

Feud and Factions in Lombardy during the Italian wars*

As many of us know, factions were a fundamental part of the Italian political and social landscape for nearly three centuries, from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-sixteenth century. Broadly speaking, one of the main reasons for their extraordinary relevance as a form of political organisation over such a long period, was that they were able to create large scale networks between independent centres of political power. During the Middle Ages the communes had developed into city-states, and had established their control over the surrounding territories, to varying degrees. They were then able to retain a considerable degree of autonomy within the new regional states, which emerged between the thirteenth- and the fifteenth century and set the scene for a long-term Italian political framework which endured until the nineteenth century. The widespread factional language of the Guelfs and Ghibellines is in fact a heritage left by the communes to the later large-scale forms of political organisation, quite independent of their institutional form, whether principality or republic. The continuing presence of the Guelfs and the Ghibellines offered to a various range of political actors (from a local noble lineage to the kingdom of France) a powerful means of communication. When they eventually lost their political effectiveness after the end of the Italian wars, they nonetheless continued to be a point of reference in the political discourse and it is very surprising to me that many historians still dismiss at least two thirds of their life and presence on the Italian political scene, from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, as a nonsensical survival of meaningless labels, manipulated by local forces in pursuit of material goals.

I shall try today to define what we more or less mean when we use the word “faction” referring to a specific context, however large, that is early sixteenth-century Lombardy; when I say Lombardy, of course, I use the medieval meaning, which refers to a broader area than the present one, and includes for instance territories and towns south of the river Po which were – or had been until recent times – subject to the Duchy of Milan and during the Italian Wars were taken out of the Milanese influence by other powers, such as the Papal States. The problem I shall be focusing on is basically this: we more or less know what Lombard factions were and how they worked during the fifteenth century; were the old local patterns of political organization completely destabilized by the Wars or they proved resilient under that pressure? To try and give some answers I shall make a few examples where the connection between feud and faction as ways of managing the political conflict might be useful to understand. In other words, we will see that in our context a feud does not normally have the force to bring about a serious

* I publish here, as it is, the text of a paper I gave at the Sixteenth-century Society Conference (Geneva, 28-30 May 2009).

re-definition of the factional patterns; quite the opposite, a feud is likely to stem out of a factional enmity, although in different ways.

First of all, when we say “faction” referring to a political grouping in Renaissance Italy, this term might mean different things. A faction could for instance be a court lobby, say, the faction of the duchess. In this case, we are talking about informal groups (or cliques, or action-sets – as a sociologist would define them), which pursue specific and limited ends. Such groups tend to gather around a strong leadership and to dissolve quickly, as soon as the group’s goal is achieved or the leader dies. In this sense, factions can be found anywhere: typically, in a University department. And this is actually the common definition of a faction, a definition originally elaborated in the social sciences, which was very popular some twenty years ago (and partly still is) among Italian historians. For instance, it was adopted by the so-called microhistorians to underscore the importance of agency over rules and the individual’s ability to manipulate his social and political ties to attain his own ends. But more recent research, particularly about northern Italian towns and territories (but also the Papal States) has shown that when fifteenth- and sixteenth-century primary sources tell us something concrete about factions and (most important of all) when the word “faction” is used, it is mainly used to mean two kinds of political groupings, which is necessary to distinguish. At the local level, factions were not necessarily two: they could be three, four or even more. They were groups which we may visualize as vertical, built up around the main local noble affinities. Their elementary units were usually families. They often had an institutional basis, and civic offices and seats in the councils were formally divided between them. They were much more than a way of organising conflict, because several towns were actually governed in this way. In other words, factional groups often enjoyed a certain degree of formalisation, and often called themselves *universitates* – the same Latin word which signifies the guilds (and the communities). In sum, they were corporate groups, which an anthropologist would probably prefer to call “parties”, even if they did not have a specific political programme. Above this local level there was a second, broader stage where both central governments and the local powers spoke the Guelf/Ghibelline political language at least until 1530. At least two reasons explain this: first of all, because this language was still very suited to link forces belonging to different towns, territories and regions, and it still proved itself useful in what one might call “international relations”; secondly, because of the symbolic potency of both ancient names, which could help families from the landed nobility to build their territorial and political hegemonies, provided that the family power was already strong enough to exploit such non-material resource. The major families invested in their Guelf or Ghibelline identity because the reference to a Guelf or a Ghibelline tradition provided legitimacy for the actions and for the strategies of the local political actors. When a lord was able to present himself to the prince or to the dominant city as the leader of the local Guelf or Ghibelline party, the central government had to take his power even more seriously. During war times, to control a faction could decide the destiny of a town and

