

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Ruggiero, Guido. The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento

Thomas V. Cohen

Volume 38, Number 4, Fall 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087374ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i4.26401>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Cohen, T. (2015). Review of [Ruggiero, Guido. The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 38(4), 224–226. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i4.26401>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2016

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

and theological opinions. She was acquitted, but her case demonstrates in subtle ways how difficult it was in a society run by men to accommodate the fact that women had a capacity for scientific observation, could deliberately foster their ideas by participating in academic discussions, and could circulate new scientific concepts through experimental practice and through the use of the artisan marketplace—all without being university-trained or belonging to any guild.

This is a learned book with a well-argued thesis, convincing research, and lucid writing, where even footnotes are bursting with valuable information. Ray elegantly opens the way for further and wider investigations into the methods that allowed intellectual women to participate in the culture of their time, thus establishing a critical link with the work of eighteenth-century women scientists such as Laura Bassi, Maria Gaetana Agnesi, and Anna Morandi Manzolini. *Daughters of Alchemy* should be required reading for anyone interested in discussing scientific work of the early modern period in Italy.

VALERIA FINUCCI

Duke University

Ruggiero, Guido.

The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento.

New York: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 635 + 34 ill. ISBN 978-0-521-71938-4 (paperback) \$38.95.

Guido Ruggiero's textbook on Italy helps fill a gaping void. We who teach Italian history are painfully aware of how hard it is to offer students a book with both breadth and vision. The Oxford series—good essays by fine scholars but with little guiding hand—remains scattershot and uneven. Hay's old textbook suits well-schooled Britons, but overshoots our students. Hanlon's taut survey takes up where many a course trails off. Ruggiero, meanwhile, aspires to cover Italy, and the Renaissance, in clear, uncondescending prose—his direct language enabling a student's ready grasp. As befits our day he presumes little knowledge but, unlike many textbook writers, treats readers with condign respect.

This is a teacher's book. Reading it, one senses the lectures, long on good yarns and cameo biographies and patient enough to unsnarl the hideous tangles of fifteenth-century alliances and double-crosses.

The work sums up Ruggiero's thinking about culture and its links to social structure, and about rich lessons slyly garnered from good literature. It argues that the great tangle we call the Renaissance was an ideological performance, hosted by the *popolo grosso* of major cities, to justify their grip on power. The trick, Ruggiero claims, was to call new things old, and to drape class interest and personal ambition in the toga of a half-imagined, selectively evoked antiquity. Italian elites could fool themselves and one another into such a myth by their habit of "consensus reality," their understanding that they were, in essence and action, as others saw them. There is much sense in this notion of a hollow pre-modern self. Ruggiero sits well with other scholars' arguments about the slow emergence of inwardness.

Now what does this rich textbook do, or not, and what classroom needs does it serve? And how are we, if teaching, to use it?

I incline to bite off pieces; Ruggiero does splendidly with the tangled politics of the Italian states, always daunting. And he suggests fascinating, if contentious, readings from favourite *novelle*, poems, plays, and treatises, often handily in English and thus in students' reach.

Ruggiero offers Italian history as story; I, meanwhile, teach it as a conversation, or argument, between scholars, hoping my students learn to be historians, even if they usually end up otherwise. So I stress historians and debates. Ruggiero's long book is short on other scholars. Some heroes surface in a cameo, but a surprising number appear nowhere in the text, and many others not even in the bibliography. Now this bibliography is partial, stressing work in English; Ruggiero has read the scholars, but seldom brings them into his lectures. Ascoli, Bouwsma, Grendler, and Kristeller do show up for culture, and Brucker and Martines for politics. But we have no Kirshner, Molho, or Kuehn for law in Florence, or for family no Chojnacki or, weirdly, Klapisch-Zuber. Despite his eminence and collaboration with Ruggiero, we have no Muir; despite the Renaissance theme, we have not a whiff of Grafton. The Italians fare yet worse: no Berengo, Chittolini, Grendi, Levi, or Raggio in the main text, and, even in the index, no Ago or Cipolla. I could stretch the list here. In sum, those who teach via debates with scholars will have to find some other path. Ruggiero puts a curtain between his reading and his readers; his textbook does not favour unanswered questions or propound debates that roil us.

Meanwhile much of Italy is little to be seen. Now Italy is vast and hard to cover; a writer must choose. There is little in Ruggiero's book for the history

of social process, exchange, negotiation, or the fine structure of social action. One sees groups in conflict, but not coalitions and constellations bargaining or adjusting to one another. Ruggiero's social history thus features some sociology but less anthropology, so that assorted zones of recent investigation enjoy little play. The history of material culture, for instance, is seldom there. Ruggiero's is a Renaissance mainly of ideas, and of fine works of art, but we barely glimpse the antiquarians, connoisseurs, or builders of the first museums. Science is sketchy and technology even sketchier; the book's index has a swarm of "Medici" but no entry for "medicine," nor for charlatans or empirics. Anatomy does not figure; Vesalius is not there. And Ruggiero's economic history is good but mainly Florentine. The new spatial turn is largely missing, as are the burgeoning histories of sensory experience, consumption, diet, regimes of health, and the human body as inhabited, perceived, and appraised, not to mention ecology, epidemiology, and historical zoology.

Meanwhile, the book is resolutely urban: five big cities plus two or three famous courts take up all the space. Italy's rural majority are barely present, except in the survey at the start. It is as if they had no history.

Religion, meanwhile, does show up, largely at the book's end when things go Tridentine, but it appears as a force for social discipline, not as a device for negotiating with the living and the dead, for securing solidarities, or for coming to terms with one's inner self. So it is that in the index there are twenty-six entries under "sex," and under "sermons" none. One looks in vain for pilgrimages, sacred images, vows, flagellations, holy plays, confraternal life, the cult of saints, exorcisms, cures, divinations, hermits, prophets, meditations or private devotions. We have Florence in plenty but no Virgin of Impruneta. There is no Oratorio and no Filippo Neri. As for the Jews, we see them from the outside only, and none of their lively historians figure, even in the bibliography.

So I admire the book and the zest and courage of its author. I will use it to navigate Italian history's vastness. But I could imagine a different textbook, equally bold but more open to our experiments and to discordant scholarly voices.

THOMAS V. COHEN
York University