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## The Eagle and the Snake: The Patriciate of Milan under Austrian Rule

The “long eighteenth century”, as far as Milan is concerned, can be taken to extend from 1706, the year when Spanish domination came to an end and Austrian supremacy began, until the restoration of Habsburg sovereignty after the fall of the Napoleonic Empire. This period of roughly 110 years saw dramatic changes in government, finance, justice, and administration as well as in society and culture, which brought about the end of the *ancien régime* and the entry of Lombardy into the modern era. The nobility and particularly its upper layer, the patriciate, were deeply affected by this process of change, both in their relationship to political power and in their attitudes and social practices. This paper, while acknowledging the social and cultural impact of ‘revolution from above’, will deal predominantly with political aspects.

The patriciate as a distinct form of nobility has long held the attention of Italian historians. A definition offered by Marino Berengo in 1975 has won wide acceptance: “What marks the patriciate is the public and political role of the families being part of it; it is the claim, at first predominant and later exclusive, to hold public office; this means, in short, the formation of a closed and hereditary power group”<sup>1</sup>: the reference to an urban background, implicit in this passage, is clearly set out in a later essay by the same author, who applies the word *patrician* to “those families who maintain their main residence in a city where they hold public offices not occasionally, but in preference to ordinary citizens or even exclusively”<sup>2</sup>. Another historian has coined the phrase *patrician system* to signify not only the power held by the patriciates, but “their way of life, a way of life specific to social groups not originally aristocratic, but who made use of aristocratic notions to define themselves as ruling classes”<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Marino BERENGO, *La città di antico regime*, in Alberto CARACCILO (ed.), *Dalla città preindustriale alla città del capitalismo* (Bologna 1975) 33–34.

<sup>2</sup> Marino BERENGO, *Ancora a proposito di patriziato e nobiltà*, in Paolo MACRY, Angelo MASSAFRA (eds), *Fra storia e storiografia. Studi in onore di Pasquale Villani* (Bologna 1994) 524. The concept is further developed in Marino BERENGO, *L'Europa delle città, Il volto della società urbana europea tra Medio Evo ed età moderna* (Torino 1999) esp. chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> Cesare MOZZARELLI, *Il sistema patrizio*, in Cesare MOZZARELLI, Pierangelo SCHIERA (eds.), *Patriziati e aristocrazie nobiliari* (Trento 1978) 63.

The case of Milan is different from that of Venice, Genoa or Lucca, where the patriciate ruled the state itself (however small this was, as in the case of Lucca) and not only the town to which it belonged. By the late Middle Ages Milan had become the seat of princely dynasties, first the Visconti and then the Sforza, who subjected many other towns and claimed political supremacy over a wide area in north-central Italy. Significantly, the origins of the Milanese patriciate can be traced to the period of intense warfare in the early sixteenth century, when rival claims to the ducal title were made by the last descendants of the house of Sforza and by the kings of France and Spain, each of these claimants trying to win the support of the wealthiest citizens with concessions and guarantees as to their dominance of city-life. When Spanish domination stabilised, after 1535, the absence of the monarch, who was locally represented by a Governor usually appointed for three years, and the then-current notion that he should rule each of his many possessions according to its own laws and institutions, fostered in the Milanese as well as in the Neapolitan ruling classes the belief that they were the genuine representatives of their respective states and were thus entitled to a portion of sovereign authority. Under this kind of compromise, the king was acknowledged as supreme lawgiver and as the fountain of justice, but how justice should be administered and laws should be interpreted was a matter for the local magistrates to settle; in the same way, the king was seen to have the right and the duty to protect his duchy and was therefore entitled to raise the necessary contributions, but their distribution and collection was not really his business, provided that payments were forthcoming. Of course, the king of Spain and his local representatives could not be expected to share such a limited view of their authority, but their attempts to redress the balance in their favour and to punish the most glaring injustices were mostly thwarted by the prevalent state of warfare and by the need to collect money at all costs.

The following treatment is essentially concerned with the city of Milan; this is in part at least justified by the fact, remarked upon by Claudio Donati, that “the Milanese ruling class, much more than the Venetian patriciate, was able to impose its own models on the nobilities of the other provinces”<sup>4</sup>. We need not retrace in detail the long process through which the Milanese patricians succeeded in establishing, by the middle of the seventeenth century, not only their control of city-life and their hold over most state-offices, but also their exclusive power to admit new families into their ranks. It will be enough to remind readers that the definition and formalisation of the prerequisites for admission were the joint work of the

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<sup>4</sup> Claudio DONATI, *L'idea di nobiltà in Italia, secoli XIV–XVIII* (Roma 1988) 340. All students of the Italian nobilities are deeply indebted to this seminal work, as well as to Donati's many other writings on the subject. His untimely death in January 2008 has prevented his contributing to the present volume, which would have greatly benefitted from his unrivalled knowledge of the Italian nobilities in the early modern period.

