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# The Economy, Representation, and Revolt: Social Unrest in Florence in the Wake of the Black Death

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The Economy, Representation, and Revolt:

Social Unrest in Florence in the Wake of the Black Death

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## Introduction

In July 1378, a contingent of lesser guildsmen and lower-class citizens overthrew a Florentine republican government comprising almost exclusively upper-class citizens, replacing it with one nominally centered on popular interests. Shortly thereafter, lower-class laborers of the newly created wool carders' and combers' guild, better known as the Ciompi, rebelled against this government. Allied with the remaining guilds, the government subsequently defeated the woolworkers and put down what would later become known as the Ciompi Revolt.

Disenfranchised by a government of Florence's wealthiest and most well-educated men who were insensitive to the condition of what they frequently perceived as a "mob," the Ciompi represent the working class of Renaissance Italy's urban-based republics. Compelled by the economic realities of their time and desirous of obtaining greater influence in an increasingly exclusive government, they resorted to violence in an expression of discontent with poverty and political impotence. This paper explores the interplay among these forces, namely the economic effects of the Black Death and the political and societal discord of late-fourteenth century Florence, and examines their role in generating social unrest in the city during this period.

Primary sources relevant to this project include various chronicles written by Florentines in the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. First among these is a document contemporary with the Ciompi Revolt: the *Cronaca Prima d'Anonimo* (First Chronicle of an Anonymous Individual) compiled along with the same individual's second and third chronicles into Gino Scaramella's 1934 monograph *Il Tumulto dei Ciompi* (The Tumult/Revolt of the Ciompi). Having been unable to locate an English translation for such a specific source, I am analyzing this document in its original 14<sup>th</sup> century Florentine dialect with significant assistance from Richard Trexler's *The Workers of Renaissance Florence: Power and Dependence in*

*Renaissance Florence, Volume III*.<sup>1</sup> Trexler's work serves as an accompanying secondary source by providing a full analysis of both the rebellious workers and the document itself while also speculating on the latter's purpose and authorship. While the author of the *Cronaca Prima* frequently takes a supportive stance toward the Ciompi, the *History of the Florentine People* by Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni offers a much more critical view. Writing approximately half a century after the revolt (which occurred during his childhood), Bruni displays a standard elite antipathy toward the lower-class individuals whom he perceives as the cause of the city's instability. One must consider, though, that Bruni's narrative style, modeled heavily on that of the Roman historian Livy's *History of Rome*, seeks to reflect an image of Florence as the Rome of his time. His chronicle thus carries with it both the implications and vocabulary (he consistently refers to the upper and lower-classes as "optimates" and "plebs") of Roman social conflicts, a rhetorical style which undoubtedly impacted his analysis. Niccolò Machiavelli, an author more temporally detached from the period than Bruni or the anonymous chronicler, also discusses the Ciompi Revolt in his *Florentine Histories*. Written in the 1520s, his account provides a post-Medici view of the revolt not found in Bruni's chronicle and can therefore supply the greater context needed to understand the revolt's significance.

Since quantitative data from fourteenth-century Florence are relatively scarce, (at least partially because the revolutionaries of 1378 burned government documents), data from the much more resource-rich fifteenth century will be used in substitution. In their investigations of the Ciompi and Florence's broader economic history, scholars have employed numerous fifteenth-century primary documents from the Florentine State Archives, especially the records from the *Catasto* of 1427, a complete registry of Tuscan households, their annual taxes,

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Trexler, *The Workers of Renaissance Florence: Power and Dependence in Renaissance Florence, Volume III*, (New York: State University of New York at Binghamton Press, 1993).

individuals' occupations, and more during that year. Without the physical and linguistic ability to access many of these resources, I find myself relying more heavily on other scholars' interpretations of these numerical data. Specifically, Raymond de Roover's *The Rise and Fall of the Medici Bank*<sup>2</sup> and David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's *Tuscans and their Families*<sup>3</sup>, the latter of which provides the results of a computerized, quantitative analysis of many of these archival documents, have proved invaluable in understanding the socioeconomic world of Renaissance Florence. I have obtained online access to a partial, English translation of the Catasto, which provides numerous examples of individuals whose socioeconomic status might have led them to revolt. More precisely, the names and occupations of those who led the revolts can be found in both the *Cronaca Prima* and Trexler's accompanying work, affording me the opportunity to locate individuals of the same occupation in the online *Catasto* and analyze their individual economic situations.

### **The Black Death in Fourteenth Century Europe**

General information regarding the plague, as well as Florentine politics and society of the period, will aid in establishing the greater context. Scholars and scientists remain conflicted as to what specific disease caused the plague; many, however, believe the plague consisted of more than one disease, with the deadly pneumonic plague, which caused heavy blood loss via the nose and throat, frequently following the more famous bubonic plague, so-called for its causing of black bubos on the skin. Death usually followed within a few days, if not on the day on which

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond de Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank, 1397-1494* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

symptoms appeared.<sup>4</sup> The plague's dissemination across Europe is traditionally attributed to the increased population of diseased-flea-carrying rats, whom the Mongols initially picked up during their campaigns in Southeast Asia. But these rats were more mobile than most, having the advantage of a politically stable and united trade route across the Silk Road, thanks to the Mongols' conquest of much of East Asia and the Middle East by the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. Reaching the Black and Mediterranean Seas, the rats and their fleas were transported by ship in 1347-48 to Western Europe's major port cities such as Genoa, Venice, Pisa, and Marseilles, from which they spread inland. As the human population in Europe reached a peak in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, so did the rat population which scavenged its refuse, accelerating the rate at which the diseased fleas could spread. It is worth mentioning, however, that primary sources make no mention of rats or what should have been a large die-off of their species had they been infected, though this is probably the result of contemporary observers' inability to understand the science of pathogens and how they spread.<sup>5</sup>

In total, the plague is estimated to have killed anywhere from one-fourth to two-thirds of Europe's population, with data varying and certain geographic areas receiving harsher blows than others. Psychologically distraught chroniclers sometimes gave estimates upwards of a 90% mortality rate, with one London writer stating that only one in fourteen survived the epidemic in his city.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere the evidence varies, though urban areas tended to sustain slightly higher casualty rates than the surrounding countryside. Three Italian cities (Orvieto, Siena, and Volterra) recorded a 50% population loss, while Hamburg (Germany), Barcelona (Spain), and

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<sup>4</sup> Guido Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 120.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-121.

<sup>6</sup> David Routt, "The Economic Impact of the Black Death," EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert Whaples (July 2008). Accessed September 2, 2015. <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/the-economic-impact-of-the-black-death/>.

Perpignan (France) each suffered around a 60-70% loss.<sup>7</sup> A particularly high rate of fatality occurred in Tuscany, the region encompassing Florence, where 60-80% of inhabitants are estimated to have died.<sup>8</sup> At the dawn of the fourteenth century, Florence was a medieval metropolis of approximately 100-120,000 inhabitants, but the plague years of 1348-52 brought a population loss of at least 60%, with only 40-45,000 individuals remaining by 1352.<sup>9</sup> Once human bodies are exposed to a disease, however, they have a tendency to build resistance against potential future contact with the pathogen. This phenomenon appears in what may have demoralized plague witnesses the most: the fact that child mortality greatly surpassed adult mortality in the recurring waves of outbreak. While this was tragic in itself, the economic reality of the situation was that adult workers were very difficult to replace and drastically needed in plague-devastated cities like Florence.

### **Florentine Politics and Society**

Florence in the mid-to-late fourteenth century was an active hub of commerce and the budding center of Italian humanist philosophy. Politically, the city continued the medieval rivalry of the Guelph and Ghibelline factions, the former traditionally supporting the papacy and the latter the Holy Roman Emperor in a battle over authority that stretched back to the Investiture Controversy of the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning in the late 11<sup>th</sup> and early 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, dozens of cities in central and northern Italy, referred to in that period as the “Italic Kingdom” subjugated to the Holy Roman Emperor, began slowly taking advantage of the Emperor’s inability to maintain order in his holdings across the Alps. One-by-one they obtained independence, some

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> John Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200-1575* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 100.

becoming signorial duchies such as Milan and others opting for republicanism like Florence. Florence itself remained a staunchly Guelph city, which became particularly problematic when it entered into the War of the Eight Saints against Pope Gregory XI in 1375 over territorial conflict.

