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“God, Power and Money” ¿Did Cosimo de’Medici Deceive Renaissance Florence?

Dios, poder y dinero. ¿Habrá engañado a Florencia el renacentista Cosimo de Medici?

Salvatore Coppola ¹

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Resumen

La reseña aborda la personalidad de Cosimo de Medici en Florencia renacentista, en la cual se debate entre la personalidad de un hombre de negocios o un humanista en ciernes.

Palabras clave

Historia – Medici – Florencia

Abstract

The review addresses the personality of Cosimo de Medici in Renaissance Florence, which is torn between the personality of a business man or a humanist in the making.

Key words

History – Medici - Florencia

In determining whether or not Cosimo de’Medici deceived the Florentines by presenting himself as a benevolent figure one must firstly understand the context in which Cosimo was living, and what motives lay at the heart of his actions. Cosimo de’Medici did what all citizens of his status did; he pursued power by preaching humility. This paradox, however questionable, is central in understanding the mechanisms embedded in the mentality of 15th Century Florentine businessmen. Cosimo’s generosity, today, can indeed be considered as an act of deception in the attempt to legitimise one’s power, and yet, the deception theory is undone by the fact that Florentine society was well aware of what he did, and for a series of reasons, was willing to allow it. The opening question is thus flawed as one might argue that Cosimo ‘deceived’ Florentine Republican institutions, but at the same time, he managed to implicitly ‘cut a deal’ with Florentine society.

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Cosimo was a man of his time who needed to behave in a certain way to achieve a degree of power that the Florentines would have never openly allowed.

The Florentines were unwilling to consent to the rise of a Florentine prince, but they soon realised, that Cosimo could guarantee unprecedented stability and prosperity to the Republic. Cosimo's presence cannot be defined as a simple deception, but rather, it was an obligatory prerequisite of Florentine society/mentality for his legitimization of wealth and consent to power. To expose this argument one must analyse the reasons for which Cosimo *needed* to present himself as a benevolent figure, and contrast it, to why he might have *wanted* to be a benevolent figure. Finally, it will be useful to observe how the partisan nature of the sources we possess is crucial in limiting/preventing us from giving a clear-cut answer to the initial question.

Cosimo *needed* to present himself as a benevolent figure because it was the only way to expiate his guilt. According to church doctrine, bankers like Cosimo were sinners guilty of usury. The only way to be forgiven was charity, and in particular, patronage to the church. Charity was an investment in honour. Cosimo patronaged a myriad of works like the reconstruction of the convent of S. Marco and the Basilica of S. Lorenzo. As Dale Kent noted: "They were clearly labelled with Medici arms and images, which served as reminders to contemporaries of the family's largesse, and for the information of posterity."² Thus benevolence served the purpose of acquiring legitimacy for one's wealth. Florentine society praised features of humanist thought; believing that the virtuous citizen should embody ideals such as modesty. The exaltation of one's wealth was perceived in Florence as an act of disrespect, or even worse, as an act of aggression on other families. Cosimo's modesty was derived from the need to discourage opposing factions from attacking him. One can understand this concept when looking at how Cosimo preferred to have his *palazzo* designed by Michelozzo, rather than Brunelleschi, because Brunelleschi's construction plan was too flamboyant. As Peter Laven states: "He [Cosimo] built also for grandeur; but in order to maintain the fiction of his role in Florence he was wary that his schemes did not seem too splendid for an ordinary citizen."³

*"When Cosimo....began to move out of his quarter to offer massive charitable support for the restoration of religious buildings in other parts of Florence, he roused fears and envies."*⁴

² Dale Kent, *Cosimo De'Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*, (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p. 131.

³ Peter Laven, *Renaissance Italy 1464-1534*, (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1966), p. 242.

⁴ Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination*, (London: Allen Lane, 1979), p. 336.