Milan city Council of 60 members (called *Decurioni*), the Senate (the highest tribunal in the State) and the *Collegio de' nobili Giureconsulti*, another patrician institution which presided over the legal professions. Let us start with the observation that in the area ruled from Milan, as in most of central and northern Italy, there was no military or feudal nobility to offset the power and prestige of the town patriciate, since the few surviving houses that could boast such origins, such as the Trivulzio, Serbelloni or Barbiano di Belgioioso, had long been absorbed in the latter's ranks and were considered the equals of wealthy families that had risen from trade and banking, as the Borromeo and Litta had done. Most patrician families in the eighteenth century bore titles (there were a few dukes and princes and a much greater number of marquises and counts) which only in a few cases went back to the fifteenth century or earlier: all the rest had been sold by the Spanish government together with fiefs, which entailed only modest economic benefits in addition to honorific privileges and the right (and burden) of paying a judge to settle small civil and criminal matters (since all important suits were submitted to town judges or to the Senate). Of the 297 titled families existing in 1700, about four-fifths had obtained their titles from the king of Spain, in some cases in his capacity as king of Naples or Sicily and not as duke of Milan. This practice was continued, indeed intensified by the Austrian Monarchy, which granted 200 new titles in only 90 years, most of them in the early part of the century under Joseph I and Charles VI<sup>5</sup>.

The possession of titles and fiefs, however, conferred only the so-called "diplomatic" nobility [derived from "diploma", meaning the patent that had conferred nobility] and was never considered in itself sufficient qualification for admission to the patriciate. The procedure to be followed by families aspiring to this rank was definitively fixed in 1652. Formal applications had to be addressed to the General Council of 60 *Decurioni* and had to be supported by "proofs of nobility", such as genealogical tables, lists of titles, offices and other distinctions borne by members of the lineage concerned, information taken from epitaphs and monuments, and by certificates attesting residence in Milan for at least a hundred years prior to the application and possession of real estate in Milan and its province. "Positive" nobility had moreover to be supplemented by "negative" nobility, essentially the abstention of the applicant himself and his ancestors from any activity regarded as incompatible with a noble style of life, which included not only menial work, but trade in general and even notarial and medical professions exercised for gain. These dossiers were examined by a standing committee of the Council, the three *Conservatori degli ordini*, who might accept or reject the ap-

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<sup>5</sup> Franco ARESE, Nobiltà e patriziato nello Stato di Milano, in Silvia PIZZETTI (ed.), *Dallo Stato di Milano alla Lombardia contemporanea I* (Milano 1980) 82–84.

plication<sup>6</sup> or in special cases have recourse to a pronouncement by the full council. Though the regulations were very strict, and further tightened in the early years of Austrian domination to counter the pressure of the recently ennobled, the practice was often less severe, as shown by an “Instruction for the admission of new subjects to the patriciate” penned in the 1750s by one of the *Conservatori*. The document starts with a distinction which has many parallels in Italian discussions on “civil” and “natural” nobility: “The prince has the power to grant titles to whom he likes, but not to make a family noble ... The nobility of a family is an intrinsic quality resulting from several of its members accomplishing illustrious deeds and holding civil or military posts, and thus acquiring glory and renown, provided that their descendants have not derogated from the status of their ancestors by the exercise of some menial or shameful trade [...]”. The author goes on to survey all the elements of positive and negative nobility and to warn examiners against the customary wiles of applicants and their lawyers, only then to recommend that a certain flexibility be applied in the final judgement:

All these objections however should not carry such weight in the minds of the *Conservatori*, as to determine them to deny admission. A certain equity is required in favour of the applicant’s family, when the evidence taken as a whole points to its being considered as a noble and honourable family, provided with sufficient wealth; the custom is then to communicate any objections to the applicant, and if these are answered in a satisfactory way, or weakened by the production of fresh evidence, it seems fair that the *Conservatori* should drop their reservations, especially considering that the extinction of noble and illustrious families is an everyday occurrence, while others become impoverished; therefore it is a wise rule of good city government, in order to prevent public administration being left without worthy incumbents, furnished with titles, fiefs and authority, and with a real interest in it, to substitute other families in which such rightful and necessary circumstances are present, as long as the wise regulations of our City, provided that prudence allows, are always observed<sup>7</sup>.

The flexible policy outlined in this passage was indeed consistently followed by the Milanese patriciate, in contrast to the closure of ranks that prevailed in Venice or in other Lombard towns, such as Cremona, Pavia or Lodi. In the eighteenth century alone, as many as 143 new families were admitted, so that by 1770, when an official list of 259 existing patrician families was approved by the *Tribunale araldico* (of which more will be said later), 88 had been admitted since 1702. In spite of the high rate of extinction (explained by the general recourse to entail and the restriction of marriages in order to prevent the splitting of estates),

<sup>6</sup> Out of 198 applications received from 1652 to 1796, 46 were rejected. In nine cases, however, the families concerned were successful after a second or a third attempt: cfr. Albane COGNÉ, *Patriciat et propriétés urbaines à Milan (XVII–XVIII siècles)*, unpublished Ph.D thesis presented and discussed at the Université Pierre Mendès-France (Grenoble II) on 13 December 2007, 182.