Florence effectively functioned as a limited republic, with major offices rotating approximately every two months. The most coveted of these included the Gonfaloniere della Giustizia (lit. “Standard-bearer of Justice”), who effectively functioned as the mayor of the city, and his advisors the eight *priori* (“priors/lords prior”). Combined, they formed the main executive body of Florentine government, the Signoria, who took up residence in the Palazzo della Signoria, the location at which much of the action during the revolts took place. The Signoria were formally required to meet with two other elected councils: the *Dodici Buonomini* (Twelve Good Men) and *Seidici Gonfalonieri* (Sixteen Standard-bearers, four from each of Florence’s four districts), both of which served as lesser advisory bodies.<sup>10</sup> Additional offices included seats on legislative bodies, judicial positions, and the office of the *podestà*, who had originally been a supreme magistrate called in during times of emergency to resolve conflict, but who by this time was more involved in civil order and defense. Qualification for all offices, however, was restricted to those who paid for membership in one of Florence’s guilds (including seven major and fourteen minor guilds) and came from the proper social standing. This meant that a significant number of individuals remained without the ability to hold office, though sometimes popular-minded guildsmen did obtain these positions. Such was the case when a populist committee was appointed as the *Otto della Guerra* (lit. “Eight of War”) at the onset of the War of the Eight Saints to oversee the conflict.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 93, 128.

<sup>11</sup> Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People Volume III*, trans. James Hankins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

This system existed alongside a societal divide between the urban upper-class *popolo grosso* (lit. “fat people,” mostly consisting of bankers, lawyers, wealthy merchants, and major guildsmen) and the *popolo minuto* (common people), the former of whom gradually accrued wealth and political influence during the fourteenth century. Between the extremes of the few rich and the throngs of the poor were a number of lesser guildsmen—skilled, average-to-low-pay artisans who were similarly barred from positions of governmental authority like the poor, but who possessed guild membership and whose economic situations were not quite as desperate. These lesser guildsmen constituted the closest thing to a middle class that Florence could boast in the fourteenth century, though the wealthy *popolo grosso* consistently remembered themselves as the middle class below the traditional nobility.

With the crisis of the plague, however, had come a reconfiguring of Italian and Florentine society. The immense demographic loss inflicted by the plague created a massive demand for laborers in both urban and rural settings. Landlords paid higher wages to the highly demanded peasants, but comparatively the wages of urban workers surpassed those of their countryside counterparts. This resulted from the relatively higher mortality rate inflicted by the plague in urban settings, generating in condensed areas a demand for labor higher than that generated by the much more expansive and relatively more labor-plentiful countryside.<sup>12</sup> What followed was an influx of individuals, particularly young males seeking greater opportunities for themselves, into cities such as Florence. Owing to both the restricted institutions (namely the guilds) of Renaissance Florence as well as the cultural differences between city and country life, many of

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<sup>12</sup> Paulo Malanima, “Urbanisation and the Italian Economy During the Last Millenium.” *European Review of Economic History* 9, no. 1 (April 2005): 110. Accessed August 20, 2015.

these individuals experienced difficulty and frustration in conforming to the customs of their new urban lives.<sup>13</sup>

In the years leading up to the Ciompi Revolt, these changes in society began to reflect in Florence's socioeconomic demographics. Poverty was still a constant challenge for the inhabitants of the city, including those who had migrated from the countryside. Although wages had reached a relative peak, many workers continued to face the challenges of debt, taxation, and unemployment.<sup>14</sup> Data from the Catasto of 1427 reveal that approximately 1% (100 families) of all Florentines controlled over a quarter of the city's wealth.<sup>15</sup> In 1457, moreover, approximately 28% of the city's inhabitants were classified under the tax bracket of *miserabili*, meaning that they were paupers with virtually no wealth or property, while an additional 35% (over 3700 households) fell into the next-lowest bracket of "below 5 soldi."<sup>16</sup> Additionally, one of the few industries that did not suffer a loss of production because of the post-plague population loss was the highly successful luxury industry, which in Florence mainly included the production of fine fabrics.<sup>17</sup> The distribution of wealth and the emphasis given to luxury production reveal which segment of society Florence's economic agenda favored, or, more directly, who controlled its formation.

This was the chaotic world in which the Ciompi found themselves beset on all sides by disease, poverty, war, underrepresentation, and the affluence of governors largely apathetic to their situation. Florence, though nominally a republic, was characterized by a great class division with regard to political participation in the mid-late fourteenth century. The individuals who

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<sup>13</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 155.

<sup>14</sup> Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 160.

<sup>15</sup> Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans*, 99-100.

<sup>16</sup> de Roover, *Medici Bank*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Lopez, "Hard Times and Investment in Culture," in *The Renaissance: Basic Interpretations*, edited by Karl H. Dannenfeldt (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1974), 89.

protested for greater representation in the post-plague period did so out of discontent not only with the economic conditions forced upon them by the very plague whose recurring destruction had demoralized them over the past few decades, but also with the individuals who continued to accumulate their own stores of wealth in the face of economic catastrophe. An analysis of the Ciompi Revolt therefore demands an economic approach, but one inclusive of the Black Death's repercussions as well as the rampant wealth and political inequality proliferating throughout Florence. I argue that the Ciompi Revolt resulted from the post-plague, urban migrations of surviving peasants who, after arriving, were economically restricted from participation in the very institutions which they believed could afford them a better life.

### **Origins of the Revolutionaries: The Economic Effects of the Black Death (1348-78)**

As it killed potentially two-thirds of Europe's population in the mid-fourteenth century, it is difficult to exaggerate the effects of the Black Death, whether medical, psychological, or economical. The most significant effects for purposes of this analysis, however, were those tied to the economy, particularly the high rate of urbanization that followed an enormous loss in urban labor. Urban employers raised wages to attract replacement workers, and these higher wages in towns and cities became the main facilitator of the urbanization process. The wages themselves resulted from the difference in productivity between the urban and rural sectors, i.e., the greater population density of urban environments (even after the plague) continued to create a higher demand for goods, which allowed for higher prices and generated greater nominal revenue for businesses.<sup>18</sup> The higher the differential between urban and rural production, price levels, and demand, the greater the urban wage level and the level of migration tended to be.

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<sup>18</sup> Malanima, *Urbanization*, 110.

While urban areas typically demanded goods and investments, their rural counterparts demanded the commodities produced by artisans in cities.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, rural populations became interested in the city and its amenities when the gap between urban and rural wages widened in favor of the urbanites. Their migrations continued throughout the fifteenth century as well, with the result that 25% of Western Europe's population lived in central/northern Italian cities by 1500.<sup>20</sup>

City governments frequently gave young people other incentives to urbanize as well, usually in the form of easier guild membership for those who qualified. Since many migrants lost their families to the plague, the decision to leave the countryside for greater opportunities was not difficult to make.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, land rents and food prices did not fall to expected levels in countryside because the workers who remained labored on the more fertile land, and the excess, less productive land was left to go fallow. Rents for the superior lands that were in use often remained relatively high.<sup>22</sup> The loss of rural workers also resulted in less food production overall, though when this was coupled with an overall drop in the demand for food thanks to the broader population loss, the price level of food decreased less than expected. What the rural laborers did manage to produce, however, was made "more efficiently and easily, perhaps with those who remained to farm the land garnering more for their labor and living better than they had before."<sup>23</sup> Italy's urban working population thus quickly recovered thanks to appealing incentives in the cities coupled with high rents and unchanged food prices in the countryside.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>21</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

It must be emphasized that the Black Death did not simply arrive in Europe in 1348, cause death on such a massive scale, and disappear from the scene. While the outbreak between 1348-52 was responsible for the largest portion of the overall population loss, the plague did return in recurring outbreaks across Europe in both the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with the outbreak of 1374 being the most relevant for Florence in this period.<sup>24</sup> Since the plague's impact affected the demand for labor and the value of wages in both urban and rural areas, these recurring outbreaks caused miniature spikes in both labor demand and wages that attracted more new men into urban environments. This allows for the interpretation that the revolutionaries of 1378 did not arrive en masse in the years of the initial outbreak, but that they instead came to the city over the course of the next three decades, with a decent portion likely arriving after 1374. Had they all arrived in the late 1340s/early 1350s instead, it is likely that the relatively short lifespan of the Middle Ages would have claimed them before they had the opportunity to revolt.

Once they arrived in Florence, however, these migrants found conditions quite contrary to what the city's incentives had promised them. It was not uncommon for municipal governments across Europe to pass legislation "not only to contain rising wages and to limit the peasant's mobility but also to allay a sense of disquietude and disorientation arising from the Black Death's buffeting of pre-plague social realities," and Florence was no exception.<sup>25</sup> The higher wages promised to them by employers, then, turned out to be a false rumor which generated a high level of irritation among the migrants. The result was that a large number of new arrivals joined the Florentine poor in subsistence living, even when they enjoyed high levels of employment and the occasional dip in the price of bread.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, wages have been

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<sup>24</sup> Ann Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 61-63..

