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ESTRATTO

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Servire due padroni: Una genealogia dell'uomo politico cristiano (50-313 e.v.)

Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli, *Servire due padroni: Una genealogia dell'uomo politico cristiano (50-313 e.v.)*. Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana; Scholé, 2018. 385. ISBN 9788828400073 €28.00.

Review by

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The ambitious goal of this book is to conduct a genealogical inquiry into early Christian forms of public-political engagement (hence the title, “serving two masters”), accounting for the emergence of a new and elusive figure, the “Christian political man,” before the Constantinian shift and the actual Christianization of the Roman Empire.

The analysis unfolds in nine chapters organized into four sections, the titles of which are worth giving in full:

- i) “Life and Fate of the Publicly ‘Impolitical’ Being” (*Vita e destino dell'essere pubblicamente impolitico*, 29-96);
- ii) “Between Imperium and Theocracy: The Law of Fields in Light of a Political Economy of Religion” (*Tra imperium e teocrazia: La legge dei campi alla luce di un'economia politica della religione*, 97-168);
- iii) “My Interest is that the State...’: Six Forms of Christian Political Subjectivation” (*Ho interesse a che lo Stato...’: Sei forme della soggettivazione politica cristiana*, 169-234);

- iv) “I Served the Roman Emperor’: Trajectories of Christian Public-Political Engagement” (*Ho servito l’imperatore di Roma’: Traiettorie dell’impegno pubblico-politico cristiano*, 235-328).

Each section is preceded and followed by useful summaries, and a final appendix in table form (329-336) documents the few scattered references to the possible presence of Christ-followers among the ranks of the imperial ruling class between 50 and 313 CE. The table lists no less than 28 pieces of evidence from literary, epigraphic, and papyrological sources, and provides a glimpse of the body of evidence that Urciuoli proposes to illuminate and analyse.[1]

Urciuoli is also interested in methodological reflection on the very possibility of recovering and interpreting such documentary evidence. As in his previous book, which attempted to trace an “archaeology of the Christian ‘we’,”[2] the key lies in the first word of the subtitle: in this case, “genealogy.” The reference is not so much to Michel Foucault as to Pierre Bourdieu, whose critical sociology provides the author with a general theoretical framework from which to take his moves.

The book opens in a captivating way, discussing an inscription found near the site of the ancient Caesarea of Mauretania (Cherchell, Algeria), [CIL III 9585](#), commonly dated to the second half of the third century. The inscription records the donation of a common grave for an “assembly of brothers” (an early Christian group) by a person described as *cultor verbi*. The name of this munificent “worshiper of the word” is also given (Severian), as is his social rank (senator). As Urciuoli notes, there have been many attempts to identify this Severian with a martyr of the same name who appears to have been executed around the same time in Caesarea. That identification is problematic for several reasons, but Urciuoli invites the reader to think about its appeal, which relates not least to the Girardian combination of victim and victimizer. The two ideal figures, the senator and the martyr, represent in fact the type of “borderline-conceptual characters” (12) that researchers should avoid focusing on: they are “pure icons,” polar opposites associated with the sort of “grand (Christian) narrative” that Urciuoli deems unhelpful for historical reconstruction.

The first part of the volume aims to deconstruct this “grand narrative.” If we define politics as that sphere of human action that directly or indirectly pertains to the conquest and exercise of power, then, Urciuoli argues, any political history of Christianity cannot but begin from an account of the “messianic preaching” that the earliest followers of Jesus started in the mid-first century. The Christ who speaks in the early Christian sources, or which the early Christian sources speak about, is for Urciuoli a “figure of theocracy,” that is, a superhuman agent who proclaims the advent of an “immediately apprehensible divine power that overwhelms any form of human power” (44, referring to Jacob Taubes’ definition of theocracy). Hence the officially “publicly impolitical” character of the pre-Constantinian Jesus-follower.[3] An impressive passage by Tertullian (*Pall.* 5.4) makes the point: *Non iudico, non milito, non regno: secessi de populo. In me unicum negotium mihi est; nisi aliud non curo quam ne curem* (“I do not act as a judge, a soldier, or a king: I have withdrawn from public life. My only activity concerns myself; I do not have any care, except for this: to have no care”; Engl. transl. by Vincent Hunink).

