies of Giordano Bruno and Giacomo Leopardi, a history of Venice, a history of pre-unification Italy from 1814 to 1849, and a masterful biography of Count Cavour, whom Thayer considered the greatest statesman of the nineteenth century.

Thayer carried on a lifelong campaign against the baneful influences of...
Teutonic pedantry, especially its promotion of minute specializations and turgid writing among historians. In a letter in 1911 to Theodore Roosevelt, who had praised his biography of Cavour, Thayer wrote,

The historian in America today, who has any noble conception of his calling, is the least understood of artists: for the standard set by the history departments of our colleges is the Ph.D. thesis. Unless you write in that fashion, you can’t be a historian. It is as if the stone-cutters at the quarry should vote that no architects were needed for planning a building, or the paint-grinders should vote the Titians and Rembrandts out of existence.

In France, and (largely) in England too, this absurd notion about historians has passed out: but it clings on here, with other Teutonic barnacles . . . I fully expect to see the day—if I live ten or fifteen years longer—when even in our colleges history will take its proper place. From the beginning of time, there has been irreconcilable warfare between pedants—treadmill men—and those to whom life is, under whatever aspect, real.31

The postwar climate of 1919, the year Thayer served as president of the AHA, offered him the opportunity to transform his reservations about Germanic historiography into an all-out assault on German intellectual life. His Presidential Address, “Fallacies in History,” raged against the dehumanizing attributes of “the German method of writing history,” which he had been protesting for thirty years. This intemperate speech opened with an attack on German psychology as “a dangerous instrument to knowledge,” which along with German history had been unmasked by the war as one of the higher forms of deception. “I saw that any method which dehumanizes the subject—history—which should be the most human of all, because it deals entirely with human passions, and actions, and motives, and must be concrete, because men and women are not abstractions, was inevitably a wrong method. I saw, too, that the boasted impartiality of the Germans, was in many cases pure humbug.” In place of the Teutonic methods, Thayer called for a history that took account of emotions; “laid bare the moral basis of politics”; held to “a common, consecutive, public plot” rather than fragmented special studies; valued ideas above facts, interpretation above information; and most of all was “interesting.”32 The histories of Leopold von Ranke, Theodor Mommsen, and above all Heinrich von Treitschke stood before the bar charged with complicity in the diabolical plan of German imperialism.

It might be tempting to dismiss Thayer as a methodologically unsophisticated dilettante who failed the test of rigor in his use of sources, but a reading of Thayer’s histories suggests otherwise.33 His Short History of Venice, the first history of the city by an American, connected the political culture of the medieval

31 Hazen, Letters, 190–92. In a postscript, Thayer assured Roosevelt that he was completely in favor of thorough research. For Roosevelt’s similar views, see Higham, History, 7–8.

32 William Roscoe Thayer, “Fallacies in History,” AHR, 25 (1920): 179–90, quotes on 179–80, 186, 189, 190. Thayer’s vehemence against psychology may be especially revealing given that he admitted to experiencing a “serious nervous breakdown” in 1896, which then interrupted his work for four or five years. The symptoms were a “deep melancholia” accompanied by “twinges of hysteria.” Hazen, Letters, 90. It should also be pointed out that unlike many PhD specialists, who so admired German historiography but misunderstood it, Thayer spoke fluent German.

33 H. Stuart Hughes rejected Thayer on the grounds that he lacked critical judgment. Molho, “Italian History in American Universities,” 201–02.
Thayer sifted his evidence carefully, even though he relied on the expected published sources. For example, in discussing the famous conspiracy of Doge Marin Falier of 1354, Thayer suggested that the official account of the plot had been concocted to make it appear an isolated incident prompted by an old man’s wrath over a personal slight, in order to cover up what was, in fact, a serious attempt to subvert the republic. Thayer’s explanatory structure derived from a moralism rooted in American Protestantism, which led him when examining the crisis of the War of the League of Cambrai (1508–17) to look outside Venice for culprits rather than question the political will of the Venetian patriciate, the theme that has been developed by historians writing on the period today. The villain was, of course, the papacy: “Its double, the Roman Church, had gone bankrupt, through its fatal separation of conduct from religion, making piety to consist in performing arbitrary clerical rules instead of in leading a good life.” Venice’s very strength aroused the jealousy of others, and its fortitude in its conduct of affairs reminded Thayer of Britain’s wars in India: “Monarchs and politicians were amazed by the solidarity of her [Venice’s] government, which they sought to equal, only to find that the secret lay neither in the despotism, nor craft, nor hosts of hirelings, nor extensive dominions: these might bring ascendancy for a season or a lifetime, but not that continuous transmission of vigor which made Venice unique.” The lesson Thayer drew for his readers spoke to the fears of Americans about the need to sustain national vitality against the jealous rage of barbarous nations.

