Did Factions Exist? Problems and Perspectives on European Factional Struggles (1400–1750)

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Questioning whether factions actually existed by way of introduction to a book titled *Factional Struggles* will probably come as a surprise to the reader. However, a review of the abundant historiography on factions in European cities and courts from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries leaves one impressed at the enormous variety and complexity of factional patterns. Often historians have developed radically opposing interpretations of the same historical circumstances, and in some cases the very existence of factions and partisanship has been disputed. The historiographical debate over the English Tudor court probably furnishes the most striking example.¹ Historians such as Greg Walker and George Bernard have seriously questioned the extent of factional disputes, and even their existence, in Henry VIII’s court.² Simon Adams has discussed and rejected the idea that factionalism in the English court was a permanent state of affairs during the second half of the sixteenth century;³ and recently, in a study of the later Elizabethan period, Janet Dickinson has argued that court politics in the 1590s was not at bottom a fight between two factions.⁴ Similarly, other researchers have concluded that in many European towns, harsh conflicts were not always the fruit of factional rivalries, as has sometimes been hastily assumed.⁵ Even when the existence of factions is not in doubt, the overwhelming variety of discordant interpretations concerning

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the origins, nature and importance of factional conflicts can be puzzling. A clear definition of what makes a faction, who belonged to factions and what their aims were, often appears impossible to state. Working on the French and Imperial courts, Jeroen Duindam came to the conclusion that no single model of factions can be constructed for early modern courts.6

Many well-known cases demonstrate that the abundance of competing interpretations is frequently the result of historiographical twists and turns. Studies of the Italian cities provide a good first example. The long, still very much alive, historiographical discussion of the Guelphs and the Ghibellines in twelfth-century Florence, ignited in 1899 by Gaetano Salvemini’s *Magnati e popolani*, has led to a bewildering variety of interpretations of the nature and composition of these two parties. Historians have shifted from describing this reality as a socioeconomic clash to analysing it as chiefly as being the result of patron-client relations.7

The focus of many historians studying Italian factions during the Renaissance and Early Modern periods in terms of topics such as “violence”, “feuds”, “honour”, and “rituals”, and a stress on microhistorical case studies, was dictated by the influence of anthropological and ethnographical studies.8 More recently, some historians have drawn attention to the long-underestimated persistence and vitality of the Guelphs and Ghibellines in northern Italy during the late medieval period. Challenging the interpretation of factions as a form of irrational violence, they emphasised the structural organization of factions, showing how they were also an accepted tool for the resolution of conflicts, and a

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