Early Christian political discourse is therefore based on a subtle dialectic in which a programmatic refusal to be involved in the exercise of secular power corresponds to an equally political decision in favour of the *ecclesia*, as the “decisive human grouping” and the only institution capable of embodying an *auctoritas* that is not of this world, and which is purported to render any (other) earthly *potestas* empty. In the concluding chapter of the section (85-94), Urciuoli briefly recalls the later success of this theologico-political device, as well as its enormous impact on modern debates about secularization.

The second part of the book leads to the true heart of the investigation. Urciuoli, as said, aims at offering an alternative approach, designed to enable historians to avoid both the theological constraints that come from early Christian self-understanding and the analytical assumptions of a long historiographic tradition, “since both have differently incorporated the same principles of vision and division of the social world which they should have understood” (101). This approach draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s social

praxeology, and particularly his theory of fields, which allows the author to identify and describe two different networks of material and symbolic relations. First, we have the field of Roman power, which corresponds to the network of power relations linked to duties (*officia*) and honours (*honores/dignitates*) institutionally associated with the three official ranks (*ordines*) at the top of the Roman social pyramid: senators, equestrians, and decurions. Second, we have the Christian religious field, a social microcosm in progress, composed of different religious agents (the bishop, the “charismatic,” the “great layman,” and the “enlightened”) often in open competition with each other.

Both fields have their own *nomos*, which Urciuoli describes analysing (internal and external) relations of competition and exchange in terms of symbolic capital, economic capital, interests, and autonomy/heteronomy. To offer just one example, where competition and interaction between the two fields is at its highest, as in the case of the “great laymen” involved in political life, Urciuoli points out that their economic capital—within the Christian religious field—is relatively insignificant compared to the symbolic capital held by church authorities. In this case, a principle of internal hierarchy (symbolic capital as a principle of autonomy) prevails over a principle of external hierarchy (economic capital as a principle of heteronomy), and a sharp line is drawn between producers and consumers of specific religious goods and services (150). This is at least the situation the sources describe as ideal and normative (illustrations are taken from Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, and Cyprian of Carthage). But what happened in reality, when individuals belonging to the Christian field found themselves engaged with the deep structures of Roman government?

This is the question Urciuoli seeks to address in the last two sections of the book, applying Bourdieu’s conceptual arsenal to analyse the concrete attitude of Jesus-followers towards public-political engagement. He identifies six “figures” of pre-Constantinian Christian political subjectivation:

- i) the “politician by vocation,” whose political interests are not affected by his or her Christian beliefs at all (unsurprisingly, this is a virtually hypothetical case, which can be glimpsed only in a

borderline case like that of Severus Alexander, if we rely on the possibly fictional account of *Hist. Aug. Alex.* 29.2);

- ii) the “man of the world,” whose political ambitions are conditioned by his or her belonging to the Christian field (Urciuoli focusses on the cases of Paul of Samosata and three public officials mentioned by Eusebius in *H.E.* 8.9.7; 8.11.1; 8.11.2);
- iii) the “loyalist *sub condicione*,” who expresses theological reservations about political institutions but does not refuse to engage completely (a position we can find in Clement of Rome, *1 Peter*, and Justin Martyr);
- iv) the “untrustworthy subject,” who accepts submission to imperial power but does not recognize any authority other than that of God (as in the case of the martyr Speratus in *Mart. Scil.* 6);
- v) the “apocalyptic opponent,” represented by the anti-imperial stance of the book of Revelation, the New Prophecy, Hermas, and Cyprian;
- vi) the “ideological endorser of the empire,” who is not necessarily interested in pursuing a political career of his or her own, but is highly concerned about the stability of the world and therefore committed to opposing any eschatological situation of crisis (a position that, for Urciuoli, can already be found in the Pastoral Epistles).