Although Venice was [the] creation of one of the most practical race of men the world has seen,—of men who as merchants and empire-builders rank with the English; of men who for enterprise and for blending genuine piety with business shrewdness resemble the Yankees of earlier days; of men who devised a masculine form of government in which

34 Thayer closed his narrative by explicitly linking the cowardly fall of the republic in 1797 with the heroic revolutionaries of 1848–1849 under Daniele Manin. Short History of Venice, 317.

35 Nevertheless, Thayer did not shrink from employing a standard of poetic truth as a measure of the record: “Faliero’s penitence on his way to execution sounds less natural than the curses which Byron makes him utter. And yet the love of Venice was so mighty in the hearts of the Venetians, that it may have moved even Faliero to bless her before she punished him.” Thayer, Short History of Venice, 133. The standard scholarly treatment of the conspiracy in Thayer’s time would have been Vittorio Lazzarini, Marino Faliero: La congiura (Venice, 1897), also in Archivio Veneto, 13 (1897): 5–107, 277–374, which was reviewed in the AHR, 3 (1898): 708–09 by Ferdinand Schevill [Schwill].

Thayer echoes Lazzarini’s view that a proper explanation should look beyond the motive of personal revenge, but Thayer does not explore, as does Lazzarini, the hypothesis that Falier’s models were the mainland despots of Padua, Milan, and Verona. Thayer’s preference for the poet Byron over the historian Lazzarini as his guide to Falier’s emotions may be making a slighting reference to Schevill’s comment in his review that Lazzarini had rescued Falier “from the nebular realm of Byronism.” Of course, Schevill, more than any other American historian, represented the influence of German scholarship on Italian history, the tendency Thayer so despised.

36 The principal source of the new interpretation is Girolamo Priuli, I diarii, Arturo Segre, et al., eds., in Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, vol. 24, 2d edn. (Città di Castello, 1912). The earlier edition from 1738, which was the only one available to Thayer, did not include the Cambrai years. For contemporary interpretations, see William J. Bouwsma, Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty: Renaissance Values in the Age of the Counter Reformation (Berkeley, Calif., 1968), 95–161; Felix Gilbert, “Venice in the Crisis of the League of Cambrai,” in Renaissance Venice, J. R. Hale, ed. (London, 1973), 274–92; Robert Finlay, Politics in Renaissance Venice (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980), passim; and Donald E. Queller, The Venetian Patriciate: Reality versus Myth (Urbana, Ill., 1986), passim.

37 Thayer, Short History of Venice, 193.

38 Thayer, Short History of Venice, 195.
reason controlled every joint, leaving no play to emotion,—yet we think of her as feminine, and the fascination which she has exerted above all other cities is truly a woman’s fascination.\(^{39}\)

Thayer’s curious shift in the gendered construction of Venice sprang from the tension between, on the one hand, the long tradition of representing the republic as serenely feminine in contrast to the surrounding principalities that esteemed the aggression of the warrior-knight and, on the other, his compulsive need to bring Venice into a republican tradition of Anglo-American fashioning that required citizens to exhibit the masculine qualities of virtù. This usually suppressed, gendered tension in Italian Renaissance historiography has persisted until recently, unmasked finally by the insights of feminist-inspired scholarship.

Schevill and Thayer, in particular, offer some illuminating glimpses into the possibilities and weaknesses of the American tradition of Italian historical studies, disclosing the strain between the Western Civilization periodization schemes and the continuity of urbanism in Italian history and revealing the impulse to Americanize the Italian experience of city-republics, one of those persistent symptoms of the wobbly intellectual identity of the American historian of Europe.\(^{40}\) Despite Schevill’s celebration of German historical methods and Thayer’s fears about their baneful influences, it must be admitted that the engagement of the first generation with Germanic scholarship was quite superficial.\(^{41}\) Some lacunae are surprising. Schevill’s historiographical introduction in his History of Florence completely ignores, for example, Jacob Burckhardt’s Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien (1860), and I have found no mention of Burckhardt in the AHR before 1939, when Wallace K. Ferguson summarized the assault of the German medievalists on the thesis.\(^{42}\) Perhaps Charles Homer Haskins’s domineering influence at Harvard, where medieval history reigned supreme, was to blame. The most widely read book of Haskins, which argued for the twelfth century as the crucible of modern thought and science, was in fact a concerted attack on the nineteenth-century conception of the Italian Renaissance.\(^{43}\)

What came to be distilled as the canonical interpretation of the Italian Renaissance was the Americanized version of it found in the Western Civilization course, which spread widely in American colleges and universities after World War I. All narrow, specialized concerns were subordinated to the progressive project of creating a “usable past” for Americans. As its indefatigable promoter, James Harvey Robinson, wrote, “only those considerations would properly find a place

\(^{39}\) Thayer, Short History of Venice, 318.