<sup>25</sup> Routt, "Economic Impact."

<sup>26</sup> Gene Brucker, "The Florentine Popolo Minuto and its Political Role, 1340-1450," in *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200-1500*, ed. Lauro Martines (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1972), 160.

shown to have actually declined in the decade leading up to the revolts of 1378, providing further stimulus for the rebellion.<sup>27</sup> Factoring in the devaluation of the penny, in which most urban laborers were paid, during the War of the Eight Saints, the financial situation of many common Florentines is seen to have grown increasingly destitute after the plague, contrary to what the city had originally guaranteed them.<sup>28</sup>

### **Socioeconomics in Renaissance Florence**

Alongside the perils of the Black Death, the commoners of Florence endured yet another plague in the form of immense socioeconomic inequality in the years leading up to the Ciompi Revolt. The beginnings of this phase of inequality can be traced back to the successes of the original *popolo*, “the people” of the medieval commune who sought to curtail noble influence by uniting as wealthy middle class merchants and guildsmen, in the mid-late 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>29</sup> Much of the traditional medieval nobility were disenfranchised when the popolo government issued the Ordinances of Justice in 1293, a set of laws which labeled certain noble families as *magnates*. Possessing the status of magnate frequently prevented an individual from obtaining political office or guild membership and required his family to pay a large sum of money to the government if the magnate committed what the Ordinances defined as “improper behavior.”<sup>30</sup> Having lent their influence toward the passage of the Ordinances, the popolo gradually transformed into the *popolo grosso*, Florence’s rising “middle class” of bankers, merchants, lawyers, and major guildsmen, whose wealth held great influence over the government. They

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>28</sup> Routt, “Economic Impact.”

<sup>29</sup> Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 40.

<sup>30</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 77-79.

became an increasingly exclusive group, changing citizenship requirements to include “membership in a guild” and “property qualifications or minimum tax assessments,” while membership in the guilds themselves was changed to include residence and taxation requirements as well as high entry fees.<sup>31</sup> Members of the *popolo grosso* easily obtained guild membership and, because virtually all political offices required guild membership of their holders, came to dominate the councils, juries, and Signoria of Florentine government.<sup>32</sup> With the passing of the 1293 Ordinances, they largely removed the old nobility from the power equation of urban politics, leaving them only the urban masses to contend with.

Those masses are referred to as the *popolo minuto*, the segment of society that encompassed laborers, paupers, and all those who held no guild membership, but who frequently worked for those who did hold guild membership.<sup>33</sup> This included the group that would become known as the Ciompi, which largely originated from the laborers of the *Lana*, the major guild of the wool manufacturers in Florence. Skilled artisans and lesser guildsmen still occupied a sort of middle rank between the *grosso* and *minuto* classes, but their concerns about underrepresentation often aligned with those of the *minuto*. Debt and taxes routinely put a great amount of economic pressure on the members of these classes in Renaissance Florence. In 1427, approximately 81% of textile-worker households reported debts on average equal to 55% of their assets, implying that much of their earned money was quickly used up in repaying these debts.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, 30% of all the city’s households reported that their debts exceeded their assets in that same year.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 67.

<sup>32</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 158.

<sup>33</sup> Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 35-36.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 159

<sup>35</sup> Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans*, 104.

Debt could also be a profitable situation, however, as demonstrated by the *popolo grosso*. The income of many Renaissance cities initially depended on taxes and state monopolies on certain staples like salt and grain. As expensive warfare became more commonplace in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it soon became apparent that these methods did not fully cover the cities' needs. Many governments resorted to taking voluntary loans from wealthy families, which later became forced loans based on a family's wealth during the more difficult times in which they hesitated to give.<sup>36</sup> Deficit spending was thus quite common in Renaissance Italy, as governments like Florence's routinely operated on funds which they had taken out from one wealthy family in order to pay back another. This mass of governmental/public debt was known as *Il Monte* ("the mountain"), and it became a growing problem in most cities, as the government was supposed to repay its forced loans at around 5% interest, made more difficult by the presence of debt owed to other families.<sup>37</sup> Ordinarily this would have qualified the lenders for the sin of usury (charging interest on loans), but since this was viewed as a service to the government, it was not uncommon for the sin to be "quietly overlooked."<sup>38</sup>

Instead, the government became a producer of additional revenues via interest for the groups who could afford to lend, namely the members of the *popolo grosso*. As their guild membership granted them significant presence in the government, the *popolo grosso* saw little harm in lending money to a government that was both run by themselves and obligated to pay them back with profit.<sup>39</sup> "Corruption" may qualify as understatement when attempting to describe how the *popolo grosso* abused the government's debt for their own gain, as they essentially turned what was meant to be a public body into a valued customer of their banking enterprises. While this

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<sup>36</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 105.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 106

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

helped ensure that the *popolo grosso* would always support the government, for the *popolo minuto*, this only furthered the idea that government was inaccessible to the lower classes who could neither purchase a share of the debt nor obtain the guild membership necessary for holding office.

Keeping in mind that economic status directly impacted an individual's ability to influence or participate in government, we shall now take a comparative look at the respective wealth possessed by certain segments of the *popolo grosso* and *popolo minuto*. The primary sources utilized in this analysis will be records from the *Catasto* of 1427. Originally created in order to better determine on whom a loan should be forced, the Florentine *Catasti* are collections of tax data from various years throughout Florence's history, with the *Catasto* of 1427 constituting the most complete record. Earlier records of Florence's tax data do exist and date back to 1371 in the form of the *Estimi*, which generally are less comprehensive and reliable than the *Catasti*.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, the *Estimi* only exist as original, archival documents, rendering them inaccessible for this study.

While it would be ideal to consult sources from the 1370s in an argument about the 1378 Ciompi Revolt, it is not necessary to do so in order to provide a general idea of the inequality pervasive throughout Renaissance Italy. As one scholar notes in his usage of the *Catasto* to evaluate working conditions leading up to the Revolt, "It is difficult to imagine that the situation was much different in the 1370s."<sup>41</sup> Since this *Catasto* reflects the society of nearly half a century after the 1378 Ciompi Revolt, its purpose in this paper will not be to provide detailed, precise data that correspond directly to the ruling classes or to the individuals who participated in the

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<sup>40</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*, Version 1.3, edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho [Machine readable data file based on D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Census and Property Survey of Florentine Domains in the Province of Tuscany, 1427-1480*], (Providence, R.I.: Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG: Brown University, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 159.

revolt, as such data are both unnecessary and nearly impossible to come by. Rather, the Catasto will aid in painting a broader picture of the wealth inequality in Renaissance Florence that prevented the Ciompi and other revolutionaries from obtaining their coveted guild membership and might have spurred them to revolt. The Catasto provides a wealth of information about each head of household (those who actually reported their family's tax data) in Florence, including name, age, type and location of dwelling, place of origin, trade (occupation), taxable income, and other economic assets. This study will focus on the aspects that will aid in determining an individual's total wealth as well as a few personal details that may illuminate how the wealth was spent. It should be noted, however, that the Catasto only gives occupations for 44% of the names listed, a far more complete record than many contemporary documents, but incomplete nonetheless.<sup>42</sup>

The revolutionaries of 1378 consisted of the Ciompi as well as artisans and laborers from a variety of professions, but laborers under the employ of wealthy wool manufacturers made a strong presence. This is reflected by a list of new office holders in July 1378, found in the

*Cronaca Prima d'Anonimo:*

“On July 25<sup>th</sup> they named (as lords prior):

Michele di Lando, Standard-bearer of Justice  
 Lioncino, pettinatore (wool comber)  
 Salvestro Compiobbesi  
 Ispinello Borsi  
 Giovanni d'Agnolo Capponi  
 Bonaccorso del Cimiero, pettinatore (wool comber)  
 Benedetto da Carlone, calzolaio (shoemaker)

As standard-bearers of their municipal districts:

Nicolò di Vanni Pelacane

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<sup>42</sup> Herlihy et al., *Online Catasto of 1427*.

Ciardo di Ciardo, vinattiere (retail wine salesman)  
 Giovanni di Giovanni, cardatore (wool carder)  
 Bruno di Pagolo, maliscalco (horseshoer)  
 Guido Fagni  
 Il Mezza di Iacopo di Mezza  
 Nicolò di Vanni Nelli.

