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Postscript: charismatic things and social transaction in Renaissance Italy

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In 1860, Jacob Burckhardt published his view, still influential today, of an artful, urban Italian Renaissance that launched Europe on its passage to modernity. A lively revisionary scholarship has challenged Burckhardt on many points, but his famous formulae still resonate: the state as work of art; the development of the individual; the discovery of the world and of man.[1] Although we now know that Italy did not alone invent the new age, it was for many years a trendsetter, especially in the domains of cultural production at the centre of this collection of essays. Republican and princely polities alike framed these developments, but, whoever ruled, Italy's unusually intense urbanization (paired with that in another well-spring of culture in the Low Countries) fostered innovation. In Renaissance cities, people and groups invested heavily in special actions, objects and places – charismatic cultural products empowered by holiness, beauty, fame and ingenuity – that fortified solidarity and resilience in uncertain times. This essay collection addresses a conjunction of urban culture and society distinctive to Renaissance Italy: an array of encounters of artifacts with ways of living in community.

Together, the collection resoundingly asserts the centrality of material culture to Italian Renaissance life. Even today, our things now cheapened by profusion, objects retain rich and complex meanings. Lecturing on his current study of the household goods of a contemporary Wisconsin family, the anthropologist William Christian Jr reports the layered stories attached to ordinary objects, and the elaborate calculations and rituals that govern what one shows, hides, discards, keeps, lends or gives as gifts. Christian's research suggests the subtlety, anywhere, of the psychological and ceremonial connections between material culture and community.[2] Yet the objects that figure in these articles were not everyday: no barrels, razors, fishnets, or cooking pots. Rather, the articles discuss things specifically

[1] J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York, 1958; original publication in German, 1860).
[2] This work of Christian's is not to our knowledge yet in print. See also D. Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (London, 2008).

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wrought and deployed to carry social and symbolic power, so we call them 'charismatic'. Special objects, whether holy, precious or strange, had long had prestige for medieval Europeans. In Renaissance Italy that charisma came to attach to many more forms of production and consumption. New breeds of connoisseurs sought out the beautiful, the refined, the ingenious, the esoteric, in works both classical and new. Renowned for its outpouring of handsome art, the period produced not only the great paintings, sculpture and architecture that we most treasure today, but also ceramics and glass, textiles and leatherwork, metal wares and armour, fine carpentry and intaglio. These latter creations, though less valued in our eyes, were to Renaissance admirers as precious as high art. Also much prized were the ephemeral, now elusive, pageants and rituals, sacred and civic, the performances of music, dance and theatre that modern scholars piece together from fragmentary clues culled from sketches, verbal descriptions, and cryptic early notations for sound and movement. Like modern Europeans, but in physical and human environments that were far less stable, Renaissance Italians strove to succeed – economically, politically and socially – and invested energy, intelligence and material resources in those quests. But, more than moderns, they also invested heavily in ceremonies and festivals, both broadly public and more narrowly socially corporate or familial. This extensive cultural production aimed not so much to secure money as to gain less tangible profits – salvation, prestige, fame and social solidarity.

Charismatic 'things' played a crucial, often intricate and sometimes contradictory role in the life of urban communities in Renaissance Italy. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, city residents, singly or in groups – elites, middlemen and even artisans – designed, commissioned, purchased, donated, borrowed, displayed, admired, envied and disparaged a great variety of potent and precious cultural products. In this era, an Italian city understood itself both as one community – especially when confronted by other cities – and as congeries of smaller, often intermittently antagonistic, communities based on neighbourhood, nation or region, religion, rank, occupation and family. Special objects or performances typically served to mark these groupings and to attract prestige for them and their members. Besides, we argue here in anthropological mode, charismatic goods, beyond their materiality, created a rich social and symbolic penumbra in which transpired a host of further exchanges among owners, guardians and beholders of the rare and beautiful. By generating assorted credits, debts and obligations, these transactions circulated capital not only aesthetic, but also moral, social and political. These in turn thickened the networks that helped to glue the city together. Some of these exchanges were positive in tone and content, but far from all of them, for the communal life of Italian cities was agonistic, laced with faction, rivalry and grudge. Community, as we see in these essays, was about striving, competition and uncertainty as well as about solidarity and succour.