In these last two sections, Urciuoli succeeds not only in providing an original interpretive framework but also in broadening our understanding of early Christian political history. Particularly thought-provoking is the final section of the book, entirely devoted to reconstructing the “dispositional tactics” of Christian “men of the world.” Urciuoli suggests connecting their social rise to the structural “shuffling of social cards” that occurred in the field of Roman power during the third century. It is telling that most of the figures discussed are high officials who act at a local level, and generally in financial administration, an area in which there was no need to hold noble titles. Their fortunes seem to fit perfectly into the

context of a general decline of traditional forms of power, a phenomenon that has often been ascribed to the so-called “crisis” of the third century. In this regard, it is only regrettable to note the absence of critical engagement with some recent scholarship on the subject, for example with the work of Lukas de Blois or David S. Potter.[4]

At any event, after closing the book one is left with the overall impression of a learned work that offers important insights. The book poses some objective difficulties, however. Readers who do not have a thorough acquaintance with Bourdieu’s technical terminology (as well as with postmodern political theory) will probably feel a certain sense of bewilderment. In addition to the linguistic barrier posed by Italian (for non-Italian readers), Urciuoli’s prose also does not always shine for clarity, and it is often hard to follow in its stylistic acrobatics. Sometimes a certain baroque predilection for metaphors can be delightful (132: “Christ is not the guarantor of the cosmos, but its liquidating commissioner”), but in many cases it ends up frustrating the reader (e.g. at 91: “Persecutions go across the thin egalitarian sheet of ecclesiastical ideology like a knife in the butter of its objective social disparities”). But these are things that can be forgiven in an otherwise brilliant book, wittily written and nicely produced.[5]

[1] Urciuoli’s dataset relies upon previous prosopographic surveys, especially those offered by A. von Harnack, W. Eck, P. Lampe, W. Wischmeyer, T.D. Barnes, and most recently in A. Weiß’ important volume, *Soziale Elite und Christentum. Studien zu ordo-Angehörigen unter den frühen Christen* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015).

[2] See E.R. Urciuoli, *Un’archeologia del “noi” cristiano. Le “comunità immaginate” dei seguaci di Gesù tra utopie e territorializzazioni (I-II sec. e.v.)* (Milan: Ledizioni, 2013; open access at the [Publisher’s website](#)).

[3] For the notion of “impolitical,” Urciuoli refers to R. Esposito, *Categorie dell’impolitico* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1988; Engl. transl. by C. Parsley: *Categories of the Impolitical*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

[4] See, e.g., Lukas de Blois, “The Crisis of the Third Century AD in the Roman Empire: A Modern Myth?” in *The Transformation of Economic Life under the Roman Empire*, ed. by Lukas de Blois and John Rich (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 2002), 204-217; Lukas de Blois, *Image and Reality of Roman Imperial Power in the Third Century AD: The Impact of War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), reviewed in BMCR [2019.03.25](#); or David S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay, AD 180-395: Second Edition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), reviewed in BMCR [2014.10.38](#). Surprisingly, Urciuoli does not even refer to classic studies such as Santo Mazzarino’s *La fine del mondo antico* (Milan: Garzanti, 1959; Engl. transl. by G. Holmes: *The End of the Ancient World*, London: Faber & Faber, 1966), whose insights on the third century are still of great value and would have been beneficial to the analysis.

[5] I noticed only a few misprints: at 276, sixth line from the bottom, the dot should be replaced by a question mark; 310 n. 219, the reference “ibi, 127-129” is unclear; 314, “e breve” should be read “a breve”; 366 (bibliography), Reeves should be placed between Rebillard and Reichert; in the table of contents, the hyphen after “p. 91” should be deleted.