As members of the twelve good men:

Duccio degli Alberti  
 Lo Smacca, fabbro (blacksmith)  
 Chiavaccino, cardatore (wool carder).<sup>43</sup>

Several of the men listed come from more illustrious families, as is shown by their use of family names instead of or in addition to patronyms. Their presence may point to the first revolutionary wave's willingness to compromise and negotiate when compared to the second. More interesting, however, are their counterparts' occupations, which include several of those listed under "trade 61" in the Catasto of 1427. Trade 61 includes several different types of manual laborers in the wool guild, namely the same pettinatori (combers) and cardatori (carders) listed above as well as the scegliatori (sorters).<sup>44</sup> These individuals comprised the most humble laborers of the wool guild, whose jobs mainly involved the refining and cleaning of raw wool so that it could be spun and woven into textile products. Additional workers of the wool guild included the cimatori (shearers), who are represented by trade 62 in the Catasto.<sup>45</sup> While the majority of men and women living in Florence in 1378 were not guild members, the laborers of Florence's textile industries were relegated to the even lower status of "legal subjects of the wool and silk guilds rather than free citizens," which prevented them from ever obtaining

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<sup>43</sup> *Cronaca Prima d'Anonimo*, in *Il Tumulto dei Ciompi: Cronache e memorie*, ed. Gino Scaramella (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1934), 76. (my translation)

<sup>44</sup> Herlihy et al., *Online Catasto of 1427*.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

membership.<sup>46</sup> Since the *Cronaca Prima* and other records<sup>47</sup> suggest that these woolworkers played the dominant role in the revolutionary activities of 1378, individuals employed in the same occupations in 1427 will be used to convey the economic status of the poor in Renaissance Florence. The Catasto of 1427 includes data from 203 men employed under trade 61 and 34 employed under trade 62.<sup>48</sup> Table 1 offers some statistics regarding the ten laborers from occupations encompassed by trade 61 who have the least valuable total economic assets. All monetary values are recorded in florins, the minted currency of Florence.

Table 1: Florence's Ten Woolworkers with the Lowest Total Economic Assets in 1427<sup>49</sup>

Name	Patronymic <sup>50</sup>	Family Name	Age	Marital Status	Bocche <sup>51</sup>	Trade	Housing	Priv. Invest. <sup>52</sup>	Pub. Invest. <sup>53</sup>	Real Estate <sup>54</sup>	Total <sup>55</sup>	Taxable <sup>56</sup>
Nicolaio	Manuccio		55	Married	2	61	Renter	0	0	0	0	0
Zanobi	Bartolo		79		1	61	Renter	0	0	0	0	0
Iacopo	Berto		80	Widowed	5	61	Owner	0	0	0	0	0
Giovanni	Domenico		38	Married	6	61	Owner	0	0	0	0	0
Nanni	Giovanni		26	Married	3	61	Renter	0	0	0	0	0
Antonio	Albizzo		30		2	61	Renter	0	0	0	0	0
Berto	Bartolomeo		44		1	61	Owner	0	0	0	0	0
Bartolomeo	Giovanni		27	Married	2	61	Renter	0	0	0	0	0
Iacopo	Luca		23	Married	4	61	Renter	0	0	0	0	0
Leonardo	Bartolo		56	Widowed	4	61	Renter	0	0	0	0	0

<sup>46</sup> Trexler, *Workers*, 64.

<sup>47</sup> See Trexler, *Workers*, 69.

<sup>48</sup> Herlihy et al., *Online Catasto of 1427*.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Father's name. More formally, these were written "Nicolaio di Mannuccio," which means "Nicolaio, son of Mannuccio."

<sup>51</sup> Lit. "Mouths," referring to the total number of people living in the household, including the head of family.

<sup>52</sup> The total value of the individual's investments in private enterprise/business.

<sup>53</sup> The total value of the individual's contribution to the public debt through loans to the government.

<sup>54</sup> Value of the individual's property excluding the place of residence.

<sup>55</sup> The total value of the individual's assets, namely investments and real estate.

<sup>56</sup> The total value of the individual's taxable assets, after deductions.

The most noticeable aspect of this table is that each man reported a value of “0” for his total economic assets. This does not suggest that the individual was entirely destitute (he was employed, after all), but it does suggest that his low wage prevented him from making any kind of public or private investment (both of which would have been needed for guild membership had he not been legally restricted from joining) and that he owned no property other than his probably very modest dwelling. A zero may simply imply that the individual’s total assets for that year were less than one florin in value, as Florentines also used the soldo and the denaro, two coins of lesser value, in this period. The same applies to his taxable assets, which include the total value of his assets minus any deductions for which he might have qualified. The number of individuals in a household was one potential qualifier of deductions, but this was not guaranteed.<sup>57</sup>

The precise ranges of these tax brackets varied slightly over time, but an example from the Catasto of 1481 shows that all denizens with taxable assets of less than 50 florins were lumped into a “7.0%” rate, effectively meaning that 7% of their taxable assets went to the government.<sup>58</sup> If a similar rate were to be applied to woolworkers with less than 1 florin of assets, they would potentially lose money that, at this level of subsistence, could be essential to survival. It is also worth mentioning that several of these men, as heads of household, would likely have been primary breadwinners in a home of four, five, or six individuals. Needless to say, the economic strain of a dismally low wage tightened even further when split among multiple people.

What is most telling, however, is that these ten only serve as examples for the ninety-two individuals under trade 61 who filed a “0” for their total assets in 1427. With 203 total responses,

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<sup>57</sup> Herlihy et al., *Online Catasto of 1427*.

<sup>58</sup> de Roover, *Medici Bank*, 28.

it is evident that 45% of the workers in trade 61 lived in economic conditions similar to those described above.<sup>59</sup> 163 workers (80%) also fell into the bracket “below 50 florins” and qualified for the lowest tax rate of 7%.<sup>60</sup> The shearers of trade 62 fared better but still saw a large number of impoverished individuals, with around 15% of workers filing a “0” for total assets and 53% falling under the “below 50 florins” taxable assets bracket.<sup>61</sup> However, their small sample size in the Catasto of only 34 individuals prevents their statistics from being conclusive. These statistics reveal, in general, that a great number of employed Florentines lived with very little, not to mention the thousands of unemployed paupers who owned nearly nothing. For a relatively small number of woolworkers, however, this hardship was not the case, as Table 2 indicates.

Table 2: Florence’s Ten Woolworkers with the Greatest Total Economic Assets in 1427<sup>62</sup>

Name	Patronymic	Family Name	Age	Marital Status	Bocche	Trade	Housing	Priv. Invest.	Pub. Invest.	Real Estate	Total	Taxable
Piero	Giovanni		71	Married	5	61	Owner	772	128	163	1063	1057
Antonio	Andrea	Filippi	58	Married	4	61	Renter	84	160	768	1012	839
Federigo	Francesco		32	Widowed	2	61	Renter	51	0	793	844	652
Niccolo	Mariano		60	Married	5	61	Owner	105	0	564	669	549
Francesco	Bartolomeo		26	Married	5	61	Owner	88	0	579	667	511
Giovanni	Niccolo		65	Married	3	61	Renter	500	0	113	613	513
Maffeo	Guiduccio	Guiducci	70	Widowed	7	61		510	0	64	574	436
Domenico	Benedetto		35	Married	5	61	Renter	51	0	399	450	355
Papi	Maso		34	Married	7	61	Renter	188	0	240	428	245
Piero	Agnolo		71	Married	2	61	Owner	40	0	319	359	315

A few things are immediately noticeable. Two individuals are recorded with family names, indicating that they were born into a higher station to begin with. Each individual also

<sup>59</sup> Herlihy et al., *Online Catasto of 1427*.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid..

accumulated enough wealth to feel comfortable with making private investments, and two decided to invest in the government's public debt. They each own property besides their personal dwelling, and nine of the ten would have fallen into the two highest 1481 tax brackets of 300 and 400 florins, respectively taxed at 21 and 22% each.<sup>63</sup> As shown earlier, however, these workers constituted a small minority of the 203 total, most of whom fell into the lowest brackets or had very little at all. As we turn our attention to Florence's bankers, however, we will begin to see how numbers far in excess of the woolworkers' earnings were a common occurrence, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Florence's Ten Wealthiest Members of the Banking Guild (Cambio) in 1427<sup>64</sup>

Name	Patronymic	Family Name	Age	Marital Status	Bocche	Trade	Housing	Priv. Invest.	Pub. Invest.	Real Estate	Total	Taxable
Giovanni	Donato	Barbadori	65	Married	8	23	Owner	22351	5650	3772	31773	20887
Giovanni	Barduccio		46	Married	9	23	Owner	3763	14562	12991	31316	21740
Ridolfo	Bonifazio	Peruzzi	57	Married	12	23	Owner	16903	2937	3686	23526	22892
Iacopo	Piero	Baroncelli	44	Married	8	23	Owner	11300	9559	2212	23071	19283
Isau	Agnolo	Martellini	55	Married	8	23	Owner	5820	5046	7503	18369	14775
Averardo	Francesco	Medici	54	Married	10	23	Owner	4082	5773	7579	17434	16497
Battista	Niccolo	Guicciardini	34	Married	3	23	Owner	4172	4802	7583	16557	11654
Giovanni	Niccolo	Guicciardini	30	Married	3	23	Owner	315	8825	3950	13090	11049
Bernardo	Cristofano	Carnesecchi	79	Widowed	4	23	Owner	7061	3595	305	10916	6791
Antonio	Piero	Benizzi	79	Married	11	23	Owner	6586	1082	948	8616	6342

Since family names are used for nine of the ten, it is quite apparent that these men frequented the upper echelons of society. Additionally, several names indicate origin from politically prominent families, notably the Medici, Guicciardini, and Peruzzi. The individuals on this list, however, don't even reflect the richest men of the city, as several of them were not

<sup>63</sup> de Roover, *Medici Bank*, 28.