Cosimo's modesty reinforces the image of a benevolent and un-ambitious citizen. In the political context Cosimo managed to erect himself as an 'informal prince' by creating a system by which the democratic mechanisms of the Republic, although in place, would determine the election of pro-Medicean citizens to the Signoria's offices. Initially through banishments, then through the appointment of *Balie* who sucked legislative power from the Parlamento, Cosimo weakened the Anti-Medici factions which had led to his exile in 1433.⁵ Cosimo's final system of control was the manipulation of the taxation system.

*"The art of narrowing the circle of men who could exert effective authority within the republic was to combine the maximum show of eligibility to office with the minimum choice of those actually appointed."*⁶

Citizens like Cosimo were supposed to fight for the *quasi-democratic* ideals of Civic Humanism but, in the case of Cosimo, he was quietly suppressing the Republic into becoming an instrument of Medici rule. As Marina Marietti states:

*"Cosimo ha spezzato l'equità fiorentina e instaurato un regime la cui evoluzione ne ha accentuato sempre più il carattere autoritario e oligarchico."*⁷

This unscrupulous behaviour required Cosimo to express as much benevolence as possible when in the public scene; effectively constructing a façade behind which he could operate in his own interest. To prevent opposition and uprisings Cosimo unofficially offered incentives for the population to sustain him. This Medici system succeeded in creating what Brion defines as the "Infantilization of the Masses". By bestowing upon them gifts, buildings, festivities and other material goods that increased public welfare, Cosimo bought the people's approval for his quasi-monarchic system.⁸ Hence, these acts of generosity had the calculated purpose of legitimising his power/wealth within Florence's domestic context. Cosimo's charity was saving him from eternal damnation, and simultaneously, created an image of himself that acquired consensus by the people as well as acceptance by the other leading families. Florence was a city plagued by *factionalism*. Had Cosimo acted more boldly, openly acquiring power and proclaiming himself ruler of Florence, this would have undoubtedly led to his demise. By maintaining a low profile Cosimo was able to attain power and, thanks to his networking skills, he established a system of mutual advantages for

⁵ J.R. Hale, Florence and the Medici: The Pattern of Control, (Plymouth: Thames and Hudson, 1977), pp. 35-36.

⁶ Ibid, p. 36.

⁷ Marina Marietti, Machiavelli: L'Eccezione Fiorentina, (Fiesole: Cadmo, 2005), p. 138.

⁸ Marcel Brion, The Medici: A Great Florentine Family, (London: Elek Books, 1969), p. 34.

all of his sustainers. “Although his actions benefited many; it was designed to favour him above all others.”⁹ Because of his wealth he had to present himself as a friend, not as a potential foe.

On the other hand, there is reason to believe that Cosimo’s benevolence was in part carried out because he sincerely *wanted* it. Brion argues that his actions were not merely acts of self-interest, but rather, there was a component of patriotism in Cosimo’s behaviour; typical of all Florentines of the time.¹⁰ Cosimo did indeed feel a sense of pride for his country, and this is reflected by the extent to which he went to patronage public buildings. He not only renewed S. Marco, but also took charge of completing other buildings, such as S. Lorenzo, which had been started by his brother. Vespasiano, Cosimo’s biographer, illustrates in Cosimo’s biography how his charity went beyond the conventional generosity expected of the great Florentine families. To acquire consent Cosimo was required to build edifices of public utility within Florence, and yet, he also sponsored foreign constructions which were of no direct interest to him. As Vespasiano reports: “certain friars of Jerusalem...told him that their house, Il Santissimo Spirito, was in ruins and wanted rebuilding. Cosimo agreed to do the whole work”.¹¹ From this simple example one can see how his sense of duty and generosity did effectively go beyond the minimum requirements to legitimise his wealth. Furthermore, it has become a legend the episode in which Cosimo, having heard that the budget for the construction of the Badia of Fiesole was costing much more than S. Lorenzo, stated that: “Those in charge at S. Lorenzo deserve blame because they have done so little work, and those at the Badia deserve praise because they have done more than the others.”¹² Civic Humanism also encourages the idea that Cosimo may have presented himself as benevolent because he felt it was a dutiful thing to do, and henceforth, one might suggest that Cosimo was benevolent by nature. As Brion suggests: “[patronage]...was not all done to earn extra popularity and prestige...”¹³, but it was in fact, an imbedded trait of the wealthy classes that derived from their humanist education. Cosimo was trying to embody the philosophical and cultural conceptions that the Renaissance were evoking; liberality, wisdom, virtue, modesty, and benevolence.