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Besides the many cultural products at the centre of this set of articles were the individuals and groups who made, possessed and consumed them. The term 'community' conjures both the people and the social processes they enacted. The concept, rich but slippery, holds a contentious place within social theory. A recent anthropological survey reports a tally of 94 definitions, far from all compatible.[3] 'Community', as used by social scientists and by the essays here, invokes at least four domains of human experience: social structures and groupings; processes and transactions; ideologies and values; identities and sentiments. Unsurprisingly, a category lacking a clear centre of its own also struggles to define the boundaries that distinguish one community from another. Yet, even if permeable or contested, borders still do matter. Among its several meanings, the metaphor of boundaries suggests space, or in this collection's term 'location', both physical and social.

The ideological framing of 'community' has created further problems. Etymologically, its roots point to commonality. Nonetheless, it is a mistake to see communities, especially urban ones, as either unitary or homogeneous. While for some purposes the city may be seen as a central 'home-place' or *patria*, it is at the same time made of many smaller groupings that may also be called communities, each claiming for its own ends shared identities, privileges or obligations that distinguish it from other city dwellers. In addition, from the time of the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, 'community' (Gemeinschaft) has been constructed as cosy, face-to-face and organic, up against the impersonal, rational and far less hospitable 'society' (Gesellschaft). But, in fact, communities, like families, are often rife with rivalry, envy and stress. And they may survive, indeed thrive and serve their members, no more by harmony than by discord. These problems have led some social scientists to reject the term 'community' altogether.[4] On the other hand, used flexibly, the concept remains useful for interrogating the behaviour and identities of collectivities of different scales.

To Burckhardt's disciples the focus in this collection on community – not the individual – may seem paradoxical. Nonetheless, recent scholarship, such as John Martin's *Myths of Renaissance Individualism*, rejects the binary of heroic individual vs. constraining collectivity and urges attention to the ways that all Renaissance individuals, including the great men, lived with and through communities.[5] In the countryside, where most Italians lived, discerning communities was, for them as for us, comparatively simple. There the Latin term, *communitas*, often designated villages in

[3] N. Rapport and J. Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (Milton Park, 2007), 72 (citing G. Hillery, Jr, 'Definitions of community: areas of agreement', *Rural Sociology*, 20 (1955), 111–22).

[4] M. Silverman and P. H. Gulliver, 'Historical anthropology and the ethnographic tradition', in M. Silverman and P. Gulliver (eds.), *Approaching the Past* (New York, 1992), 25 and 64 n. 74.

[5] J. J. Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (New York, 2004).

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their corporate capacity as legal agents capable of contract. Invoking this vocabulary, a *paese* used its seal, bought or transferred property, elected headmen or petitioned states or overlords. But a village was also a community in modes far more than merely legal. It had its site and lands, a recognized place. Although villagers were never socially or economically homogeneous, residents were knit together in that location by dense webs of negotiation and exchange, by bonds of amity, rivalry and grudge, as well as by history, by shared values, traditions and usages, and by loyalty and felt identity. With layers of transactions coinciding in one place and population, even with blurring at the edges, the rural community was and is not hard to spot.

Pre-modern cities, in contrast, were complexes of more and less overlapping communities. Though Renaissance Italy, like other early modern societies, strove for order and embraced hierarchy, its urban residents often struggled with shortages, and violence, and disarray. Although these cities could boast gradually maturing states and economies, by modern standards many institutions were unreliable or out of reach. The unpredictability, and fallibility, of a larger political order encouraged city dwellers to turn for every sort of help to other social groupings. These urban communities varied enormously in their size, power, scope of interest, intensity of action and density of connections. Some, formalized as institutions like governmental councils, professional corporations or religious congregations, were easily demarcated and legibly arranged in ladders of prestige and power. Others, less formal, occupied urban space and time in less conspicuous, less readily stratified ways. Through membership in an array of communities, people not only prayed and donated for next-worldly salvation, but also bid for this-worldly providence – peace, local glory, access to work, care in sickness, help in hard times.