<sup>64</sup>Herlihy et al., *Online Catasto of 1427*.

members of the guild (reflected by trade 23) at the time of the Catasto and thus claimed other occupations in the official records. Two of them, Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (owner and founder of the Medici Bank) and Palla Nofri Strozzi held staggering total assets of 91,089 and 162,906 florins, respectively.<sup>65</sup>

The vast public and private investments of these individuals show additional sources of income through interest. Taxable assets for these individuals were reduced by the amount they had contributed to the public debt, i.e., they received a tax deduction for issuing loans on which they would profit from interest. While it is important to consider the taxable assets of these individuals, a common practice in the time of the Ciompi Revolt was to forgo taxing those who made significant contributions to the public debt.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, woolworkers like the Ciompi and the rest of the urban poor were so impoverished that they took out loans in order to pay their taxes, generating further profit via interest for the banking class.<sup>67</sup> The Catasto lists a total of twenty-two men as members of the banking guild, among whom more famous names such as Albizzi and Machiavelli show up.<sup>68</sup> Of this number, the banker with the lowest total assets records a value of 80 florins, interestingly lower than the top tier of woolworkers, but far greater than the average recorded by those same individuals.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the median value of total assets recorded by the bankers was 7,431 florins, far more than the median of even the top ten woolworkers.<sup>70</sup> Table four reveals similar figures for members of the Wool Manufacturers' and Merchants' Guild.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Trexler, *Workers*, 64.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Herlihy et al., *Online Catasto of 1427*.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Table 4: Florence's Ten Wealthiest Members of the Wool Manufacturers' and Merchants' Guild  
(Arte della Lana) in 1427<sup>71</sup>

Name	Patronymic	Family Name	Age	Marital Status	Bocche	Trade	Housing	Priv. Invest	Pub. Invest	Real Estate	Total	Taxable
Bernardo	Lamberto	Lamberteschi	61	Married	8	24	Owner	23296	20573	4012	47871	43327
Giovanni	Domenico	Giugni	50	Married	14	24	Owner	15561	4139	8086	27786	23607
Domenico	Nofri	Busini	53	Married	6	24	Renter	4278	17601	4302	26181	24343
Francesco	Benozzo		60	Married	8	24	Owner	8743	10031	4547	23321	21690
Castello	Piero	Quaratesi	32	Married	2	24	Owner	5782	13570	2370	21722	21453
Bartolo	Nofri	Bischeri	57	Married	9	24	Owner	3689	13485	3672	20846	6113
Daniello	Nofri	Dazzo	30	Married	2	24	Owner	12221	2575	3446	1870	16373
Toso	Albizzo	Dafortuna	30	Married	7	24	Owner	11709	2057	2888	16654	15739
Schiatta	Uberto	Ridolfi	62	Married	12	24	Owner	3873	5785	4049	13707	12334
Andrea	Lando	Fortini	50		3	24	Owner	9268	2724	1700	13692	13562

Florence's prominence as a first-rate textile producer is attested by the success of these individuals, many of whom traded their products on an international level. These are the same men who likely employed—but did not supervise, as many supervisors participated in the revolt themselves—the woolworkers. Their private and public investments rival or surpass those of the bankers, with whom they would have shared the privilege of having their taxes written off. With a colossal 20,573 florins in public investment, Bernardo Lamberteschi was the 9<sup>th</sup> largest investor in the public debt in the entire city.<sup>72</sup> In total, 123 guild members reported their assets to the Catasto, with 5,080 florins being the lowest value of total assets recorded on a single member. Each one of them held investments in the public and private sectors, implying that their wealth was set to increase with time.<sup>73</sup> Their affluence stands in direct contrast to the poverty of their lowest, increasingly disgruntled employees.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Put simply, many of the artisans and laborers who revolted in July 1378 were heavily impoverished and struggling to provide for themselves and their families. Meanwhile, the bankers who determined their laws and the businessmen who employed them were accruing profit not only from their own enterprises, but also from interest gained on loans made to the government. The workers' socioeconomic status prevented them from obtaining access to the halls of government in which they could alter their situation, so they resorted to violence in an effort to be heard. The stage was set, and the revolutionaries lacked only a political catalyst to set things in motion. Beginning in 1375, they would receive just that.

### **Tensions Rising: Guelphs, Ghibellines, and the War of the Eight Saints (1375-78)**

The catalyst arrived in the form of the War of the Eight Saints, a territorial conflict between Florence and a pope who was still based in Avignon rather than Rome. Ultimately, the war proved more disastrous internally for Florence than externally, as the city's public debt skyrocketed to new levels to fund the war efforts, placing great strain on the economy. Perhaps more important, however, are the political ripple effects from the war felt by Florence's highly divided political parties: the Guelphs and the Ghibellines.

The war began when Gregory XI, the last of the Avignon Popes, ended a conflict with Milan in 1375 and allowed his mercenary troops to patrol the borders which he theoretically shared with Florence, but which had been gradually slipping out of the papacy's control since its departure from Italy in 1309.<sup>74</sup> As is frequently the case with mercenaries, however, their leader John Hawkwood was willing to abandon the fight for greater pay, and thus he was dissuaded from attacking Florence for a fee of 130,000 florins.<sup>75</sup> Assuming 14<sup>th</sup>-century chronicler

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<sup>74</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 166.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Giovanni Villani's numbers for the Florentine budget in the 1330s held roughly consistent a few decades later, Hawkwood's payment would have amounted to almost half of Florence's 300,000 florin annual income.<sup>76</sup> While it did force the city into a financial situation that would be felt by the commoners, this payment did not put a permanent stop to the conflict, as the war still continued in small skirmishes as well as by less physical means.

Incensed at the actions of Gregory XI, Florence's government appointed an eight-man assembly known as the Otto della Guerra (The Eight of War) to manage all aspects of their conflict with the Pope.<sup>77</sup> This assembly had the idea to acquire the funds for paying off Hawkwood by forcing a loan onto members of Florence's local clergy and by selling church property, which technically violated canon law protecting church property from secular taxation.<sup>78</sup> In response, the Pope issued an interdict against the city, forbidding certain religious activities, including services and mass, from taking place within its territory. A war of ideologies began when Florence fired back in defense of "republican liberty and the guild regime of the popolo against the return of papal tyranny and corruption in Italy."<sup>79</sup> Florence found allies and encouraged open dissent in several guild-based cities of the Papal States such as Perugia and Bologna, which were weary of pontiffs ruling from afar in Avignon.<sup>80</sup> Coluccio Salutati, Chancellor of Florence, humanist scholar, and mentor to Leonardo Bruni, was the primary agent who encouraged these rebellions. Utilizing rhetorical skills imparted by the finest humanist

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<sup>76</sup> Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 119.

<sup>77</sup> Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People: Volume II*, trans James Hankins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 485.

<sup>78</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 167-68.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Bruni, *History Volume II*, 503, 505.

education, he wrote letters to several Papal State cities, encouraging them to throw off the papal reigns and embrace the *popolo* tradition of guild republicanism like Florence had done.<sup>81</sup>

Florence's actions did not come without consequence, however, as a papal interdict carried serious weight across the Christian world. The immediate concern was the lack of religious services in Florence, a monumental disturbance to the city's Guelph, god-fearing population. To alleviate some of the tension, the government actually ordered the city's clergy in 1377 to defy Gregory's interdict and commence services again, but several church officials fled Florence in rebellion, and those who stayed, along with most of the citizens, were dubious of the services' validity.<sup>82</sup> The interdict had a more long-term economic impact, as it theoretically prevented European rulers from dealing with Florentine banks. The banks, however, held great influence over many rulers as the lenders who financially sustained their governments and war efforts, frequently making them more valuable allies than even the vicar of Christ.<sup>83</sup> It was thus common for rulers to cleverly and conveniently overlook the interdict in their interactions with Florence's bankers.