<sup>7</sup> The document is published by Francesca PINO, *Patriziato e decurionato a Milano nel secolo XVIII*, in: *Società e storia* 5 (1979) 339–378 (see 368 and 377 for the passages quoted).

the total number of patrician families in Milan was still 234 in 1796<sup>8</sup>. Needless to say, the prevailing practice was very effective as a means of preventing class conflicts and preserving the numerical and economic strength of the patriciate.

The main prerogative of the patriciate was the monopoly of seats in the General Council, composed, as noted, of 60 members, or *Decurioni*. These were appointed for life by the Governor, whose choice was, however, restricted to patrician families. In theory, only candidates of at least 35 years of age and free of any debts or legal suits involving the City of Milan could be considered. When a seat became vacant, there was usually keen competition between leading families to influence the governor's decision. During the seventeenth century it became common practice for elderly members to resign in favour of their sons or other relatives, since one lineage could not be represented by two *Decurioni* at the same time. In these cases the age-requirement was often set aside. Even when, in the second half of the eighteenth century, this form of heredity in disguise was no longer permitted, it was possible to circumvent the rules by agreement with other families. In 1765, for instance, three *Decurioni* resigned from the Council: Pietro Verri was given the seat renounced by Duke Gabrio Serbelloni, while the former's father, Gabriele Verri, was succeeded by Marquis Carlo Francesco Visconti and Gabrio's son, Gian Galeazzo Serbelloni, took the place left free by Ignazio Caimi<sup>9</sup>. As a general rule, the continuous presence of a family in the Council was a fair measure of its power and prestige (as also of its sheer numeric force). From the *Elenchi dei magistrati patrizi di Milano* published by Franco Arese in 1955, 293 families are shown to have been represented at least once in the General Council between 1535 and 1796; but while 112 of these furnished a single *Decurione*, 106 produced two or three, and 75 from four to thirteen<sup>10</sup>. The General Council met in the Broletto Palace under the presidency of the *Vicario di Provvisione*, who was always a member of the *Collegio dei Giureconsulti* and was appointed by the Governor for one year. The agenda for these gatherings was established by the *Vicario* together with the *Conservatori degli ordini*: no oral discussion was permit-

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<sup>8</sup> For these figures, see Franco Arese; Id., *La matricola del patriziato milanese di Maria Teresa*, in Aldo DE MADDALENA, Ettore ROTELLI, Gennaro BARBARISI (eds.), *Economia, istituzioni, cultura in Lombardia nell'età di Maria Teresa*, vol. III, *Istituzioni e società* (Bologna 1982) 325–361, where a full list of the newly-admitted families is given. A number of genealogical and other essays published by Arese in “Archivio storico lombardo” have been recently reprinted: Cinzia CREMONINI (ed.), *Carriere, magistrature e stato. Le ricerche di Franco Arese Lucini* (Milano 2008).

<sup>9</sup> ARESE, *Elenchi dei magistrati patrizi*, *ibidem.* 87.

<sup>10</sup> ARESE, *Elenchi dei magistrati patrizi di Milano*, *ibidem.* 55–105. See also PINO, *Patriziato e decurionato a Milano*, and Michela BARBOT, *Il patriziato milanese: un'élite aperta? Ricambio politico e mobilità sociale nel ceto dirigente ambrosiano (secoli XVI–XVIII)*, in: Marco CATTINI, Marzio A. ROMANI, José Manuel DE BERNARDO ARES (eds.), *Per una storia sociale del politico. Ceti dirigenti urbani italiani e spagnoli nei secoli XVI–XVIII* (Cheiron 41, 2005) 71–99.

ted, and the motions submitted by this body or by other city authorities were either approved or rejected by secret ballot. The Council and its standing delegations (the *Tribunale dei dodici di provvisione*, the *Congregazione del patrimonio*, the *Congregazione del Banco di S. Ambrogio*, all elected by the General Council and composed partly of *Decurioni*, partly of other patricians) had full responsibility for a wide range of subjects, from town provisioning to taxation, from public health to road building and maintenance. Moreover, extraordinary committees could be formed to deal with specific questions: in the 1720s, for instance, a *Giunta urbana del censimento* was erected to monitor the activities of the *Giunta Regia* appointed by Charles VI in 1718. One last peculiar feature is worth mentioning: from time to time, at least until the early years of Maria Theresa's reign, the Milan Council sent one or more "envoys" to the Court in Vienna to sue for privileges or lodge complaints, as if there were no representative in Milan of the sovereign to deal with such requests.