\(^{40}\) Anthony Molho has urged that “the overriding task of American Italianisti is to seek to recapture that sense of historical continuity which historians such as William Roscoe Thayer possessed at the turn of our century.” “Italian History in American Universities,” 222.

\(^{41}\) Compare Novick, That Noble Dream, 21-31.


\(^{43}\) Charles Homer Haskins, The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century (Cambridge, 1927). Haskins did not deny that there was a “Renaissance” in fifteenth-century Florence, but he wanted to create a greater sense of continuity between the twelfth and the fifteenth-century revivals of Latin learning (5-6).
which clearly served to forward the main purpose of seeing more and more distinctly how this, our present Western civilization, in which we have been born and are now immersed, has come about." 44 Italian history became fragmented in that scenario into three distinct moments: antiquity, when the humanism of the moral pagans and Roman law created the grounding for responsible citizenship, the Renaissance, when the city-republics renewed ancient values and anticipated the humanizing virtues of modern constitutions, and the Risorgimento, when liberal values finally triumphed. Frederic Chapin Lane, who bridged the gap between the founding generation who taught him and the current one, which includes several of his students, neatly summarized this interpretation in his Presidential Address to the AHA in 1965 at the height of the Cold War.

My thesis here is that republicanism, not capitalism, is the most distinctive and significant aspect of these Italian city-states; that republicanism gave to the civilization of Italy from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries its distinctive quality and very largely explains the intensity shown in imitating classical antiquity. The attempt to revive the culture of the ancient city-states strengthened in turn the republican ideal and contributed mightily to its triumph later in modern nations and primarily in our own. 45

Little had changed in this formulation from the generation of Wolfson, Schevill, and Thayer, but its unraveling was not far away. The students on the other side of the lectern in the late 1960s who later happened to become historians of Renaissance Italy lost confidence in this optimistic plot. Their answers to why Americans should study Renaissance Italy moved in entirely new and sometimes opposing directions.

A CENTURY AFTER THE FOUNDING GENERATION, what—to recall the concerns of Charles Homer Haskins—is the state of the dignity, independence, and creative power of American historians of Renaissance Italy? First, their dignity now seems assured. Nowhere else in the world does such a substantial portion of the

44 Cited by Allardyce, "Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course," 705. On the baneful effects of the Western Civilization construct on the study of Italian history, see Molho, "Italian History in American Universities," 205; and "Gli storici americani e il rinascimento italiano," 12-14.

45 Frederic Chapin Lane, "At the Roots of Republicanism," AHR, 71 (January 1966): 403, reprinted in Venice and History: The Collected Papers of Frederic C. Lane (Baltimore, Md., 1966), 520-39. Compare his "Medieval Political Ideas and the Venetian Constitution," in Venice and History, 285-308. A generally positive appraisal of Venetian republicanism also appears in Lane's Venice: A Maritime Republic (Baltimore, 1973), a book severely critiqued by Eric Cochrane and Julius Kirshner, "Deconstructing Lane's Venice," Journal of Modern History, 47 (1975): 321-34. Lane was the first American, however, to explore the archives thoroughly in his scholarship and to employ the essential criterion of evidence still in place today, and one should note that Lane did not usually present himself as a historian of the Renaissance but as an economic historian, trained by Haskins and Roland P. Usher at Harvard and Alfons Dopsch at Vienna. Lane was deeply influenced by the ardent turn toward economic history of the interwar years that also attracted his fellow worker in the Venetian archives, Fernand Braudel. Braudel wrote the foreword (v-xiii) to Venice and History, which also contains a Biographical Note (xv-xviii) on Lane's career. I believe the earliest example of extensive research by an American in an Italian archive for the Renaissance period is Lane's "Venetian Shipping during the Commercial Revolution," AHR, 38 (1933): 219-39, reprinted in Venice and History, 3-24. I have found one previous article in the AHR that exploits an archival source, but it is an amateur piece without any historiographical pretensions. Ginevra Niccolini di Camugliano, "A Medieval Florentine, His Family and His Possessions," AHR, 31 (1925): 1-19.
historical community devote itself to the study of foreign countries; in the departments of history of major universities in the United States, Europeanists outnumber Americanists, and a specialist in Renaissance Italy is usually considered necessary for a respectable graduate program. The many non-U.S. specialists in American departments of history, most of whom have no inherited identification with the society they study, have made the American historical culture remarkably cosmopolitan, if fragmented. In the United States, there are probably more specialists in the history of Renaissance Florence and Venice than there are in any other country, including Italy itself.

