Unit 3 Reading Guide: The social order

In this unit we move from the family to the other social formations in Renaissance cities, and examine the hierarchy and mutual obligations that governed social life. We begin by looking at general issues and then turn to specifics: the social hierarchy of Florence, the place of religion and morality in public life, and the mechanisms by which outsiders were defined and treated.

Essential questions for this unit
• How was society divided?
• Can we talk about social classes in the Renaissance?
• What obligations existed between social orders?
• How was the social hierarchy legitimated?
• How was the social hierarchy enforced?
• What was the connection between social structure and political power?

Paper topics for this unit
The following paper topics are suggestions; if you would like to define a different paper topic, you are welcome to do so. See the paper guideline handout for more details.

1. The modern concept of social class involves two elements: (1) a specific place in an economic or social hierarchy (e.g. working class, upper class), and (2) consciousness or awareness that one is a member of such a grouping (i.e., class consciousness). Based on this definition, is it reasonable to use the term “class” when talking about the social and economic hierarchy in the Renaissance? Is it useful, and if so, what are the limits of its usefulness?

2. Describe and explain the changes in the social hierarchy and the values of the elite over the course of the Renaissance, c. 1300-1500.

3. What moral values did the government of Renaissance Florence feel that it was their duty to promote? What sanctions were applied to those who violated those values? How was religion related to public morality?

Tues. 10/15: The social and economic order
Read: Burke, 209-234 (ch. 9); Martines, 162-190 (ch. 10).

1. What were the distinctions and social divisions among the religious in Renaissance Italy? What proportion of the population was associated with the Church? What were the main ways in which lay people participated in religious activities?

2. What functions did the courts of Renaissance signorie fill? What political and cultural activities went on in the court?

3. What connection does Burke identify between political forms and the production of artists (not art) in the Renaissance? What about the connection between political forms and artistic patronage?

4. How much social mobility was there in Renaissance Italy (according to Burke)? How did social mobility change with time? Was Italian Renaissance society “bourgeois”? What problems are associated with this term?

5. How did land tenure, ownership, and production change in the late Middle Ages? What was the connection between town and country in city-states?
6. What connections does Martines identify between economic trends and political trends in the fifteenth century? How are shifts in the tax systems of Renaissance city-states connected with these trends?

7. How was industrial or craft production organized in Renaissance Italy? Was the Italian economy capitalist? (How does your answer to this second question depend on your definition of “capitalism”?)

8. Can one posit a direct link between economic power and cultural development in the Renaissance? Why or why not?

**Thurs. 10/17: Social structure in Renaissance Florence**

1. Read §§1-6. What assets and liabilities did rich Florentines possess? Poor Florentines? How large were families recorded in the 1427 Catasto?

2. Read §§7-12. What opportunities for enrichment and social advancement were available for Renaissance Florentines? What risks did they run? How likely do you think it was that someone would make a giant leap up the social hierarchy? What about a great fall?

3. Read §§13-15. What did wealthy Florentines think about their money? How was it to be treated, and what was it used for? Assuming these documents are representative, how did attitudes toward wealth change over the fifteenth century? Do the changes fit with what you learned from Burke and Martines?

4. Read §§102-105. What powers did the guild authorities have over workers in their trades? What daily challenges were faced by the working poor in Florence?

5. Read §§106-109. What forms of servitude existed in Renaissance Florence? What access to legal protection was there for slaves?

6. Read §§110-112. Under what circumstances did the Commune provide relief for the poor? What were the normal sources of charity in other circumstances?

7. Read §§113-115. What attitude did political authorities take toward the poor?

**Tues. 10/22: Religion, public morals, and outsiders**

1. Review §35 on the St. John’s Day celebrations in Florence. What aspects of the celebrations draw on religious groups and symbolism? How is religion integrated with this civic festival?

2. Read §§83-85. What was sumptuary legislation? Why did communes pass it? Is there any connection between sumptuary legislation and social mobility? If so, what?

3. Read §§86-87. What problems did gambling cause? Who is accused of gambling?

4. Read §§88-92. Why did Florence tolerate prostitution? What kinds of offenses could get prostitutes and pimps in trouble with the authorities? What conditions forced women to become prostitutes?

5. Read §§93-96. Why did the government of Florence need to reiterate and strengthen sodomy laws? Why were priors ordered by law, under penalty of a fine, not to interfere with judicial investigations of sodomy?
6. Read §§97-101. Why did the Commune feel a duty to oversee the morality of convents? Is there a connection between this concern for convents, attitudes about women, and the practice of sending younger daughters to a convent instead of finding husbands for them?

7. Read §§117-122. How did communal legislation and popular opinion regard the Jews of Florence? What stereotypes did Florentines have about Jews? What professions or trades did the Jews in these documents practice?

8. Read §§123-127. What heresies are mentioned? How did the Florentine people feel about heretics? What was the balance between ecclesiastical and civil authority in the prosecution of heretics?

9. Read §§128-132. What crimes were witches and sorcerers accused of? How were they punished? Why do you think that Brucker put the documents on sorcerers in the section with Jews and heretics, rather than the section on crimes?