Some historians have gone as far as rejecting the deceitful nature of Cosimo’s behaviour. Hale argues that Cosimo was: “A rich man with a sturdy pride in his family’s social position, a real pleasure in building, happily shouldering the responsibilities of wealth and not so imaginative as to

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 26.

¹¹ Vespasiano, *Cosimo de’Medici (1389-1464)*, From *Lives of Illustrious Men of the Fifteenth Century*, Trans. William

George and Emily Waters. in Myron Gilmore (ed). *Renaissance Princes, Popes, and Prelates*. New York. 1963, p. 220.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 220-221.

¹³ *Op.cit*, Marcel Brion, (1969), p. 29.

disregard convention....”¹⁴ This view appears somewhat naïve in that it excludes the fact that, to a certain extent, Cosimo was required to present himself as benevolent due to an implicit code of conduct of 15th century Florentine businessmen¹⁵. Although Hale’s view appears excessively *buonista*, he successfully points out an idea that many erroneously discredit; Cosimo de’Medici presented himself as benevolent because he sincerely wanted (and could afford) to. Cosimo’s attitude towards life may have been also conditioned by the family context that characterized his upbringing. “His father, always so wary and discreet, had throughout his life, maintained his reputation for modesty and moderation.”¹⁶ It is likely that the attitudes of his father may have influenced him as well. Renaissance patrons like Cosimo were constantly attempting to leave a mark in history of their existence; becoming a beloved citizen was the most logical way to achieve this goal.

The grandeur of the city depended on honour and reputation. Florence, as a growing merchant city, was psychologically handicapped by the fact that, unlike Rome, there was not yet a true sense of identity. Figures like Cosimo felt responsible for forging a Florentine identity, and felt that this depended to a great extent on the way they presented themselves and their city. Cosimo desired to be remembered, and this would depend on his reputation and the material goods he would leave for posterity. As a leading patron stated, the objective of patronage was: “The honour of God, and the honour of the City, and the commemoration of Me.”¹⁷ Perhaps the most eloquent words describing Cosimo’s fear of being forgotten were reported by Vespasiano; “I [Vespasiano] once heard Cosimo say that the great mistake of his life was that he did not begin to spend his wealth ten years earlier; because, knowing well the disposition of his fellow citizens, he was sure that, in the lapse of fifty years, no memory would remain of his personality or of his house save a few fabrics he might have built.”¹⁸ This shows how indeed Cosimo did want to become that benevolent figure he presented himself as and, the extent to which he went in being charitable, constitutes tangible evidence of his good will.

In determining Cosimo’s benevolence, one must realise that the opening question has highly ambitious expectations. It is quite difficult to establish whether or not Cosimo’s attitude was a deception or not, since the sources at our disposal are limited and partisan. As Jurdjevic states:

¹⁴ Op.cit., J.R.Hale (1977), p. 32.

¹⁵ Charity and Benevolence were required to expiate sins and gather legitimacy for power in the eyes of public opinion.

¹⁶ Christopher Hibbert, The Rise and Fall of the House of Medici, (London: Allen Lane, 1974), p. 40.

¹⁷ Dale Kent, Cosimo de’Medici and the Florentine Renaissance, (London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 132.

¹⁸ Op.cit., Vespasiano, (2006), p. 222-223.