Regarding the Ciompi Revolt, however, what ultimately resulted from this conflict was the distancing of several Florentine political bodies, most notably the Eight of War themselves, from Florence's usually dominant *Parte Guelfa* (Guelph Party), always loyal to the papacy. During the war, the Eight had taken up the title of "The Eight Saints," in order to convey the sense that they were just, godly men struggling against the injustices of a corrupt and violent pope.<sup>84</sup> Such an action broke with several centuries of Florentine tradition of being a reliable papal ally. Indeed, the elections of July 1375 saw the city formally/governmentally discard its

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<sup>81</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 167.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

Guelph alliances, aligning itself politically with the major Ghibelline city of Milan.<sup>85</sup> Eventually the pope returned to Rome from Avignon in 1377 to manage his affairs in the peninsula more directly, but after the loss of his mercenaries to Florentine coin and the outright rebellion of many smaller cities in his domain, he was more reluctant to continue the war.<sup>86</sup> Florence also tired of the fighting, and peace negotiations began in late 1377. Pope Gregory suddenly died (“of an unbearable bladder pain”) in April 1378, and the resultant confusion meant that peace negotiations were stalled.<sup>87</sup> The papacy eventually forced Florence to pay an indemnity of 250,000 florins as well as to pay 5% interest on the value of all church property confiscated/sold during the war, and because the debt-laden city did not have the funds to repay this immediately, the lost property essentially became the church’s investment in Florence’s public debt.<sup>88</sup>

No one had expected this war to last three years, however, and the Eight were now incurring greater criticism from their Guelph enemies in the summer of 1378. During the war, tensions between the Eight and the popolo grosso citizens of the Parte Guelfa had begun to rise because the Eight were suspected of favoring the commoners of Florence. As the war dragged on, their term of office and magistracy was extended several times, which further exacerbated tensions between the groups.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, the Eights’ conflict with the pope and his interdict opened them to criticism from Florence’s large population of papal loyalists, many of whom began openly “cursing” them for their actions during war. The Parte Guelfa also received support from the old nobility, who wished to see the popular Eight removed and who themselves

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>86</sup> Bruni, *History Volume 2*, 519.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 522-523. “intolerabili vesicae dolore interiit.”

<sup>88</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 170.

<sup>89</sup> Bruni, *History Volume 3*, 3. Note: Bruni broadly uses the Latin terms “optimates” and “plebs” when referring to the social classes in his chronicle. “Plebs” probably specifically refers more to the skilled artisans and lesser guildsmen than it does to the urban poor and laboring classes such as the Ciompi.

comprised a sizeable portion of the Parte. While the commoners remained loyal to the Eight throughout the conflict, the nobility began using the Parte Guelfa apparatus as a means of attacking the Eight and their supporters and excluding them from office by alleging that they had descended from Ghibellines.<sup>90</sup> The Parte Guelfa grossly overstepped, however, when it labeled as Ghibellines its traditional allies—the major guildsmen of the *popolo grosso*, who were then driven into alliance with the lesser guildsmen against the Guelphs, as we shall see.<sup>91</sup>

As if poverty, humble social origin, and the label of “Ghibelline” weren’t enough to keep Florence’s lower classes from obtaining guild membership and public office, the Parte Guelfa and its supporters also introduced the so-called “Law of Admonition,” which “warned” the Eight and their supporters to not to take up public office and actively declared them unfit to do so.<sup>92</sup> This political contest between opposing social factions in the early summer of 1378 served to highlight Florence’s societal divide, which already existed in the form of immense inequality in wealth and representation, and to provide the immediate trigger for the violent months that followed. If the average revolutionary had been highly dissatisfied with his socioeconomic condition for the past several months or years, the tensions of that summer are what finally compelled him to act on his feelings.

### **The Ciompi Revolt(s) and Political Turmoil (1378-82)**

What actually followed the Guelph-Ghibelline power struggle later that summer is not adequately contained in the title “Ciompi Revolt.” Rather, it involved two distinct social movements of violence and protest led and performed by two distinct social groups. The first,

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 158-59.

<sup>92</sup> Bruni, *History Volume 3*, 3, 5.

known as the July Revolution, was initiated by a contingent of skilled artisans and lesser guildsmen supported by throngs of the city's most humble workers, all of whom demanded greater guild and political representation. The second, known as the August Revolution, was much more radical in nature and involved a contingent of those humble workers, better known as the Ciompi, struggling for those same desires against new political alliances which excluded them. While these revolts are frequently merged together in our memory as one "Ciompi Revolt of 1378," further analysis reveals a distinction between the two separate incidents.

This analysis of the revolts draws mainly from two primary sources, the *Cronaca Prima d'Anonimo* and Leonardo Bruni's *History of the Florentine People*. The anonymous chronicle in general takes a much more sympathetic view of the revolutionaries and presents them and their actions relatively favorably. In contrast, Bruni's account depicts the revolutionaries (perhaps not completely inaccurately) more as a rampaging mob ("multitudo") bent on destroying the city's political liberty, the acquisition and maintenance of which is the central theme of his entire chronicle. For Bruni, political liberty meant the triumph and survival of guild-based republicanism and the flourishing of the nobility-conquering popolo grosso. Because the revolutionaries desired to reform the popolo grosso-dominated government, they represented a direct threat to his interests and philosophy. Given that he wrote his account in the 1420s during the peak of the popolo grosso's power and just before the Medici consolidated themselves as the unofficial lords of Florence, his interpretation of events is not surprising. A balanced use of these sources allows for minimal bias in the analysis.

With the month of July upon them, the Parte Guelfa continued to label various citizens, including, again, major guildsmen of the popolo grosso, as Ghibellines for supporting the war effort, and certain denizens of Florence grew disenchanted with the hostile political climate of

the status quo. Believing that the Law of Admonition had been used beyond its reasonable limits, Standard-bearer of Justice Salvestro de' Medici called for the law's reform and the reinstatement of the Ordinances of Justice of 1293, a direct assault on the nobility of the Parte Guelfa.<sup>93</sup> This episode was highly reminiscent of the original events of 1293, with a (Medici) member of the popolo grosso leading the effort to curb noble influence. But perhaps no one had grown quite so infuriated with the power struggle between what they likely perceived as two camps of equally excessively wealthy individuals as those whom Bruni labels as "plebs," the skilled artisans and lesser guildsmen of the city. Fearing resistance to Salvestro's reform, they and the "city mob" ("multitudo urbana") ran through the streets and set fire to the homes of many within the Parte Guelfa who had employed the Law of Admonition, though many of the "optimates" themselves were either hiding or had fled the city, which likely prevented the revolutionaries from killing them.<sup>94</sup> With his opposition adventitiously neutralized, Salvestro passed his legislation and terminated the Law of Admonition. Many of those men whom the mob had targeted were exiled (if they hadn't already left) or declared magnates, rendering them politically impotent.<sup>95</sup>

New elections, including those for new priors, were held shortly after that. Around the same time, "mostly poor men from the lower class" began holding "nocturnal meetings" in which they decided to obtain a guild of their own as well as a place on the priorate.<sup>96</sup> Bruni's exact Latin phrasing implies that these men were "from the lowest plebs" ("ex minima plebe") and the fact that the phrase is in apposition to the "multitudo urbana," suggests that he means for the lowest rankings of the plebs to represent the unskilled laborers, i.e. the most humble workers

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 4-5. "multitudo urbana, egentes plerique ac ex minima plebe homines...conventus agere nocturnos ac de vindicandis sibi honoribus tractare coeperunt."

of the city. His use of the term “plebs” without modification, then, can be taken as a higher form of the lower social class, namely the skilled artisans and lesser guildsmen. Both of these groups were instrumental in the next phase of the revolution, as they had been in removing the Law of Admonition, and Bruni cites agitation with the “discords amongst the greater citizens” as the reason for which they began holding meetings and taking further action.<sup>97</sup> Once the new priors, now headed by Standard-bearer of Justice Luigi Guicciardini, had discovered their plots, they took captive four members of the lowest plebs to discover their motives “and punished them for having held private discussions about constitutional innovations.”<sup>98</sup> A contingent of both skilled artisans and the most humble workers then surrounded the Palazzo della Signoria (Palace of the Priors) demanding the return of the prisoners, and when the priors refused to yield, they burned Luigi Guicciardini’s residence to the ground. They then took to the streets, attacking and burning the homes of the rich in several locations.<sup>99</sup> Having captured the magistrate chosen to quell their rebellion, they dragged him into the Piazza della Signoria (central square), hung him within view of the priors, and tore his body to pieces.<sup>100</sup>

This represents a shifting of the recipients of popular violence from persons of noble or magnate status to those of *popolo grosso* status, i.e. those major guildsmen whose families and associates both dominated Florentine politics and employed the most humble workers of the city. Indeed, the artisans and laborers had at this point worked together to perform similar acts of violence against both traditional nobles and officials from the *popolo grosso*, indicating that the precise class of their opponents was to them less important than the fact that they, through wealth and status, maintained a political authority lacked by the lower classes. On the next day, the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 6-7. “poenasque darent quod privatos de republica innovanda tractatus habuissent.”