City communities also differed because urban populations were larger, more heterogeneous and always in flux. As magnets for migration, Renaissance cities gathered people who did not share the habits, mostly stable bonds – and enmities – that shaped village experience. Urbanites – the native born as well as the newcomers – knew and depended on the practices of community, but life in the city demanded the active building and revising of those alliances. For men and women in need of self-help, the city offered more choices, more flexibility, but also less clarity and continuity. Consider some examples: guilds and confraternities offered formal collegiality. Occupation created affinities; merchants met with merchants, soldiers with soldiers, or thieves with thieves. The city's many foreigners often congregated with fellow countrymen. Neighbourhood or parish, at once a hodge-podge assemblage of residents in a common, more or less tightly bounded space and a putative moral community where prayers and gossip converged, provided a setting for social bonding. In the city community could mean many things, and most persons belonged to more than one.

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The great utility of community for Italian city-dwellers has led some scholars to overstate its powers. Troubled by the spectre of disintegrating civic culture in twentieth-century North America, Robert Putnam famously proposed the North and Central Italian *communi* of the middle ages as enduring models of social cohesion and well-being. He descried in their communal workings an explanation also for the longstanding disparity between the bustling, progressive urban centres of Tuscany, Lombardy and the Veneto, and the dolorous backwardness of the mostly rural Mezzogiorno south of Rome.[6] A 2009 anthology of essays takes Putnam's reading of early Italy to task head on.[7] Rebuking his rosy assumption that in communities good will prevailed, critics point out how often early communes served as theatres of conflict, even of sanguinary strife.[8] Like Bedouin tribes, who laid aside internal feuds only when hostile tribes took up arms against them, as Edward Muir argues, communities usually paraded their internal love and unity only when pressured from without. Never were rites and protests of eternal harmony anything like the whole story.

To return, then, to charismatic things, in Renaissance Italy cultural production galvanized collective and individual action and enabled exchanges that tied people together. Most obviously, precious artifacts, by their presence or use, served as signs – more and less legible – of urban community. As Nevola's introduction highlights, charismatic art readily marked city spaces, and also special times. Laying claim to streets, bridges, palaces, churches, markets and gardens, a multitude of signifiers, many of them linked to families and communities, bedecked and emblazoned the early modern Italian city. In parallel, rituals, festivals, memorials and thanksgivings singled out many days on the cyclic calendars or in the longer life courses of collective and personal time. Many communities, broader and smaller, collaborated in these observances and drew from them catharsis in ways that engaged art. The effort and expense of these artful deployments attached members to communities at times more latent than manifest. Thus, the articles provide examples of professional alliances that were only sometimes explicit. The worshipful Florentine Biliemme of Rosenthal's article, gathering a constituency of social outsiders, clearly articulated its public identity. Though without formal rites of membership, it had a name, a topographic centre and calendared ritual. On the other hand, whatever community held together Furlotti's Roman antiquarians was altogether tacit, and largely functional; theirs was a network, strung

[6] R.D. Putnam with R. Leonardi and R.Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, 1994).

[7] N. Eckstein and N. Terpstra (eds.), *Sociability and its Discontents: Civil Society, Social Capital and their Alternatives in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2009).

[8] E. Muir, 'The sources of civil society in Italy', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 29 (1999), 379–406; T.V. Cohen, 'Communal thought, communal words, and communal rites in a sixteenth-century village rebellion', in Eckstein and Terpstra (eds.) *Sociability and its Discontents*, 23–50.

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among wider ganglia of owners, admirers, buyers, sellers, hunters, thieves and forgers of ancient objects. Similarly, social strata could be more and less sharply bounded and self-aware. The Roman civic nobility of Cafà's article was a self-conscious group, sharing a myth of antique descent, marrying among themselves, and feistily defending their political traditions against competing elites. Meanwhile, Hanke's grotto-building Genoese merchants or Hohti's *credenza*-filling Sienese artisans eschewed clear labels as they negotiated for better social position. These men sought to stand out within the communities to which they belonged, and to ally themselves, through taste and consumption, to their superiors.