It was not only through civic administration that the Milanese patriciate exerted its influence. Its members usually occupied at least half or more of the seats in the Senate, the supreme court of the Duchy and the guardian of the Lombard tradition of autonomy, and in the two financial Magistracies. The immensely powerful position of archbishop of Milan, at the head of a very large diocese extending beyond the limits of the State, had also been its preserve since the mid-sixteenth century. When the seat became vacant, the Council sent a delegation to the pope to ensure the appointment of a Milanese patrician. But other episcopal sees in Lombardy were also usually occupied by Milanese patricians. Since marriage was normally restricted to one son, usually the first-born, his younger brothers very often took holy orders, and some reached the highest positions in the Church: from 1706 to 1796 there were 27 cardinals of Milanese patrician origin, and their promotion was the occasion of public rejoicings in which the prelate's family took the leading part. Military careers were also of course open to noblemen and particularly to younger sons, though the imperial army lost more and more of its attraction for Milanese patricians as the eighteenth century progressed, for reasons that will become apparent later<sup>11</sup>. Another traditional occupation was law: almost exclusively patrician in its composition was the *Collegio dei nobili giureconsulti*, which besides controlling the legal professions was the springboard for successful careers in the Church or the magistracy. Jurisprudence was a central element in patrician culture and an effective tool both for the defence of traditional privilege and in the frequent conflicts with royal power. It was as a notable lawyer that Pietro Verri's father Gabriele, member of a theretofore obscure

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Claudio DONATI, *Esercito e società civile nella Lombardia austriaca*, in: DE MADDALENA, ROTELLI, BARBARISI (eds), *Economia, istituzioni, cultura*, cit. 241–267 and particularly 266–267.

family, rose to the rank of Senator and honorary member of the Council of Italy in Vienna in the middle years of the eighteenth century.

Of course, as always, if power brought wealth the reverse was also true. The withdrawal of patrician families from trade and finance was never complete, but it can be confidently stated that in the eighteenth century their revenues came first and foremost from land, and that certainly more than half of the cultivated soil owned by the nobility in the State of Milan (between 30 and 40% of the total surface, with a marked concentration in the fertile and productive irrigated plain south of the capital) belonged to the Milan patriciate. No precise figures are so far available, but a fair impression can be gathered from the fact that the 58 families of the *Decurioni* sitting in the General Council in 1723 possessed among them over 38,000 hectares, or 7.5% of all the agricultural land in the State (excluding its mountainous parts) and 13.4% of the total estimated capital value, according to the cadastral survey carried out in those years<sup>12</sup>. A much lesser, but far from negligible component of patrician wealth was urban property. Careful statistical research by Albane Cogné shows that in 1751 the patriciate was collectively the owner of 15.5% of cadastral units and of 20.3% of the total estimated value of real property in Milan<sup>13</sup>. A high proportion of this property consisted of imposing family residences or palaces, often completely rebuilt or substantially renovated in the course of the century and particularly after 1760. Country villas, too, were the object of lavish embellishment. “Faire bâtir une belle maison confère à Milan la vraie noblesse”, wrote Stendhal in 1816<sup>14</sup>. Other houses or apartments in town were usually rented out, but this was a much less popular form of investment than rounding out family estates in the countryside or loaning money on interest, mostly to other nobles. It is highly probable that the distance between the very rich, a category which included the great majority of patrician families, and the middling and poor sections of the population grew considerably in the second half of the eighteenth century, as salaries stagnated while agricultural prices increased over 40% between 1750–60 and 1780–99, causing a similar rise in the rents paid by farmers to landlords. The correspondence of the hierarchy of ranks to the distribution of wealth was very close, as is confirmed by an important analysis made by Franco Arese of the contributors to a forced loan levied by the Government of the Cisalpine Republic in 1798, two years after the French occupation of the State

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<sup>12</sup> Claudio BESANA, Il patrimonio fondiario delle famiglie decurionali nella Milano del primo Settecento, in: AA.VV., Tra rendita e investimenti. Formazione e gestione dei grandi patrimoni in età moderna e contemporanea (Atti del terzo Convegno Nazionale, Torino 22–23 novembre 1996, Bari 1998) 327–348.

<sup>13</sup> COGNÉ, Patriciat et propriétés urbaines 246.

<sup>14</sup> Rome, Naples et Florence, ed. 1826, in STENDHAL, Voyages en Italie, ed. Victor DEL LITTO (Paris 1973) 308. On the building boom that transformed Milan's appearance in the late eighteenth century, see Luca MOCARELLI, Costruire la città. Edilizia e vita economica nella Milano del secondo Settecento (Bologna 2008) 77ff., 114 ff.

of Milan<sup>15</sup>. A list of the “wealthiest citizens” was drawn up for the purpose, where the name of each contributor was accompanied by the yearly income attributed to him and by the loan requested, according to a graduated scale. Arese takes into consideration incomes of 10,000 lire and upwards, attributed to 286 citizens. Of these, 156 are of patrician status (62 of whom are former *Decurioni* or their sons and heirs), 62 are simple nobles, 68 are described as “bourgeois” (for this last group I prefer the more unexceptional word “others”). The following table shows the distribution of wealth among these categories:

YEARLY INCOME	PATRICIANS	(Decurioni)	NOBLES	OTHERS	TOTAL
(Milanese Lire)					
45,000 to 300,000	30	(20)	10	4	44
28,000 to 45,000	32	(13)	7	4	43
16,000 to 28,000	44	(21)	16	15	75
10,000 to 16,000	50	(6)	29	45	124
TOTAL	156	(62)	62	68	286
%	54.5%	(21.7%)	21.7%	23.8%	100%

The first conclusion to be drawn from these data is that more than half of the wealthiest individuals in Milan belonged to patrician families, which represented probably no more than 1% of the population of Milan. But if we consider only the two top layers, those with yearly incomes of at least 28,000 lire, their predominance is even more pronounced, rising to 71.3% of the contributors in these classes. Exactly two-thirds of the patriciate (composed, as noted, of 234 families at the end of the *ancien régime*) were classified as belonging to the very wealthiest citizens. The *Decurioni*, moreover, stand out as an élite within the élite, since they hold two-thirds of the places in the top group but only 12% of the fourth rank. By comparison, the “diplomatic” nobility and the “bourgeoisie” cut a poor figure as far as both numbers and incomes are concerned: they represent together only 45.5% of the 286 contributors listed and even less in term of wealth, since the collective revenue of the two groups stands respectively at 24.2 % and 14.3% of the total. It might be objected that the republican government of 1798 was probably biased against noble landowners and inclined to over-estimate their presumptive income in order to charge them more heavily. But other evidence is not lacking of the economic primacy of the Milanese patriciate. From a recent analysis of the social distribution of 400 dowries in the last twenty years of Austrian domination (1777–1796), we gather that while the dowries of daughters of non-noble fathers never reached 50,000 lire, dowries in excess of this sum were

<sup>15</sup> Franco ARESE, *Patrizi, nobili e ricchi borghesi del Dipartimento d’Olona secondo il fisco della I Repubblica Cisalpina (1797–1799)*, now in *Id.*, *Carriere, magistrature e Stato*, cit. 297–363. For the data discussed here, see in particular the table at p. 305.



granted to daughters of “diplomatic” nobles in one-third of their marriages, and to 61.8% of the brides from patrician families<sup>16</sup>. The same impression is derived from the lists of owners of boxes in the old Ducal Theatre and the new Teatro alla Scala, built in 1776–78, or of country villas and private coaches.

We must now briefly consider the changes affecting the patriciate brought about by the Austrian government in the eighteenth century. Except in two ways, the long reign of Charles VI (1711–1740) can almost be regarded as a continuation of Spanish domination, of which the sovereign considered himself the rightful heir. One was the strong patrician opposition to the new *censimento* or cadastral survey, which threatened to destroy the fiscal privileges of the capital and its landowners. This bitter struggle was kept up throughout the activity of the first royal *Giunta* (1718–1733) and resumed in 1749 when a second *Giunta* was appointed by Maria Theresa. But after 1760, when the new land tax based on the *censimento* went into force, this opposition gradually subsided and left room for a growing appreciation of the positive sides of the system, above all the stability of the levy and hence its progressive decline as a percentage of rents which were rapidly growing due to agricultural improvement as well as to price inflation. The second reason for patrician discontent during the early decades of Austrian domination was the habit of Charles VI, and of the Council of Spain created by him in 1713 for the administration of his Italian possessions, to grant titles and pensions to foreign individuals, mostly of Spanish origin, sometimes insisting that they be given citizenship and appointed to the General Council of Milan at the first vacancy. One of these *future*, as they were called, granted by the Emperor to count Giuseppe Bolagnos in 1716, was disregarded by the Lombard government and caused a serious incident in relations between Milan and Vienna. The answer of the General Council was to harden the requisites for admission into the patriciate, declaring, for example, that prospective candidates had to own most of their landed wealth in the city and province of Milan (1716). Requests from Vienna that an official register of the titled nobility be established in Milan were met with silent neglect, in spite of the fact that a similar plan was set out by a member of the Lombard magistracy, the *sindaco fiscale* Giuseppe Benaglio (who was not a patrician) in his *Elenchus familiarum in Mediolani dominio feudis, jurisdictionibus titulisque insignium* (1714).

It was not until the middle of the century, when the survival of the Austrian Monarchy itself was at stake and when Maria Theresa’s will to overhaul and centralize administration at the expense of provincial power became clear, that action was taken to impose on the Lombard nobility, too, a measure of control from

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<sup>16</sup> M. MOLTENI, *L’aristocrazia milanese alla fine del Settecento attraverso i contratti dotali*, unpublished thesis discussed at the Università degli studi di Milano, Faculty of Letters, a.a. 1980/1981.