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 6-7. “...in publicam aream tractum, in oculis priorum laqueo suspendit laceravitque.”

revolutionary crowd gathered more members and plundered the Palace of the Podestà before returning to the Palace of the Priors. Bruni implies that this crowd contained mainly, if not entirely, members of the most humble class by specifically referring to them as the “mob” without the plebs. The author of the *Cronaca Prima* reports that “they went to the Piazza della Signoria, all armed, shouting ‘Viva il popolo minuto’” as they approached, underscoring this notion.<sup>101</sup> It must be recognized, however, that some of the humble workers from the Arte della Lana were in fact “petty entrepreneurs, who were themselves employers of labor,” that these men formed the leadership of the mob, and that they were socioeconomically closer to an artisan or lesser guildsmen, though they did not enjoy the same political rights.<sup>102</sup> Upon reaching the palace, “one Michele di Lando, wool comber,” appeared and “took in his hand for himself the standard of justice...to save it for the popolo minuto.”<sup>103</sup> Forcing themselves inside, the crowd coerced the priors and Standard-bearer of Justice into abdicating their offices, allowed them to return home (if they still had one), and began establishing members of their own as the city’s governors.<sup>104</sup>

Michele di Lando was made Standard-bearer of Justice, and several men of both the artisanal and humble classes, represented already in an above list, were appointed to executive positions as priors, as district standard-bearers, or as members of the Twelve Good Men. While they were deliberating, a sheriff arrived to propose to the popolo grosso, who were no longer in charge, the hanging of the city’s poor men in retaliation to the day’s violence. He was subsequently grabbed by the popolo minuto and torn to pieces, the smallest of which allegedly

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<sup>101</sup> *Cronaca Prima*, 75. “...si n’andaro a la Piazza de’ signori, tutti armati, gridando: ‘Viva il popolo minuto’” (my translation).

<sup>102</sup> Brucker, *The Florentine Popolo Minuto*, 171.

<sup>103</sup> *Cronaca Prima*, 75. “...uno Michele di Lando pettinatore...e si fu preso, e postogli in mano il confalone della giostizia...per salvallo per lo popolo minuto” (my translation).

<sup>104</sup> Bruni, *History Volume III.*, 7.

was not six ounces.<sup>105</sup> The new government issued many reforms that day, having begun by burning the bags which contained the names of those eligible for political office under popolo grosso rule and reforming the sortition process by which those names were chosen.<sup>106</sup> They heard the complaints of those whom the Parte Guelfa had labeled Ghibellines in the recent months, restored them to Guelph status, and judged that they would not be deemed enemies of the state or of the Parte Guelfa.<sup>107</sup> The anonymous chronicler writes that they did this to give political participation to more people, “so that everyone would have part in the offices, and so that all the citizens would be united together; and so that the poor person would have the part that was proper to him. For they have always borne the costs, but the only ones to reap benefit have been the rich.”<sup>108</sup> They even attempted to eliminate the interest payments on investments in the public debt from which the popolo grosso profited so greatly, though this was halted before it came to fruition.<sup>109</sup>

The reforms continued with the naming of a new leader for each major and minor guild. Michele, the priors, and the new guild leaders then deliberated on the establishment of the “Arti Minute,” (“the lowest guilds”) a group of guilds designed to afford the most humble workers with some form of the political representation that they desired.<sup>110</sup> In total, the government created three new guilds and enrolled 13,000 new men into guild membership.<sup>111</sup> The first of these new guilds contained mainly dyers, silk weavers, and lesser craftsmen; the second

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<sup>105</sup> *Cronaca Prima*, 76. “...fu tutto tagliato per pezzi; il minore pezzo no fu oncie sei.”

<sup>106</sup> Bruni, *History Volume III*, 7. Florentine elected positions were, after a complex process of scrutiny to determine who was eligible, chosen from among names drawn at random from bags.

<sup>107</sup> *Cronaca Prima*, 76.

<sup>108</sup> Trexler, *Workers*, 16. “Perché ciascuno avesse parte degli uffici; e perché fossero uniti insieme i cittadini; e che il povero avesse la sua parte, come gli tocasse; però che sempre hanno portato la spesa, e non ebbono mai niuno guadagno se non e ricchi” (translated by Richard Trexler).

<sup>109</sup> Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 136.

<sup>110</sup> *Cronaca Prima*, 77.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

contained a number of small, non-textile merchants as well as the wool shearers; and the third, numbering about 9,000 men, contained the masses of wool carders and combers.<sup>112</sup> Because each guild possessed the same amount of influence regardless of its population, the government in the long run chose a disproportionately large number of minuti office holders from the “generally more establishmentarian and smaller twenty-second and twenty-third guilds than from the massive twenty-fourth,” meaning that the Ciompi still faced issues of political exclusion even given their new guild.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, of the 13,000 newly-enfranchised men, fewer than 2,000 actually cleared the process of scrutiny required for holding office, implying that the new government remained committed to excluding certain individuals just as the popolo grosso government had done.<sup>114</sup>

The Lando government next turned its attention toward reforming the election process itself, altering the law to state that the nine priors (including the gonfaloniere) should be chosen as follows: three from the seven greater guilds, three from the fourteen lesser guilds, and three from the three new minuti guilds.<sup>115</sup> While this seems at first to be a fair policy or even one that gives the minuti guilds a great share of representation, the subsequent altering of the scrutiny process caused the policy to lose some of its efficacy. On August 9, Michele di Lando chose two *arrotti* (confidants) to represent his views in the scrutiny process for choosing names to be drawn in official elections. The priors also each chose one confidant, so each executive essentially guaranteed himself a pair of eyes and ears in the process of choosing the city’s next leaders.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Trexler, *Workers*, 82.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>114</sup> Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 136.

<sup>115</sup> *Cronaca Prima*, 77.

<sup>116</sup> Trexler, *Workers*, 85.

Perhaps more than anything else, this process revealed the growing distance between the entrepreneurs and lesser guildsmen of the Lando government and the popolo minuto, as the confidants chosen were representative of the popolo grosso more than the commoners in any form. The priors' choices included a banker and a wool manufacturer/executive, among others, and those of Lando himself included a doctor and a butcher.<sup>117</sup> The first three of these were established major guildsmen, while the fourth came from a lesser guild. Their cooperation with the Lando government symbolized the creation of new alliances—between the major and lesser guilds—that had begun during the Parte Guelfa's period of labelling various individuals as Ghibellines and that left the Ciompi and popolo minuto out of the political process. While the original contingent that had overthrown the popolo grosso in July had been fairly representative of the lower classes, the five-and-a-half week period in which the Lando government held power highlighted just how sharp the social divide between guildsmen and non-guildsmen was, as major guildsmen continued to receive official appointments.<sup>118</sup> Meanwhile, various uprisings continued to cause violence throughout the city, and the Lando government began exiling citizens who opposed them.<sup>119</sup>

This was the state of affairs in late August, when the Ciompi, who comprised the bulk of the massive 24<sup>th</sup> guild, became fully conscious of what was happening to their supposed alliance with the lesser guildsmen. Possibly named after the sound made when their wooden clogs struck the street, the Ciompi helped bring the number of guildsmen in the city up to 22,000 in a population of 55,000 men and women, implying that a great majority of Florentine men held guild membership in the summer of 1378.<sup>120</sup> These new men did not take their newfound

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>118</sup> Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 136.

<sup>119</sup> Bruni, *History Volume 3*, 9.