An astonishing academic infrastructure now exists that supports and promotes Italian Renaissance studies. Since the 1950s, the Fulbright-Hays Fellowships and other grants have made it possible for waves of graduate students to spend at least a year working in the many state archives of Italy, and in recent years specialists on Venice and the Veneto have been favored with financial support from the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation. The Archivio di Stato in Florence has become the principal locus of American historians in Italy, so much so that the closing of the old archive in 1987 and the removal of its collection to a new building aroused considerable nostalgia and even anxiety, especially among American italianisti. The stature of American research institutions in Italy now exceeds anything Charles Homer Haskins could have imagined a century ago, and there are at least 103 undergraduate university programs, forty-five in Florence alone, that have institutionalized the Grand Tour for the children of the American middle classes. In the United States, specialized research collections such as those at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., and the Newberry Library in

46 From the listings in the Directory of History Departments and Organizations in the United States and Canada, 19th edn., 1993–94, American Historical Association, Institutional Services Program (Washington, D.C., 1993), I have counted 489 specialists in U.S. history and 546 in European history at the following universities, which train large numbers of graduate students and are generally ranked among the best departments: Brandeis, Brown, Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, CUNY—Graduate School, Duke, Emory, Harvard, Illinois, Indiana, Johns Hopkins, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Northwestern, Pennsylvania, Princeton, Rochester, Rutgers, Stanford, Texas, UC—Berkeley, UCLA, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and Yale. All of these except Illinois, Minnesota, Rochester, and Yale list at least one specialist in Renaissance Italy, but the medievalist at Illinois actually works in late medieval and Renaissance Venetian history, and Yale has recently hired an assistant professor in the field. The figures are balanced in favor of American history only at CUNY, North Carolina, Rutgers, Texas, and Virginia.

47 Compare Novick, That Noble Dream, 470.

48 There are ninety-six U.S. subscribers (a group that includes predominantly historians but also art historians, literary scholars, musicologists, and others) to News on the Rialto: Newsletter for Studies in Venetian History, 16 (1995). Italy supports fifty subscribers and Great Britain thirty-seven. There is no similar source for information on the students of Florentine history, but American specialists on aspects of Florentine history and culture are certainly much more numerous than those who work on Venetian matters.


50 The most comprehensive listing of study abroad programs is Sara J. Steen, ed., Academic Year Abroad, 1995/1996 (New York, 1995), published annually by the Institute of International Education, but even it underestimates the number of programs abroad, many of which are put together by individual faculty members for their own students. The number of students and intensity of study in these programs vary widely from ten or twelve students who visit for a few weeks in the summer in many ad hoc programs to more than six hundred for a year at the Syracuse University Program in Florence.
Chicago cater to the interests of Italianists; there are some thirty-four regional conferences and university centers devoted to the Renaissance; and the Renaissance Society of America has about 2,500 members.\textsuperscript{51} The steady increase in high school Latin enrollments since 1977 indicates that there is still a substantial pool of prepared students from which future specialists might be recruited.\textsuperscript{52}

Haskins's second concern, the independence of the American scholars, raises a more complex and subtle question, given the extensive linkages between European and American historians that have multiplied since World War II. Members of the current generation are for the most part the intellectual children and grandchildren of the Central European émigrés who found a refuge in America during the 1930s and 1940s: Hans Baron, Ernst Cassirer, Felix Gilbert, Ernst Kantorowicz, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Theodor Mommsen, and Erwin Panofsky, who brought the academic traditions of Austria and Germany directly to the graduate seminars of American universities, as Nicolai Rubinstein and Ernst Gombrich did in Britain.\textsuperscript{53} The impress of this weighty group of exiles has been far deeper than the faint touch of Germanic scholarship that so disturbed William Roscoe Thayer in the earlier generation, and these German speakers altered American views about the Italian Renaissance even more than did the distinguished expatriates from fascist Italy, who mostly specialized in other periods.\textsuperscript{54}