Vienna. This new phase was ushered in by Gabriele Verri's "fiscal dissertation", published in 1748 as *De titulis et insigniis temperandis*. Verri's scathing denunciation of the appropriation of titles and noble prerogatives by upstart social climbers was meant to please the true nobility, but it also led to a re-formulation of the old demand for state legislation on the subject, which went against the patriciate's tradition of self-regulation. A heraldic commission was created for the purpose in 1750, but the reforming zeal of Governor Gian Luca Pallavicini, a kind of Italian Haugwitz, soon gave way to the caution and the inclination for compromise of the new Plenipotentiary Minister, Beltrame Cristiani (1753–1758); and after the first spurt of activity the commission gave no further sign of life. In this area, too, we are reminded of Grete Klingenstein's words of caution: "The persistence of the reforming drive was a typical feature of enlightened absolutism. At the same time we are confronted with contradictory elements which make it difficult to interpret enlightened absolutism as a predetermined programme and point rather to a historical process comprised of actions and reactions, sometimes unexpected, by internal crises and by phenomena of stagnation, acceleration and exhaustion"<sup>17</sup>.

The scene was set for a new and more incisive reforming cycle after 1760, as a result of a number of events taking place both in Vienna and in Milan. These included the abolition in 1757 of the *Consiglio d'Italia* (heir to the old *Consejo de España*) and its replacement with a more bureaucratic and efficient *Dipartimento d'Italia* attached to Kaunitz's State Chancellery; the appointment in 1758 of count Firmian as the new Austrian Plenipotentiary; the financial strain imposed on the Monarchy by the prolonged and eventually unsuccessful Seven Years' War against Prussia, which made a new overhaul of the system imperative; and, last but not least, the wide circulation of enlightened ideas both in Vienna and (especially) in Milan. Giuseppe Parini wrote his *Dialogo sulla nobiltà* around 1760 and published the first two sections of the satirical poem *Il giorno* in 1763 and 1765; in the autumn of 1761 the *Accademia dei Pugni* came into being as a society of young noblemen of enlightened views who won a European reputation with Pietro Verri's *Meditazioni sulla felicità* (1763), Cesare Beccaria's *Dei delitti delle pene* (1764) and the journal *Il Caffè* (1764–66). Patrician values and institutions were criticised and ridiculed by these writers not only as old-fashioned and irrational, but as obstructive to justice, equality and public happiness. Alfonso Longo's wholesale attack on hereditary nobility was not shared by the Verri brothers, who were content to plead for a better educated and socially useful élite. A further incentive to political action in this field came from the agreement stipulated with the duke of Modena in 1753, under which archduke Ferdinand was to marry Maria Beatrice d'Este and be appointed Governor of Milan and Mantua (as came

<sup>17</sup> Grete KLINGENSTEIN, *Riforma e crisi: la monarchia austriaca sotto Maria Teresa e Giuseppe II. Tentativo di un'interpretazione*, in: Pierangelo SCHIERA (ed.), *La dinamica statale austriaca nel XVIII e XIX secolo* (Bologna 1981) 100.

to pass in 1771): one of the problems involved in setting up a princely court in Milan was the definition of *Hofzutritt* (the nobility's right of access to court) and of connected matters of ceremony and etiquette.

This led to a new Heraldic Tribunal being set up in January 1768 with the explicit task of “watching over the legitimate use of prerogatives and degrees by this nobility of ours [...] examining ex officio the proofs of nobility to be produced by Italian gentlemen aspiring to the title of chamberlain... and drawing up a catalogue of all the titled feudatories and noblemen of the State”<sup>18</sup>. This time things moved quickly. An intense exchange of views between Milan and Vienna was followed by the issue of an edict dated 20 November 1769 which regulated all matters relating to the nobility, starting with the classification of individuals “who are to be regarded as noble”. The different types listed in the first article of the edict can be reduced to three categories: top civil officers, whose nobility, being “merely personal and annexed to the exercise of their office”, could become hereditary only when public office ran in the same family for two or three generations; the holders of fiefs with jurisdiction numbering at least 50 households and of titles and ranks (like that of chamberlain) conferred by the sovereign; and finally “those who are included in the catalogues of noblemen in their own towns, provided that their statutes require proofs of true and positive nobility”<sup>19</sup>. While Mozzarelli stresses the break with the past represented by these provisions, which in his view mark “the crisis of social order and hierarchies in Lombardy”, Donati, though admitting that “the relative novelty was the declaration of the sovereign's right to recognise all the nobles existing in the State”, points to “the element of continuity with Milanese patrician traditions”, manifest not only in the exclusively patrician composition of the *Tribunale araldico*, but also in the reference to the standards “established and observed by the *Collegio de' giurisperiti nobili* of Milan”<sup>20</sup>. This willingness to compromise is confirmed by Kaunitz's correspondence with Firmian on the subject: as early as 1766 he wrote that “one must adjust to the concept that Italian towns have of the nobility of their families, so different from the use of Germany”; on the other hand, he insists on the equal status of “civil nobility”, which the sovereign alone can confer on his subjects, with the nobility attributed to families whose eminence has enjoyed common recognition for centuries<sup>21</sup>. The Heraldic Tribunal had a busy time examining and approving the demands for recognition of noble status coming from all over the State of Milan (Mantua had a heraldic delegation of its own), starting with the official list of Milanese patricians drawn up by the *Conservatori degli ordini*. On

<sup>18</sup> Cesare MOZZARELLI, *Impero e città. La riforma della nobiltà nella Lombardia del Settecento*, in Cesare MOZZARELLI, Gianni VENTURI (eds), *L'Europa delle corti alla fine dell'Antico Regime* (Roma 1991) 511. This essay is the most detailed treatment of the subject.