of its province, as Niccolò Machiavelli knew very well. If I started giving such examples about Lombard towns during the Italian Wars I could go on for hours, so I hope that you can take my word for it. To complete this brief introduction I would just like to point out that the Guelf/Ghibelline language was not exclusively spoken by a political and social élite, but – in some areas at least – was deeply rooted in what we may call popular culture. In early-modern Italy, as well as in many other European countries, it was still customary to celebrate May Day planting trees. But in fifteenth-century northern Italy, in the countryside and in the cities as well, these trees would be often associated to factions, and called Guelfs or Ghibellines according to their gender: this tradition was still alive well into the sixteenth-century, and was forbidden during the Counter-Reformation for obvious reasons. An oak, for example, which in Italian is a feminine noun (“la quercia”), would be a Ghibelline tree; an elm, which is masculine (“l’olmo”), would be a Guelf tree. This peculiar Lombard custom was explained in 1520 in a famous report which the envoy Gian Jacopo Caroldo delivered to the Venetian Senate, to help them understand such a different world from Veneto. In 1515, for instance, some Guelf and pro-French partisans near Alessandria «planted for May a barked oak, onto which they stuck elm leaves and lily flowers, and this way they celebrate waiting for the ninth day of May». Trying to give an overview on the subject “relationship between feud and faction” in our context is not easy, because each local situation has to be understood with regard to its peculiar factional configuration; because the chaotic flow of events going on during these years is particularly difficult to unravel (and yet we always have to take into account the general political frame in this or that moment); last but not least because the sources, which are relatively abundant for the end of the Fifteenth century, become very sparse and fragmented. For these reasons I picked two feuds to try and highlight different aspects of the relation between the two levels – feud and faction. To do this I basically rely on narrative sources, which need a little integration because of course they do not provide all the information necessary to understand.

The first one is a chronicle about Parma, written by Leone Smagliati. He was a bookseller, and he kept a diary from 1494 to 1518. His writing is very concise – for some years a bit too much – but nonetheless he gives very interesting and detailed informations, for instance about fiscal policies and taxes – and about politics too, of course. Parmesan factions, or *squadre*, were traditionally four from at least the mid-fourteenth century; each one of them took the name from one of the major feudal families of the province (Rossi, Pallavicini, Sanvitale and Correggio). These factions typically had a high institutional profile, as I said before, and were able to create a long-lasting political system, recognized by the central government. This system underwent a serious crisis towards the end of the fifteenth century, and – simplifying a little bit – the outcome is a polarization where the Rossi alone (traditionally Guelf) face the other three factions, the *Tre squadre*, which in the early years of the Sixteenth century are identified as the Ghibelline party, even if only the *squadra pallavicina* had a Ghibelline political tradition. Roughly between 1507 and 1514 we have an interesting feud