At the same time as they tagged groups or limned boundaries, precious or beautiful things also enabled a form of communion that forged bonds through shared pleasure. The most basic social communion, in Italy as anywhere, was commensality, the sharing of food and drink, that relaxed bodies and disarmed ill feeling. Similarly, when, in public or private, Renaissance people marvelled together at a fine sculpture or relished a moving song, and expressed their common delight, they entered a moment of aesthetic communion that helped cement affinities and palliate the tensions of urban life.[9] Even when the experience itself did not last, memory could foster other enactments of belonging and good faith. Curiously lacking a word for shared enjoyment in the presence of the beautiful, English needs a term like 'co-aesthesis' to call attention to this social experience.

Shared pleasure in the beautiful and precious, however, could also engage a number of more subtle and sometimes more risky or costly social dynamics characteristic of the early modern world. There, charismatic goods circulated not only through buying and selling in an economic marketplace, but also through gift-giving, loans, hospitality and even theft. The gambits were many and they entangled participants in exchanges of capital – social, moral and political as well as economic. Mediated by the materials and by symbolic values, including those special ones attached to art, these transactions wove nearly everyone, up and down the social scale, into enduring webs of obligation and entitlement. Notably, early modern Europeans habitually courted debt. As their post-mortem inventories show, they were slow to balance books or cash in assets to cover their obligations. Rather, the whole urban economy was a vast web of interlocking credits, linking agents who could barely untangle them and seemed little inclined to try. Renata Ago, an historian of early modern Rome, and others, argue for an underlying rationality for such behaviour.[10] Outstanding credits – economic, but also social and political – created, maintained, and expressed ongoing relationships. They fostered wide networks of amply broadband reciprocities that distributed resources further and more fluidly than a stuttering, cash-poor economy could. The

[9] See also R. Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1982).
[10] R. Ago, *Economia barocca: mercato e istituzioni nella Roma del Seicento* (Rome, 1998).

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communities cobbled together with this socio-political glue helped make good the weakness of formal urban institutions.

Beauty, being fragile, created obligation and, hence, opportunity to weave social connections. Like the sacred, always at risk, the artful and the precious mobilized persons, and communities, to shield them from harm. As Mary Douglas argued, purity and danger are never far apart.[11] Beauty, likewise, because easily lost, broken or destroyed, set up a zone of danger. It had to be cosseted, shown circumspectly, shared prudently and sheltered zealously from assault and insult. Indeed, whenever factional, familial or personal conflict arose, fine things were the ready targets. Shaming rituals, more and less flamboyant, were far more likely to assail a handsome façade or portrait than to ransack the humdrum paraphernalia of daily life. An apt example was the woeful fate of the gold brocade of the Sienese ambassador to the court of Naples, as Jackson recounts it, rubbed by contemptuous courtiers until it frayed.

Another terrain for forging social bonds was hospitality, which engendered obligations and credits for both guests and hosts. In aesthetic hospitality, a host honoured chosen persons with special occasions of aesthetic communion that nurtured not just shared pleasure, but also reciprocity. An owner, patron or custodian could, as a generous mark of favour, display a precious thing to guests, and might also, as a further offering, reveal some of its arcana that he alone was privy to: its rare materials, its pedigree, its esoteric messages, its special powers to cure, to inform or to call on God. Receiving special knowledge and experience, beholders incurred diffuse obligation. They were expected to repay the gesture on the spot or soon after with expressions of delight and gratitude, but often that was not the end of the story. Like any gift, this exchange set in motion later gifts, in both directions, often of an entirely different nature. Thus, aesthetic hospitality helped feed alliances. We can imagine visitors to the villas of Bardati's French cardinals or the grottoes of the Genoese merchants contemplating how to repay their hosts.