<sup>19</sup> ASMi, *Araldica*, p.a., 4.

<sup>20</sup> MOZZARELLI, *Impero e città* 512; DONATI, *L'idea di nobiltà* 355.

<sup>21</sup> Letters to Firmian of 28 April 1766 and 30 Octobre 1769, in ASM, *Araldica*, p.a., 19.

the whole, its efforts were successful, and the 1770s can be regarded as a kind of Indian summer for the patriciate, whose loss of political power was to some extent compensated by the boost given to social life by the presence of the archducal court and by the growing income from land.

The real offensive against patrician institutions and privileges was launched by Joseph II in the mid-1780s, when town government was concentrated in *Congregazioni Municipali* compulsorily composed of nobles and non-nobles and closely watched over by provincial *intendants* who can be seen as forerunners of Napoleonic prefects. The *Consigli decurionali* survived, but only as empty shells, deprived of any real function. Noble colleges of law and medicine also lost most of their attributions; the Heraldic Tribunal was abolished and its functions were taken over by a department of the *Consiglio di governo* set up in 1786 under the presidency of the new Plenipotentiary Minister, count Johann Joseph Wilczek.

Many of these changes, however, were short-lived, as Leopold II, both because of personal inclination and under the pressure of the difficult international and domestic circumstances, withdrew most of the radical reforms implemented by his brother, including those affecting the patriciate of Milan. Indeed, the Milanese *Consiglio generale* was not only reinstated in its old functions, but was given new powers, in particular the ability to appoint new *Decurioni* to fill vacancies in its own body without any interference from the Governor<sup>22</sup>. A reform-party within the Council, headed by Pietro Verri and Francesco Melzi d'Eril, appealed in vain to Leopold II's liberal feelings, asking for a constitution based on a representative body elected by all landowners. This same party, however, scored a significant victory in 1792–93 when it succeeded in enforcing a majority vote in favour of oral debate in the Council's sessions<sup>23</sup>. The procedure for admission of new families into the patriciate was also changed in 1793, with greater involvement of the whole council in decisions<sup>24</sup>.

The closing years of Austrian domination in eighteenth-century Lombardy thus saw both a revival of patrician privilege and power, in line with the reactionary tendencies of archduke Ferdinand and of his nephew, the new emperor Francis II, and the emergence of a progressive and proto-liberal minority inside the nobility, which was ready to barter its titles and privileges for political participation and for supremacy as a social elite based on education and property. The latter phenomenon was as much the product of the influence of enlightened culture as of the reforming initiatives of the Habsburg government and the examples set

<sup>22</sup> Leopold II's resolutions are contained in his dispatch of 20 January 1791, in answer to the requests of the Deputazione sociale erected the previous summer: cfr. Silvia CUCCIA, *La Lombardia alla fine dell'Ancien Régime* (Firenze 1971) 18 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Carlo CAPRA, *I progressi della ragione. Vita di Pietro Verri* (Bologna 2002) 537–550.

<sup>24</sup> See the new Regolamento per l'ammissione al nobile Patriziato Milanese approvato, ed ordinato dall'Eccellentissimo Consiglio Generale de' Signori Sessanta Decurioni di Milano on 17 June 1793, reprinted in Felice CALVI, *Il Patriziato milanese* (Milano 1865) 365–368.

by the American and French Revolutions. Much wider, of course, was the circulation of modern fashions and customs, fostered by the nearly universal knowledge of the French language, by travelling abroad and by a much diminished allegiance to Catholic precepts and morals. "Every noble either out of conviction or in imitation of others thinks in a different way from his ancestors", noted Pietro Verri, who also dwelt on "the great change made in education" and on the preference for casual dress in contrast to Spanish gravity<sup>25</sup>. The sample of the Milanese patriciate analyzed by Dante Zanetti shows that the proportion of male patricians entering the Church, which was 22.9% for the sons of fathers born between 1650 and 1699, dropped to 12.8 % for those whose fathers were born between 1700 and 1749 and to 5.0 when the fathers' birth took place between 1750 and 1799; the corresponding rates for women taking religious vows were 25.8%, 12.9% and 4.3% respectively<sup>26</sup>. The almost universal custom for married women to enlist the services of *cicisbei* and the sexual freedom remarked upon by many observers both pointed in the same direction.

The events of 1796, the introduction of republican values and institutions and the subsequent transition from a republican order to a centralised and authoritarian state caught the Milanese aristocracy in the middle of a difficult conversion to modernity. Quite a few noblemen responded to Francesco Melzi's call for collaboration by taking up careers in the administration or the army, but most remained aloof and showed little enthusiasm for the new titles instituted by Napoleon in 1808. While some regretted their lost privileges and the *douceur de vivre* typical of the *ancien régime*, others were more sensitive to the high-handed treatment of the clergy and to the loss of their traditional primacy in civic life. Francesco Melzi d'Eril noted in 1812, in his capacity as President of the *Consiglio del sigillo dei titoli*, a Napoleonic version of the old *Tribunale araldico*: "Although many reasons may have concurred to paralyse the progress of the new institutions, yet the greatest obstacle they have met was in my opinion the total exclusion of those families, bearing titles in the old system, who maintained in fact and in general opinion, together with their riches, all the reputation which they enjoyed before"<sup>27</sup>.