between the Garimberti, Rossi, and the Dalla Rosa, Pallavicini and Tre Parti: the relevance of this conflict in our chronicle is striking, and it is virtually the only feud described by Leone Smagliati, so we have the impression that it was probably a crucial episode in Parmesan political life during those years. Typically, the problem arose from a dispute over the control on a feminine benedictine monastery, St. Paul. The Garimberti had lent a huge amount of money to the abbess Orsina Bergonzi, who was the sister in law of a Garimberti. When she died, the new abbess, Giovanna da Piacenza, in her turn sister in law of Scipione Dalla Rosa, refused to acknowledge the debt. The subsequent conflict between Garimberti and Dalla Rosa developed along the usual lines: judicial, with a trial which aimed to obtain the removal of the new abbess, and failed; political, with formal and informal involvement of the central government. The first relevant episode described by Smagliati is a football match, where one of the two teams was led by Scipione Dalla Rosa and the other by two Garimberti: they bet a dinner and the dalla Rosa won. Then things got more serious, also because of a row about municipal tolls between the Garimberti and another prominent family of the *squadra pallavicina*, the Cornazzano. In January 1510 a peace was signed in Milan between the Garimberti and Scipione dalla Rosa, probably imposed by the French government; in July, Gian Francesco Garimberti was murdered by Scipione Dalla Rosa, who was banished to Milan. Once again, we observe a typical development: the trial on the one hand, blood revenge on the other, all mixed with attempts to peacemaking. For instance, in February 1511, on the main square of Parma, a former servant of Gian Francesco Garimberti murdered Filippo Pratisotti «only because he was friend of Scipione dalla Rosa». In the meantime, the general political situation was worsening: as for Parma, in the background we clearly distinguish the two hundred years old feud between the signorial patrons of the urban factions, Rossi and Pallavicini, which was going on. In 1518 Scipione Dalla Rosa could finally leave Milan, but he could not get immediately back to Parma: Smagliati tells us that in June he was hoping that count Troilo Rossi would help him to obtain the peace from the Garimberti, who had resisted until then the pressure of the governor, who wanted a peace at all costs. As far as we know, there was actually a peace between Garimberti and dalla Rosa, but the son and the closest relatives of the murdered did not sign it: Scipione dalla Rosa, in any case, took back his place in Parmesan political élite before 1518 was over. I shall make only a couple of remarks. In this case, the feud takes place between an ancient family of the Parmesan establishment, the Garimberti, loyal partisans of the Rossi from the fourteenth-century, and the dalla Rosa, that is a family of *nouveaux riches*, which for the most part of the Fifteenth century sat in Civic councils but never had a relevant political role. Their closest allies, the da Piacenza, are a new family as well. It is worth noticing that in Fifteenth century Parma, despite the pervasiveness of the factions, blood feud between urban lineages was extremely rare. The only relevant exception is a feud started by a new family, the Ferrari, against a very old and important lineage, the Zaboli. As in the Garimberti vs. Dalla Rosa case, recourse to blood feud seems to be an option chosen to legitimize social ascent. We must also note that the conflict between Garimberti and Dalla Rosa

fits perfectly in the existing factional configuration, which is not modified at all by the feud.