Hospitality also bred risk for the hosts. Willingness to chance scorn is one of the many sacrificial gestures towards a guest. Guests might disdain the food, dismiss the service or deride the women's gowns, and they might also scorn the art. Inevitably, a person or community who displayed precious things to guests invited them to appraise, and perhaps snub, them. The Italian term, *stimare*, attached to a very common social, economic and legal practice. The word had a double meaning visible in its root but lost in English, which needs two words; it meant both to estimate and to esteem. Assessment always happened; approval was less to count on. Accordingly, not only individuals but also communities – families, guilds, corporations and whole towns – paraded their treasures as bids for approval, knowing that they ran risks. To expose one's charismatic goods thus functioned

[11] M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966).

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much like a gift; it was a sacrificial move inviting connection. Indeed, the beholder who failed to repay with appreciation or delight either bungled or, often wittingly, changed the rules of the exchange. An anxious host, buying precious goods, needed reassurance that their virtues were genuine and solid. The prosperous Stampa brothers of the Furlotti essay sold their services, as, among other things, professional *stimatori* who vouched for the antiques they brokered.

Especially in an agonistic culture like Renaissance Italy, even distrust or envy could have a role in establishing and sustaining productive social relations. To cultivate honour and reap prestige often meant active rivalry and even theft, symbolic as well as material. In an essay on late medieval Marseilles, provocatively titled 'Hatred as a social institution', Daniel Smail argued for the social utility of such hostile linkages.[12] Hatred, and hostility, both mobilized negotiations and helped to define the social circles within which persons mattered to one another. What held for hatred also held for the envy that charismatic things awakened. Like honour, envy's potency weighed most among people who shared a social milieu and who might there jostle for position. Therefore, one might regard communities as defined, to a degree, by the envies that circulated within them. Like admiration, its sour cousin envy recognized the value of charismatic goods, and by extension the virtue, even superiority, of their owners or guardians. Envy was thus welcome, but also posed risks, should it boil over into hostility. So the envied might be moved to appease the envious with gestures that acknowledged and reiterated their connection and so reknit community. In Jackson's article about sumptuary legislation, who really cared what gowns and sleeves Sienese wives donned for festive occasions? Not denizens of other towns, nor indeed the city's own labouring classes. Those interested were other wealthy wives, and their husbands. As in other cities, Sienese elites formed a community of envy and legislated meticulous decrees to stem and channel the sentiment. Sumptuary laws might promote distinctions, mandating bigger sleeves and bolder necklaces for richer wives, but they also muffled them, seeking to moderate expense and keeping all women of a given strata on fairly even sartorial footing. The legislation, as befitted community, both presumed envy and strove to channel it so as to reduce friction.

In sum, art and other charismatic things played a role in many social scripts, and marked and reinforced community in multiple ways. Let us finish with a splendidly complex example, Canguilhem's upscaled carnival songs, and try to extend his nuanced reading a bit further. Onto Florentine streets during Carnival, a performance space traditionally filled by popular *canti*, courtly musicians brought a display of new, highly refined *mascherate*. The bawdy sexual innuendos of the older artisans' songs were sublimated into metaphors of hunters and riders. The courtiers,

[12] D. Smail, 'Hatred as a social institution in late medieval society', *Speculum*, 76 (2001), 90–126.

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says Canguilhem, thus staked the aristocrats' claim to appropriate and rebrand the city. It took recondite knowledge to execute and decode these songs, just as it took expertise to appreciate Furlotti's Roman antiques. So, bonded in song, the performers used their special mastery to signal difference and superiority. But the story is more layered, as the courtiers also sang to and for other urban dwellers, whose shared pleasure and sense of belonging also counted. Throughout Italy and the early modern world, the powerful offered such pomps and parades to the people. Indeed, few moments better rallied a city than a good procession, sacred or secular: awe, piety, exaltation and shared thrill at beauty welded a throng of spectators – mismatched and stratified though they were – into something that, by any measure, we might call community. But these displays of elite artistry, as gifts, brought obligation, or at least aspired to enrol the beholders in a charismatic exchange: deference and loyalty for pleasure and a fancy of well-being. At the same time, the new Florentine songs were, for the lower classes, a gift less than fully welcome. Would the labourers not have enjoyed, and felt more empowered by, their old music? The situation points out well the complexity of analysis such a moment invites.

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