Though legally dead, the patriciate lived on in the political aspirations of many of its members and the role they played in their own towns. The return of the Austrian Monarchy after the fall of the Kingdom of Italy gave momentary rise to

<sup>25</sup> Letters to his brother Alessandro of 27 April 1782, 31 May 1777 and 7 February 1778, in Emanuele GREPPI, Francesco NOVATI, Alessandro GIULINI, Giovanni SEREGNI (eds.) *Carteggio di Pietro e di Alessandro Verri dal 1766 al 1797* (Milan 1910–1942) vols. XII, 273, IX, 52 and 218–219.

<sup>26</sup> Dante E. ZANETTI, *La demografia del Patriziato milanese nei secoli XVII, XVIII, XIX, con una Appendice genealogica di Franco Arese Lucini* (Pavia 1972) 83.

<sup>27</sup> Report to the Emperor of 8 February 1812, in A.S.M. *Araldica*, p.m., 52. For a wider treatment see Carlo CAPRA, *Il dotto e il ricco ed il patrizio vulgo... Notabili e funzionari nella Milano napoleonica*, in: *I cannoni al Sempione. Milano e la Grande Nazione* (Milano 1986) 37–72.

renewed claims, represented at the highest level by Giacomo Mellerio, the Lombard delegate in the Central-Organisierungs Hofkommission set up in Vienna. But such hopes were short-lived, as it soon became apparent that the Austrian government wanted to retain as much as possible of the Napoleonic bureaucratic structures and centralisation. Neither the setting up of a new and all-patrician Heraldic Commission in Milan (whose proposals for buttressing patrician primacy inside the nobility were mostly rejected) nor the appointment of a great number of aristocrats to state and civic posts in the new Lombard-Venetian Kingdom nor the opening with Austrian approval of a *casino dei nobili* for the oldest aristocracy were able to offset the perception of being treated as common subjects rather than as masters in their own house, as the old patricians had to some extent felt themselves to be. The quick dissolution of “the temporary and ambiguous alliance between the aristocracy and the state which runs through the first years of the Lombard Restoration”<sup>28</sup> was seen by the shrewdest contemporary observers, such as Stendhal and the Austrian statistician Carl Czoernig, as one cause of the liberal leanings of many young aristocrats. Czoernig noted in 1833 that “der Regierung ist er [der lombardo-venezianische Adel] nicht zugewendet, da er in ihr viel mehr eine feindliche Macht, eine Beschränkung seiner Befugnisse erblickt, weshalb er auch ihre Dienste meidet”<sup>29</sup>. The connection between the frustration of aristocratic hopes for a return to the past and the revolutionary stance taken by part of the Lombard nobility was affirmed by K.R. Greenfield and further elaborated by Meriggi for Lombardy and more recently by Thomas Kroll for Tuscany in a book bearing the significant title *Die Revolte des Patriziats. Der toskanische Adelsliberalismus im Risorgimento*<sup>30</sup>. Here is not the place to discuss this thesis, which has much to recommend it, but which cannot be accepted as the sole or even the main explanation for the Italian or the Lombard Risorgimento. The case of Federico Confalonieri, part-time conspirator and would-be political leader, who was certainly a supporter of liberal-aristocratic values but also restlessly in search of novelties and modern inventions – from Lancasterian schools to steam navigation, from bazaars and urban development projects to gas lighting<sup>31</sup> – shows that the championing of civil society versus state power was no less important as a driving force behind aristocratic liberalism in Restoration Lombardy than nostalgia for a lost world.

<sup>28</sup> Marco MERIGGI, *Milano borghese. Circoli ed élites nell'Ottocento* (Venezia 1992) 86.

<sup>29</sup> Über die Ursachen der Revolution in Italien, Manuscript im Haus-, Hof- und Staatarchiv Wien, Kaiser Franz Akten, 211, fol. 280, quoted by Marco MERIGGI, *Der Lombardo-venezianische Adel im Vormärz*, in: Armgard VON REDEN-DOHNA, Ralf MELVILLE (Eds.), *Der Adel an der Schwelle des bürgerlichen Zeitalters, 1780–1860* (Stuttgart 1988) 225.

<sup>30</sup> Tübingen, 1999. Ital. translation : *La rivolta del patriziato. Il liberalismo della nobiltà nella Toscana del Risorgimento* (Firenze 2006).

<sup>31</sup> It is sufficient here to refer the reader to the studies included in: Giorgio RUMI (ed.), *Federico Confalonieri aristocratico progressista nel bicentenario della nascita* (Milan 1987).