The refugees from the Nazis transported to the English-speaking world the whole tradition of German scholarship on Renaissance Italy, which no longer survives as part of the history curriculum in Germany itself.\textsuperscript{55} Kristeller brought to Columbia the rigorous philological and philosophical training necessary to grapple with Latin humanist texts, creating a new American school of humanist studies, which deserves a more extensive treatment than is possible here, but Kristeller subordinated the study of humanism to the grander schema of the Western Civilization construct, an inclination that made his often highly technical work adaptable to American preconceptions.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{51} Directory of Members, the Renaissance Society of America, 1994, Supplement to Renaissance Quarterly, 47 (Winter 1994).
\textsuperscript{52} Between 1962 and 1976, high school Latin enrollments in the United States collapsed from 702,000 to 150,000. Since then, the student demand for Latin has gradually but consistently grown to the point that there is now a national shortage of qualified Latin teachers. Sally Davis, Latin in American Schools: Teaching the Ancient World (Atlanta, Ga., 1991), 13. I wish to thank William J. Ziobro, secretary-treasurer of the American Philological Association, for his kind assistance in helping me understand the state of Latin education today.
\textsuperscript{54} Gaetano Salvemini was a specialist in modern Italy but apparently did not train any PhD candidates during his fourteen years at Harvard. Molho, “Italian History in American Universities,” 212. Robert Lopez trained Italian specialists at Yale, but he was a medievalist. Although Arnaldo Momigliano’s interests and expertise were remarkably wide ranging, he was a classicist and spent most of his career in exile in Britain, only venturing to the University of Chicago as a visiting professor after his retirement from University College, London.
\textsuperscript{55} “The Renaissance occupies no space of its own in the history curriculum. If it is taught at all, it is owing to the private research interest of an individual instructor. Otherwise, it is subsumed under the Gestesgeschichte (intellectual history) of early modern Europe and labeled as humanism and the revival of antiquity,” Susan C. Karant-Nunn, “Humanism to the Fore: Renaissance Studies in Germany Today,” Renaissance Quarterly, 47 (1994): 931.
\textsuperscript{56} Compare Molho, “Gli storici americani,” 15. On Kristeller’s academic training and immigration to the United States, see Paul Oskar Kristeller and Margaret L. King, “Iter Kristellerianum: The
Felix Gilbert and Hans Baron in their own very different ways provided immensely attractive models for connecting intellectual and political history, models that made it possible to bring together the interests of the earlier generation of American historians in both republican thought and the political institutions of the Italian city-republics. These two scholars argued that the intellectual achievements of Leonardo Bruni, Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini, Gasparo Contarini, and a handful of lesser figures—as a group, the core thinkers in the history of Italian republicanism—fashioned and refashioned their political analyses, employed political and historical examples from antiquity, and struggled to create a theory of history in response to calamitous events that threatened the existence of the Florentine and Venetian republics. Gilbert's and Baron's histories created a marvelous reciprocity between on the one hand the travails of the Western democracies during World War II and the Cold War and on the other the Renaissance republics that defended themselves against the assaults of foreign tyrants. Gilbert's and Baron's work carefully constructed a delicate genealogy of thinkers and citizens who valued "free government" (governo libero) above all else and who sought to understand the political and historical conditions necessary to sustain it; but, in contrast to the Americanizing models of the first generation, the exiles shied away from facile comparisons between past and present. Their work flashed a powerful lure that attracted American scholars, because the émigrés respected the political languages and categories of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries while still privileging republicanism in what appeared to be a far more objective, historicized methodology than that previously available. Perhaps most remarkable is the fact that, unlike Kristeller, neither Gilbert nor Baron directly trained graduate students, Gilbert spending the bulk of his career at the Institute for Advanced Study and Baron at the Newberry Library. Their influence came from the power of their published work and their personal generosity to the young historians who managed to make their acquaintance.57

Gilbert and Baron employed two concepts, "republicanism" and "crisis," as devices for coupling political thought to historical events. For Gilbert, the critical


moment was “the crisis in the assumptions about political thinking” around 1500 when in Florence the generation of Machiavelli and Guicciardini struggled to understand, how in the aftermath of the collapse of the Medici regime, it was “possible to maintain a free government” and regain republican virtù.58 Gilbert argued that the attempt to answer this question by a group of Florentine citizen-intellectuals in the early years of the sixteenth century resulted in the invention of modern political thought.59 His interests were wide ranging, venturing into Venetian history, historiography, American constitutional thought and foreign policy, and twentieth-century European history. Baron, by contrast, confined most of his attention to the detailed explication of a single, remarkable idea: that about 1400, as the consequence of a crisis created by Milanese attempts to conquer the Florentine republic, a new type of humanism, which he labeled “civic humanism,” arose that “transcended in significance the history of Florence and of Renaissance Italy.” Civic humanism promoted active engagement in public life rather than scholarly or monastic isolation, it reinterpreted history in light of contemporary events, and it offered a new defense of the moderns against the ancients by valuing the vernacular as the language necessary for a socially engaged political discourse. Civic humanism, in short, “was the salt in the humanist contribution to the rise of the modern world.”60 The dissimilarities between these two looming figures were manifold: they differed by a century in the dating of the crucial crisis that precipitated modern thought, Gilbert’s reconstruction of the historical context was more painstaking than Baron’s, Baron’s reconstruction of the philological and textual tradition more crucial than Gilbert’s, and Gilbert never accepted Baron’s concept of civic humanism; but, together with Kristeller, they permanently altered the course of American studies of the Italian Renaissance.

The “civic” part of Baron’s thesis, in particular, inspired a generation of American historians of Italy, who began to reinterpret many odd corners of Renaissance political and social life as essentially civic in nature. The depth of Baron’s influence is deeply ironic, because he adapted far less well to the Anglophone academic world than did Gilbert or Kristeller. (Gilbert, in fact, produced some of his best work in American history.)61 As Riccardo Fubini has recently pointed out, Baron “was a scholar who remained obstinately attached to a bygone age” by translating the idea of Italian civic humanism from the German Bürgerhumanismus, which was adapted from the ideal of Bildung, the process of identity formation as a solid bourgeois and patriotic citizen through an educa-

58 Felix Gilbert, Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence (Princeton, N.J., 1965), 7, for the second quote where Gilbert is quoting from Machiavelli. The “crisis” is the subject of Chapter 3.
61 Felix Gilbert, To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy (Princeton, N.J., 1961).
tional curriculum built on the Greek and Latin classics. As old-fashioned as this ideology was in Cold War America, Baron’s adaptation of it to fifteenth-century Florence revitalized Burckhardt’s much discredited thesis and rescued the concept of the “Renaissance” from its medievalist detractors, preserving the republican construct so dear to American historians within the seemingly neutral guise of the “civic.”