The second case takes us to the other side of the Milanese duchy, northwest, between Como and Milan. For Como during the Italian wars we have the very interesting *Annales* written in Latin by a local jurist, Francesco Muralto, which cover the period 1492-1520. It is not necessary to describe in detail – as I did for Parma – the local factional configuration; just keep in mind that the Swiss and the Grisons were very close and very much interested in the carve up of the Milanese duchy which was going on at the time; and that around the Lake of Como the communities were often Guelfs or Ghibellines. The story apparently begins in 1513, when Giovan Battista Pusterla is appointed governor of Como. Soon after, Muralto tells us, «Baldassarre Castiglione (not the author of the *Cortegiano*), began to do violence to the Pusterla family, burning a mill and crying *Francia! Francia!*». Giovan Battista Pusterla reacted writing to the duke of Milan and to the ducal captain of Lugano, who gathered his forces and marched several miles south to burn down Castiglione Olona, that is the seat of the Castiglioni lineage, where virtually all the inhabitants bore the surname Castiglioni: as you know, the violation of the house is a particularly serious offence. The second round took place two years later: «orta discordia» between Castiglioni and Pusterla, Giovan Battista Pusterla spread false news about a non-existent victory by Prospero Colonna against the French: as a consequence, the Ghibellines from Como attacked the Guelf quarter of the city. Pusterla tried to exploit the situation, and, since he was worried that the Castiglioni would join their forces with the Guelf community of Torno, opened the city gates to his allies from Lugano. The Guelf families of Como then left the city, seeking refuge in Torno, but Pusterla attacked the borough with swiss troops and sacked it; during the following days, Pusterla ordered to arrest all the people from Torno that could be found around the lake, because «they had the coats of arms of the King of France impressed in their hearts». Moreover, a thousand people from Torno who tried to escape by boat on the lake were pursued and killed by the Swiss and the Grisons. According to Muralto, by the way, after the French victory at Marignano the Castiglioni had the last laugh: and it was Fioramonte Castiglioni who seized Como with two hundred followers and took possession of the city in the name of the King of France. What is particularly striking in this story is that neither the ghibelline Pusterla nor the guelf Castiglioni are from Como. We are talking about two of the most powerful milanese aristocratic families, whose leaders enjoyed very important offices, were bishops (and even cardinals, in the case of the Castiglioni), were very important members of the ducal court. Typically, as well as other prominent milanese lineages of the time, they lived both in their palaces in Milan and in the castles they owned in the province, north of the city, where they exerted full jurisdictional powers and had lands and – above all – men. Castiglioni and Pusterla happened to be neighbours: Castiglione Olona and Tradate (the seat of the Pusterla family) are very close. When Francesco Muralto writes «orta inimicitia inter Castilliones et Pusterla», what he cannot see (or does not consider worth explaining) from his perspective, is that the enmity between the two families was actually very

ancient. In 1408, as a matter of fact, the Pusterla had kidnapped Ubertino and Giovanni Castiglioni, asking for Ubertino alone a ransom of 1300 fiorini. The ransom was paid, but the two Castiglioni were not released: quite the opposite, they were thrown in the ill-famed prison of Monza, run at that time by a Pusterla. A century had passed, but as we know vendetta does not have expiry date, there is no “best before”. If we consider that the destruction of Castiglione Olona in 1513 wanted by Giovan Battista Pusterla had gone far beyond the orders given by the duke of Milan Massimiliano Sforza, we shall not be surprised to learn that, a couple of months before the seizure of Como, Fioramonte Castiglioni had gone by night to Venegono with his cousin Camillo (a cleric) to kill Giovanni Maria and Bartolomeo Pusterla. The French were of course not interested in prosecuting the murderers, but when the Sforza came back in 1521 the Pusterla appealed to the prince. After a short period in prison and the confiscation of his estates, Fioramonte Castiglioni continued to serve the French for some years, and he finally obtained the pardon from Francis II Sforza. Once again, we appreciate the complexity of the feud, its characteristic mix of blood revenge and recourse to judicial and military options according to the political context. This case shows us very clearly the big potential of factional networks, and how two feuding lineages could exploit them to their advantage. But the range of options for the actors was wide, not unlimited. As for politics and factional allegiance, in early Sixteenth-century Lombardy tradition very often required a price to pay, as also the Guelf inhabitants of Torno knew very well.

To sum up: both cases show that, during the Italian Wars, feud as a social practice of the nobility was still steered by the traditional factional logics. If we take a look ahead, just a few decades, we notice that this pattern is going through a crisis. Lonate Ceppino, between Castiglione Olona and Tradate, 27 April 1564: Giovan Battista and Gian Giacomo Castiglioni are waiting in the dark for Andrea Pusterla and his young son Giovan Angelo, an arquebus each. Giovan Angelo Pusterla is killed, his father escapes. After three years Giovan Battista Castiglioni, sentenced to death, obtains – I don’t know how – the peace from Andrea Pusterla. He then begs for the royal pardon, writing in his plea that the captain of Milan had convicted him of murder «under pretext that between him and Andrea Pusterla there was *inimicitia*, enmity». In fifty years, the will of the Castiglioni (and of the Pusterla) to narrate their history in terms of vendetta has evaporated under the pressure of the Spanish criminal justice. Enmity was, by then, no more than a pretext.

Marco Gentile