BOOK REVIEW


This book offers an interpretation of medieval protest based on the concept of ‘disciplined dissent’. It starts with an Introduction by the editor, Fabrizio Titone, on ‘The Concept of Disciplined Dissent and its Deployment: A Methodology’. Titone argues that we should see power as diffused, and thus transcend the binary distinction between consensus and resistance. By ‘disciplined dissent’, he means the strategies by which those who were the target of policies of marginalisation (as well as those who occupied less prominent social and political roles) managed to improve their position by adopting the rulers’ language, behaviour and rules. By such means, those whose lives were affected by top-down and exclusionary social control policies might overcome the restrictions placed upon them and reassert their own influence. All the essays collected in this volume take the concept of ‘disciplined dissent’ as their theoretical point of departure, despite relating to wholly distinct political contexts. Contributions by scholars from different backgrounds shed light upon different circumstances prevailing in continental medieval Europe, offering the reader a broad spectrum of analyses of political confrontation, and many episodes of non-violent protest.

Barbara H. Rosenwein (‘Poetic Dissent: The Troubadours at Toulouse’) examines poems, written and sung in Old Occitan (the regional vernacular), meant to please and entertain their patrons. The author states that troubadour dissent was one form of disciplined dissent because, on the one hand, it borrowed the vocabulary and themes of those in power (in this case the court of Toulouse) and on the other it used them to critique, to question and to point out weaknesses. The troubadours masked their critique by displacing their focus from men onto women. Sometimes the ruling power re-appropriated the vocabulary of the dissenters, adapting it to their own uses. Rosenwein suggests that all the scribes who drew up the official acta at the Toulousain court were inspired by the poets to appeal ever more emphatically in their charters of fidelity.

Christina Lutter (‘Negotiated Consent: Power Policy and the Integration of Regional Elites in Late Thirteenth-Century Austria’) uses as primary sources Gutolf’s Translatio S. Delicianae and Jans’ Fürstenbuch. While Gutolf (Gutolfus de Sancta Cruce), a monastic writer documented in charters from 1265, 1267, 1284 and 1285 as a monk at the Cistercian monastery of Heiligenkreuz, in Lower Austria, developed his contemporary history in a more sophisticated way, Jans der Enikel, a Viennese poet of the thirteenth century, wrote popular stories, playfully making use of traditional courtly models. Lutter’s research makes clear that both writers were interested in recording a conspicuous series of conflicts and negotiations over power in the Austrian lands to restrict princes’ political control in the Habsburg reign.
The volume continues with an essay by María Asenjo-Gonzáles (‘Political Dissent in Towns and Cities in Castile and Leon, Expressed through Complaints and Petitions to the Crown (Thirteenth–Fourteenth Centuries’). She challenges the theory that disciplined dissent was managed in the political society of Castile at the end of the thirteenth-century solely as a conservative movement to safeguard justice from the threats posed by royal reforms. The author points out that disciplined dissent jeopardised the capacity of the king and his officials in the councils of the hermandades, the military peace-making associations of armed individuals. Asenjo-Gonzáles explains that, as medieval kings of León, Castile and Aragon were often unable to maintain public peace, these protective municipal leagues began to emerge to protect communities against bandits and other rural criminals, as well as against the lawless nobility, or were mobilised to support a claimant to the Crown.

Peter Coss (‘Disciplined Dissent in Fourteenth-Century England’) examines the validity and utility of the concept of disciplined dissent in relation to later medieval England. Much of the political life of medieval England was played out at Westminster, where membership of both Houses of Parliament was dominated by men who constituted the elite. Naturally, there were also important local dimensions to the exercise of power, both political and social. Coss uses the example of Coventry merchants: excluded from power by an entrenched ecclesiastical landlord, they failed to make headway by acts of rebellion, and were able to turn the tide by adopting forms of action that were socially and politically acceptable and were common currency within the ranks of the powerful.

Alma Poloni (‘The Political Mobilisation of Wage Labourers and Artisans in Siena, Florence, Lucca and Perugia in the Second Half of the Fourteenth Century’) investigates the processes by which the lower classes of Siena, Florence, Lucca and Perugia developed a new political consciousness and demanded a role within the world of work. In Florence and Perugia the guilds had for decades played an important political role, in Siena their role had become relevant only after the establishment of the magistracy of the Twelve, while in Lucca they were practically excluded from political life. The main aspect which emerges from this research is the almost complete lack of interaction between the different ranks of the popolo within the guilds, so that in all these cities the mobilisation which took place in the 1370s and 1380s was based on a reaction against the supremacy of the upper members of guilds. In Central Italy, in other words, popular mobilisation between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was determined by the reaction of the lower ranks of society to the closing of the political system in the hands of wealthy guildsmen.

Fabrizio Titone (‘The Right to Consent and Disciplined Dissent: Betrothals and Marriages in the Diocese of Catania in the Later Medieval Period’) studies groups in Southern Italy who strove to oppose hegemony and looked, not to direct action, but to forms of adaptation and self-preservation which could be employed by those excluded from real power. He draws attention to the illuminating argument that, in late medieval Sicily, matrimony was a social model that held sway and precluded alternative choices, also claiming that it systematically ratified the passage from the guardianship of the father to that of the husband. The author highlights the liberating effect of the rite of passage entailed by marriage by using the example of the diocese of Catania.
in which imposed unions and marriages were denounced to the ecclesiastical court as potential threats to the social order.

Jeff Fynn-Paul (‘Three Stages of Disciplined Dissent at Manresa in the Later Medieval Period’) aims to show that in medieval Manresa, a city in Spanish Catalonia, disciplined dissent was possible only if the conditions of an actual dialogue between the Church, the Crown and the bourgeoisie was present. This depended on a willingness on the part of the Crown to sanction a dialogue between itself and burghers, nobles and churchmen. The author asserts that fourteenth-century Catalonia was governed by consensus, so while general goodwill was guaranteed by the harmonious relations between the Catalan city government and the Crown, political equilibrium disappeared in the following century—a time in which suspicion among the parties gave way to resentment and political instability.

Ángela Muñoz Fernández (‘Iberian Women in Religion and Policies of Disciplined Dissent in the Archbishopric of Toledo in the Fifteenth to Early Sixteenth Centuries: The Heaven of Juana de la Cruz’) analyses the voices adopted by religious women, such as nuns and mulieres religiosae (bestas). This work examines the Archbishopric of Toledo during the first two decades of the sixteenth century and explains how the voices of religious women contributed to the diffusion of the Protestant Reformation in the Iberian Peninsula. This research considers the role of Juana de la Cruz, whose visionary experiences (during which she lost consciousness) narrated the feasts and pageants taking place in heaven. Juana de la Cruz, in fact, is a figure who exemplifies the broad phenomenon of charismatically pious women who demonstrated the unjustified and abusive nature of the social limitations placed upon women.

John Watts concludes the volume, stressing that ‘disciplined dissent’ helps us to understand the forms of political assertion adopted by those who needed to establish legitimacy to challenge the holders of power. With this last consideration, I would like to stress the importance of this volume, which will be crucial reading for all scholars involved in studying the meaning of political confrontation and protest.

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