“After all, we know that many humanists associated with and supported Cosimo de’Medici.”¹⁹ Many of the leading humanists in Florence were in fact patronaged by Cosimo himself. The effect of these relationships are highlighted by the degree of compliments directed towards Cosimo in the humanists’ writings of the time. For Bartolomeo Scala Cosimo was: “...this incredible exemplar of ‘divine fortitude and wisdom’.”²⁰ Naldo Naldi compared the glory of Cosimo to that of Augustus whilst “...other aspiring poets like Francesco da Castiglione or Angelo Lapo of Faenza referred to Cosimo’s patronage and openly expressed their hope of being rewarded for their verse.”²¹ Furthermore, Cosimo gathered consensus amongst humanist circles by bringing leading scholars to teach in Florence. This was viewed by many as an act of civic humanism, but also, made these ‘imported’ scholars a tool to legitimise Cosimo’s degree of wealth and power. One of these ‘imported’ intellectuals was the Greek Argyropolous, for whom: “[Cosimo]...represented the sort of philosopher-ruler whom ‘divine Plato wished to govern cities and public affairs.’”²² By sponsoring leading humanist writers, Cosimo effectively created a generation of Medicean propagandists whose writings elevated him onto the pedestal of the Pater Patriae which he would later become. It is clear how such ‘conditioning’ led most writers of the time to portray a benevolent image of Cosimo; in the hope of being rewarded by he who was the effective ruler of Florence. Thus, the sources that we possess today are insufficiently reliable in evaluating the true nature of Cosimo’s benevolent image.

Because of the nature of Florentine society (particularly its factionalism), Cosimo resorted to what some might define as ‘deception’ to camouflage his ambitions. As Vespasiano stated: “He acted privately with the greatest discretion in order to safeguard himself, and whenever he sought to obtain an object he contrived to let it appear that the matter had been set in motion by someone other than himself.”²³ Cosimo’s system of rule, although masked by his low profile, possessed such a network into the guilds and offices of the *Signoria* that it was impossible for people to be unaware of who effectively ruled Florence. Deception evokes the image of the ‘deceived’ being somehow damaged from the ‘deceiver’. On the contrary, in the case of Florence, the deceiver managed to bring benefits and prosperity to those he theoretically ‘tricked’. “Cosimo is said to have advanced

¹⁹ Mark Jurdjevic, “Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici”, Renaissance Quarterly, (vol.52, n°4, Winter 1999), p. 998

²⁰ Alison Brown, “The Humanist Portrait of Cosimo de’Medici, Pater Patriae”, The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, (vol. 24. n° ¾, July-Dec., 1961), p 199.

²¹ Ibid., p. 201.

²² Op.cit., J. R. Hale (1977), p. 27.

²³ Ibid., p. 40.

the public good by turning it into his own profit.”²⁴ It is *unfair* to consider Cosimo’s behaviour as a deception. One must always bear in mind that all wealthy citizens of Florence endeavoured to present themselves as the ideal figures of a modern Humanist society; making acts of benevolence a recognised duty of all those who were wealthy. Cosimo, on the other hand, acquired a degree of wealth that surpassed by far that of any other Florentine family; often generating hatred and envy. As a result of these domestic rivalries Cosimo needed to present himself in such a way to not be perceived as a menace at all, but as a friendly figure worthy of respect. Yet, his actions suggest that his motives were also encouraged by a genuine sense of civic/moral duty. Cosimo could not have overthrown the Republic, becoming a despot, due to the factionalism imbedded in the texture of Florentine society. Likewise, the Republic would have never achieved the degree of wealth and prosperity it did, had Cosimo not been its ‘invisible’ sponsor. The Florentines were thus willing to ‘close an eye’ on Cosimo’s influence considering the benefits that were in it for them. Benevolence was both a moral characteristic as well as a political skill of Cosimo de’Medici. However unscrupulous Cosimo may have been, one cannot neglect the positive effects his actions had on Florence as a whole. Florence recognised the credit the city owed to Cosimo, and because of what he did, the Florentines glorified him as the one and only *Pater Patriae*. Deception per se is an insufficient explanation, as we have seen, of Cosimo’s relationship with Florence. The best quote that symbolises the association between Cosimo ‘il Vecchio’ and Florence was expressed by Marcel Brion, who stated: “The Medici may have made their fortune in Florence, but they also *made Florence’s fortune*.”²⁵

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²⁴ Op.cit, Marcel Brion (1969), p. 26.

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