A positive flood of English-language books appeared between the early 1960s and the early 1980s, which introduced many new themes to Renaissance studies but which chiefly consisted of a meticulous reconstruction of the political culture of the Italian city-states, Florence and Venice in particular, during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. The distinguished intellectual historian William J. Bouwsma adapted to sixteenth and seventeenth-century Venice a Baronian view of the relationship between threats to republican liberty and the articulation of republican thought, uncovering the historical circumstances that led Fra Paolo Sarpi to pen his great defense of republican liberty.

The civic construct spread into aspects of Italian urban history that Baron himself never imagined: historians have written about civic religion and the civic world in Florence, civic ritual in Venice, civic politics in Rome, and civic sculpture in Messina. The very plasticity of the civic construct, however, threatened to make its explanatory usefulness overly frangible, and the civic model has begun to crack, in part because it may have been more an artifact of the global conflicts of the mid-twentieth century than of Renaissance Italy.

A measure of the creativity of contemporary American scholarship—to turn to Haskins’s third concern—must appraise how, in responding to the work of the émigré historians, American Italianisti have refashioned the historiographical tradition and how they have struck out in new directions. Their desire to show how a fundamentally new political culture appeared in the Renaissance city-states of central and northern Italy has had numerous repercussions, most loudly in the general reinvigoration of the history of republican thought, especially in the

63 See Hans Baron, “The Limits of the Notion of ‘Renaissance Individualism’: Burckhardt after a Century,” in In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism, 2: 155–81.
64 Bouwsma, Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty.
hands of the grand synthetic theorists, J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner. Pocock has fulfilled what had long been the implicit promise of Italian Renaissance studies for the Anglophone world by laying out a precise genealogy of political thinkers from Leonardo Bruni to John Adams, demonstrating how the very act of thinking about republics demanded a special attitude toward history, an attitude that broke up the timeless continuity of Christian hierarchies into a series of discrete moments, "those periods of history at which republics had existed and which were worthy of attention, and those at which they had not and which consequently afforded nothing of value or authority to the present." Here was the Western Civilization construct of James Harvey Robinson rewritten with enormous heuristic force, a republican version of history, which has been composed around a series of luminous moments from ancient Athens through the Renaissance city-states, to the English civil war, and finally to the revolutionary American and French republics.

Much of what might be considered "normal" historiography, however, has pushed the republican construct into deep background, while retaining a proclivity for "civic" institutions in the republics of Florence and Venice. The result has been an unprecedented and stunning achievement, whatever the often unarticulated ideological impulses behind it. The institutional and political history of Florence has now been carefully reconstructed through an exceptional series of studies that reflect a common research agenda. These trace the evolution of the city-state from a faction-ridden and ungovernable commune to a guild republic to an oligarchic one, through the Medici domination of electoral politics and Savonarola's prophetic dictatorship from the pulpit to the changing regimes of the tense "Machiavellian moment" of the early sixteenth century, an often obscurely amorphous evolution during which the exercise of political power split away from the institutions of authority in a way that made it possible to observe the contingencies and ambiguities of public life—the necessary precondition for modern political thought and historiography. The combined North American–


68 Pocock, Machiavellian Moment, 54.

British–Australian effort that produced this body of historical work over the course of thirty years has reconstructed with great detail and subtlety the process of political transformation in that most documented of late medieval cities, a transformation that has been analyzed with more intellectual force than perhaps any other period in medieval or early modern history, with the possible exceptions of the English and French revolutionary eras.

A similarly ardent research campaign has engaged the social history of Florence and other towns, opening new questions unthought of in earlier generations. It was in social history that the civic construction of Italian history first began to show cracks. Due to the survival of the earliest ample cluster of private diaries (the famous ricordanze), the oldest extant tax-census (the catasto of 1427), and an incomparable quantity of documents from a variety of administrative, fiscal, judicial, and religious institutions, Florentine history offers unequaled opportunities for reconstructing household structures, social networks, and marriage alliances; for uncovering social relations among subaltern groups; and for capturing glimpses of the inner lives of common people. Unlike the work on Florentine political and intellectual history, however, Florentine social history reveals less obvious patterns of progressive transformation. Some economic structures and the institutionalization of charity may have anticipated modernity, but most other areas of social life did not.70 The teleologies of modernization just do not fit very well into the complex social realities of the fifteenth century: the progressive nuclearization of the family did not appear consistently in fifteenth-century Florence, nor did its workers display an enduring sense of class consciousness, nor did traditional patron-client relationships dissolve, nor did Florentines become more secular in their values, nor did they seem inclined to abandon ritual forms of behavior for more “rational” ones.71 Joan Kelly-Godol’s famous question,