<sup>120</sup> Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy*, 160.

positions lightly and attempted to be actively involved in the city's political processes. But, as we have seen with the priors' selection of confidants, the Lando government was beginning to reverse its loyalties from the *popolo minuto* to the *popolo grosso*. Another sign of this phenomenon appeared on August 21<sup>st</sup>, when the scrutiners, having finished vetting the new candidates for office in the upcoming elections, formed among themselves a consortery, or "brotherhood." The consortery granted them what in Florence was called "pre-eminence," which allowed them to enjoy banquets, to bear "offensive and defensive arms," and to create their own standard.<sup>121</sup> The particular standard that they created was characterized by "a gold lion on a blue field, the lion holding the cross of the *popolo di Firenze* in its claw and wearing a shield with the word 'Liberty' on its breast," thus being a physical representation of the *popolo grosso*'s alliance with this body of government.<sup>122</sup> Because the Lando government had direct ties to the body of scrutiners through their confidants, they could expect to be included in the consortery and to enjoy pre-eminence even after leaving office on September 1st. The *popolo minuto* noticed the alliance when the consortery held a lavish banquet at the church of Ognissanti a few days later, and they grew concerned that the new government was becoming increasingly closed to them.<sup>123</sup>

Not to be outdone, the Ciompi picked a standard for themselves to rally behind, choosing a neighborhood flag adorned with an angel.<sup>124</sup> Each of the now twenty-four Florentine guilds possessed a standard, and each proudly displayed it when the guilds convened for elections on August 29<sup>th</sup> in the Piazza della Signoria. When the elections were completed, all of the guilds exited the square with their flags except the Ciompi, who remained in protest.<sup>125</sup> Their newfound

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<sup>121</sup> Trexler, *Workers*, 48.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>125</sup> *Cronaca Prima*, 81.

solidarity angered the major guildsmen of the *popolo grosso*, who formulated a conspiracy with their allies in the Lando government to do away with the 24<sup>th</sup> guild and return its members to the status of the wool guild's property.<sup>126</sup> On the next day, two or three members of the Eight Saints, now faithfully aiding the *popolo minuto* who had backed them during the Parte Guelfa's accusations two months ago, approached the Palace of the Priors "to demand the oath of the outgoing and incoming governments not to pass any legislation without their approval."<sup>127</sup> Michele di Lando subsequently ordered that they be taken prisoner, and rumors abounded that the *popolo minuto* were poised to commit more burnings in retaliation.<sup>128</sup>

On the morning of August 31<sup>st</sup>, Lando himself, on his last day in office, mounted his horse and rode through the city allegedly with the intent of arresting the remaining members of the Eight Saints. Some of the *popolo minuto* had amassed in the square before the Palace of the Priors to demand the return of the imprisoned Saints, but they listened to the city's leader when he emerged. He carried with him the standard of justice, and he and his entourage shouted, "Long live the people and the guilds, and may he who desires a lord die," claiming that the Eight Saints wanted a lord (to rule them).<sup>129</sup> Thus, the guildsmen's conspiracy was revealed—to convince the populace that the members of the Eight Saints were attempting to sell Florence and to replace its republican traditions with the type of lordship found in Milan and other duchies. Lando's government had now fully switched sides, as where it had once sided with the Eight Saints and fought with *popolo minuto* against the Parte Guelfa and the previous *popolo grosso* government, it now had an established alliance with the major guildsmen of the *popolo grosso* and actively opposed the *minuto*'s interests. Lando believed that this conspiracy could end the

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<sup>126</sup> Trexler, *Workers*, 53.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Cronaca Prima*, 81. "Viva il popolo e l'arti, e muoia chi vole signore," dicendo questi otto volevano signore."

city's rampant social conflicts by deceiving the Ciompi into believing that their Eight Saints were in fact traitors, thus bringing them in line obediently with the new alliance of guilds. His carrying of the standard of justice was crucial to this, as the people knew to always follow and obey the Standard-bearer of Justice when he carried his flag with him.<sup>130</sup> Lando deceived these members of the minuto, for as he led them out of the square, guildsmen filed in to occupy it so that the minuto would not be able to return.<sup>131</sup>

But many of the radical Ciompi were not among those led away by Lando, and they approached the piazza filled with guildsmen and demanded entry.<sup>132</sup> They gathered under their flag of the angel, and when the priors requested that all guilds give up their flags and display them from the governmental palace's windows, they realized that the government's true aim was to force them into disorganization. When they demanded a new flag to rally under, the government refused, and a brief but violent battle ensued in the square.<sup>133</sup> Michele di Lando, now having returned from leading away the original party of the minuto, joined his guildsmen in driving the Ciompi from the square, a struggle in which many Ciompi perished.<sup>134</sup> The guildsmen's assault was led by members of the butchers' guild, perhaps symbolic of the devastation wrought upon the Ciompi that day. The new alliance had triumphed, and the Ciompi were left powerless again. On September 1, the government determined to cleanse itself of any members from the 24<sup>th</sup> guild who still remained, and the guild itself was formally abolished shortly after.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Trexler, *Workers*, 54.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Cronaca Prima*, 82.

<sup>133</sup> Trexler, *Workers*, 54.

<sup>134</sup> Bruni, *History Volume III*, 15.

<sup>135</sup> Trexler, *Workers*, 56-7.

The lesser guildsmen, however, had gained a significant political position through their shrewd dealings in the last month, which they retained until 1382. The flag of the Parte Guelfa was permitted to re-enter to the city in 1381 and even received a parade upon its return, indicating that the traditional nobility were no longer entirely ostracized.<sup>136</sup> The government reversed the status of those nobles who had been labeled magnates in 1382, and those whom the government had exiled since Salvestro de' Medici's tenure as Standard-bearer of Justice were permitted to return as well, for his was the most recent government which the popolo grosso deemed not excessively radical. The remaining two guilds of the popolo minuto were also disbanded so that only the original twenty-one remained.<sup>137</sup> Many of the men who had been in power during the past four years were banished or made public enemies, and the former exiles began reforming their government alongside the popolo grosso. Bruni reports violence in response, but only mentions "frequent outbreaks," and that the city was eventually "freed of its troubles." The exiles received their old properties and offices, and the city "recovered order and stability."<sup>138</sup> The period in Florence's history known as the "Ciompi Revolt," had formally ended with the pre-1378 situation largely restored. Over the next several decades, the popolo grosso enjoyed the most power that it would ever hold while maintaining its alliance with the Parte Guelfa, until one family, the Medici, emerged to establish its dominance in the 1430s.

## Conclusions

If the popolo grosso themselves were the "new men" of the Florence when they began taking over the noble government a little over a century before the revolts of 1378, their

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<sup>136</sup> Bruni, *History Volume III*, 49.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

sympathies toward other new men had evaporated by the time of the Black Death. Their treatment of and resentment toward the Ciompi and the other peasants who migrated to Florence for work and better opportunities reveals how callous and detached the major guildsmen grew in their affluence. Mired in poverty and systematically excluded from the processes by which they could alleviate their situation, the new men of the post-plague period expressed their frustrations with the societal divide in the most noticeable way possible: open rebellion against the government perceived as the source of the problem. At their core, the experiences of the revolutionaries of 1378 speak to the dangers of allowing issues of urban poverty to go unaddressed, with violent action becoming a viable option for those whose situations turn desperate enough. But they also challenge the traditional narrative of Renaissance historiography, which promotes the Italy of this period as a movement away from the feudal institutions of the Middle Ages and toward something more modern. The collective experience of these new men as disenfranchised hopefuls, manual laborers, and the legal property of their employers suggests that the urban society of Renaissance Florence did not break with the social traditions of the preceding several centuries, but rather transformed them by creating a continuity in the form of a new “urban-based serfdom” that left its participants in a similar, nearly propertyless state.

With the adage that “absolute power corrupts absolutely” firmly implanted in our memories, the Ciompi Revolt offers the notion that even a smaller amount of shared power can corrupt an individual thoroughly. Michele di Lando’s betrayal of the *popolo minuto* represents the effect that promises of prestige and greater influence can have on one who previously did not know these benefits. He not only discarded those members of the *minuto*, who had initially aided the lesser guildsmen in the July Revolution, and replaced them with the *popolo grosso*, he

actively participated in their violent demise alongside his new allies. His shift in allegiances suggests that participation in a tainted system has the potential to corrupt those who enter with seemingly honest intention. But if even increased representation for the classes who need and desire it most can backfire and result in further tragedy, how can such a situation be resolved, and how can a more equitable experience be shared by citizens of various backgrounds? Bruni suggests,

“This state of affairs can stand as an eternal example and warning for the city’s leading citizens that they should not allow civil unrest and armed force to come down to the whims of the mob. For it cannot be restrained once it begins to snatch the reins and realizes that it is more powerful, being more numerous. Most of all, it seems, one should beware of seditious actions which have their origins among the principal citizens, for they end up moving from there to the lower orders.”<sup>139</sup>

What Bruni means by “seditious actions” is undoubtedly the Law of Admonition that created the dissension among the upper classes and provided the lesser ones with an opportunity to seize power. However, if a modern interpreter were to construe these “seditious actions” as the perpetuation of wealth and representation inequality over a prolonged period of time (an offense against any government which claims republicanism as its foundation), then Bruni’s claim might present a more valid hypothesis.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 9.

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