71 On the household and family, see Goldthwaite, Private Wealth, who does see progressive nuclearization in a limited sample. Those who do not are Francis William Kent, Household and Lineage...
“Did women have a Renaissance?” has presented the most serious challenge to the masculinist assumptions of Italian civic history because, even though the answer is not entirely clear, merely posing it has had a deeply subversive effect.72

The consequence of this vast enterprise of empirical historical scholarship has been the exact opposite of what the nineteenth-century enthusiasts for historical positivism expected: the vision of firmly founded historical “truths” that would gain universal assent among the initiated professionals appears to have been a chimera rather than a prophecy. Answering even the basic questions, such as, “What was the Italian Renaissance of the fifteenth century and how did it happen?” generates explanatory epicycles, epicycles within epicycles, and delicately worded qualifications that make the phenomenon of the Renaissance or even of republicanism more elusive than ever.
The decentralization of Renaissance historiography away from Florence, so evident over the past twenty years, has also complicated the picture. The historical experiences of other cities not only fail to conform to the Florentine model but are not even easily compared to it. Once historians struggled out of the straitjacket of issues defined exclusively by the republican tradition, the political life and social composition of the other great republic, Venice, looked very different from Florence: more consistently oligarchic, more thoroughly institutionalized, more self-confidently complacent, more open to the artistic productions of women, less open to new men, less introspective, and yet possessing hidden dynamisms. Those who have ventured even farther afield of the great city-republics into other cities, such as Siena, Ferrara, Milan, Rome, Naples, Pescia, Pisa, Pistoia, Lucca, Poppi, Brescia, Vicenza, Padua, Rimini, and Udine, have found that the civic model did not always fit very well. In the course of the


British historians have tended to show greater interest in the lordships than the more republic-minded Americans. For example, see John Larner, The Lords of Romagna: Romagnol Society and the
past decade, as the shades of the great German castaways have begun to fade and
the superiority of American institutions becomes ever more doubtful, Anglo-
phone historiography has moved closer to Italian historiography than ever before.
Political history, in particular, has seen a transatlantic merging of interests, with
the Americans beginning to turn from their civic inclinations toward the Italians' 
focus on the evolution of regional states. The new history of state formation has
been oriented around issues such as the relationships between the center and the
periphery, feuding, fiscal politics, legal history, the institutional history of
church-state relations, and the culture and sociology of princely courts.76 Samuel
Cohn recently summarized the consequences of the collapse of the civic para-
digm: “[H]istorians can no longer speak of linear developments; centralization
can no longer simply be assimilated to modernity; and perhaps we must also ask
ourselves if it is appropriate, in this regard, to speak of modernity at all.”77

By the early 1980s, a crisis of confidence in the republican and civic enterprise
of Italian Renaissance historiography became evident, a crisis that opened creative
new approaches best exemplified by the work of Richard Trexler, who has entirely
reoriented the urban and religious history of Florence toward the social-
psychology of ritual behavior; Samuel Cohn, whose quantitative investigations of
various aspects of social and religious life have exploded old teleologies and
chronologies; and Guido Ruggiero, whose investigations of the illict have
restructured Renaissance history around the friction between public discourses
and private intimacies.78 Not only have historians of Italy, like those in other
fields, turned to new approaches inspired by the Annales School, ethnography,
cultural studies in literature, feminist historiography, and gay studies, but many of
them seem to have lost faith or perhaps interest in “The Renaissance.”79 One
symptom has been the burgeoning curiosity about microhistory, which had its
origins among Italian historians associated with the journal Quaderni storici but

---

76 On the regional states, see Giorgio Chittolini, “Cities, ‘City-States,’ and Regional States in
North-Central Italy,” Theory and Society, 18 (1989): 689–706; and Chittolini, “The Italian City-State
and Its Territory,” in City-States in Classical Antiquity and Medieval Italy, Anthony Molho, Kurt Raafflaub,
and Julia Emlen, eds. (Stuttgart, 1991), 589–602. James Grubb, however, wishes to retain the concept
of the Renaissance state for the fifteenth century. Firstborn of Venice, ix–xvi. For an example of a
near-complete merging of research interests, see Giorgio Chittolini, Anthony Molho, and Pierangelo
Schiera, eds., Origini dello Stato: Processi di formazione statale in Italia fra medioevo ed età moderna
(Bologna, 1994).

77 Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., “Razionalità e ‘civismo’ nella storia italiana della prima età moderna,” in
Chittolini, et al., Origini dello Stato, 177.

78 Trexler, Public Life in Renaissance Florence; Cohn, Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence; Cohn,
Death and Property in Siena; Cohn, Call of Remembrance and the Black Death; Guido Ruggiero, Violence in
Early Renaissance Venice (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980); Ruggiero, The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and
Sexuality in Renaissance Venice (New York, 1985); and Ruggiero, Binding Passions: Tales of Magic,

79 For an astutely prescient statement of the implications for Renaissance historiography of the
“collapse of the traditional dramatic organization of Western history,” see William J. Bouwsma, “The
Renaissance and the Drama of Western History,” AHR, 84 (February 1979): 1–15. Compare Anthony
which has stimulated several examples by Americans. The practice of microhistory attempts to abandon all teleological and anachronistic assumptions about the course of history in favor of the microscopic examination of a small group, a tightly circumscribed event, or an individual, with a goal of discovering elements of cultural or social practices that are invisible to the wide-angle lens of more macrohistorical techniques, especially quantitative ones. As Carlo Ginzburg, the noted Italian historian who now teaches at UCLA, has remarked, “anachronism is a kind of conscious or unconscious will to impose your own values and also your own existence on people. So in some way, philology is also related to a kind of respect for the dead.” Respecting dead ways of thinking and acting, which has been translated into treating fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italian life as alien to the present as Siberian shamanism, assaults the very foundations of modernization theories, the Western Civilization construct, and the Americanizing of Italian history. Even without employing a specifically microhistorical approach, several scholars have seen that the vast criminal and inquisitorial archives in Italy are best suited for ethnographic history, especially because they offer transcriptions of the testimony of unlettered persons, illustrate the institutional relationships between elites and non-elites, and unravel the constitutive practices of social life.

The Renaissance lingers on in the historiography but often signifies little more than a chronological tag, except in the history of thought and the arts, where it still seems to have heuristic value. Many new areas remain to be explored, especially in the Mezzogiorno, but the critical lacunae are perhaps less a product of geographical preferences than limits of imagination, especially given the magnificent possibilities offered by the Italian archives. Until very recently, historians of gender have ignored what is by far the largest repository of records by and about women to be found anywhere for the pre-modern period, the archives of the suppressed convents. Although ecological politics had its origins in the United States and ecological histories of North America are now a commonplace, English-speaking Italianisti have completely passed over the topic, despite the fact that the Archivio di Stato in Venice houses the voluminous records of several magistracies that were devoted to the regulation of waterways, forests,
and common lands. But most of all, historians have ignored what the Western Civilization construct and the civic model taught them to ignore, especially the vast majority of the population who lived outside of cities and towns, the peasants. Unlike for France, England, Germany, and even Scandinavia, rural history for Italy is in a decidedly primitive state. With the relatively high levels of literacy in Italy and the penetration of urban administrations into the countryside, a rich rural history of Italy is eminently possible, and—to paraphrase Marc Bloch—good historians must be willing to abandon the archives occasionally and get their boots dirty.

In many ways, the current generation of American historians of Italy is in an enviable position, one that would be gratifying to Charles Homer Haskins and others of his generation who strove to build the foundations for a vibrant professional community of European historians in the United States. Dignity seems guaranteed. Even as financial support begins to seem Spartan when compared to past decades, a solid institutional foundation has secured an American presence in Italian historical scholarship. And independence has been won. Graduate education in North America has become sufficiently rigorous and the number of influential books by Americans translated into French and Italian has been large enough that U.S. scholarship is now an equal partner in an international historical dialogue, so much so that most Italian scholars are thoroughly conversant with the American historical community. The kinds of contacts that once only William Roscoe Thayer had with Italian colleagues are now common, and national identity has become far less of a consequential issue in international scholarly exchanges. But are we sustaining our creative power? This most important question challenges the current generation to emulate the ingenuity of our predecessors if not their conclusions, to rid ourselves, finally, of the battered and scratched Anglo-German-American spectacles of the republican and civic constructs, to envision grand sweeps of history without slipping on the blinkers of anachronistic models, to replace a narrow parochialism with comparative methods, as difficult as they are to formulate, to imagine how to exploit the archives to answer new questions, and most of all to remember that cranky warning from the founder of Italian historiography in America, William Roscoe Thayer, who implored us to shun the mindless treadmills that can wear out the intellectual vitality of a field.


86 Among the exceptions to this trend in English are Frank McArdle, Altopascio: A Study in Tuscan Rural Society, 1587-1784 (Cambridge, 1978); Trevor Dean and Chris Wickham, eds., City and Countryside in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Essays Presented to Philip Jones (London, 1990); and Muir, Mad Blood Stirring. Italian historians have been much more adventurous in these areas. See the special issues devoted to aspects of agrarian and resource history in Quaderni storici, 65 (1987); 79 (1992); 81 (1992).