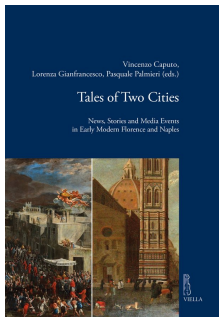


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Vincenzo Caputo, Lorenza Gianfrancesco, Pasquale Palmieri (eds.)

Tales of Two Cities

Review by: Laura Incollingo



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This book brings the debate on news circulation, the intersections between orality and written words, and the importance of news networks to an Italian context, choosing two cities as the theater of investigation: Florence and Naples.

The main themes explored throughout the book are the questions of how these communication networks were created, how they functioned during particularly charged times, and who were the various actors that were part of such networks. The authors also engage with the various channels through which information was disseminated and the role of news and information in forging and influencing political connections and shaping the relationship between authorities, elites, and masses. This book neatly inserts itself into the ongoing debate surrounding the concept of popular culture in Italy. Rather than something that was excluded from the dynamics of power relations, popular culture is the fundamental other half of the conversation when it comes to the circulation of news.

The first section is focused on Naples and the communication of political news. Gianfrancesco offers a poignant analysis of the policy implemented by the Duke of Osuna in his role as Viceroy of Naples in 1616-1618. Using the military campaign that he launched against Venice in 1617 and the efforts that he made in promoting the Spanish religious politics surrounding the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, she analyzes the strategies that the Viceroy implemented to gain mass consensus. At the center was the construction of a public image built using the public spaces as a political platform.

Benigno's essay analyzes the information networks that the Duke of Arcos had in place during the time of Masaniello's revolt (1647). Relying heavily on the private correspondence of the Duke, he reconstructs with clever insights the network of information that the Duke had at his

disposal, taking into account both vertical and horizontal lines of communication. This essay places Naples in a broader European context, while also highlighting the dual direction and use of established information networks: these were not only a way to collect information and news but also a powerful tool that could be used to influence the flow of news and therefore the political happenings.

Dedicated to the period of the rebellion but focused on the masses is Boerio's essay on the media landscape of Naples at the time. Analyzing the circulation of news from both an internal and external perspective, he focuses on how news were communicated to and received by a broader audience, composed of both literate and illiterate subjects. The analysis of the kind of formulaic language that was used when communicating with the masses makes this article an interesting piece in the study of the intersections between orality and written culture.

This section concludes with an article by Gallo on the circulation of news during the Spanish War of Succession. In a climate of political uncertainty, the debate that took place in the city as to who held the more legitimate claim to power was complex. This article plays a key role in highlighting how the circulation of news was indeed something that involved all social strata and something from which the masses were not excluded. Not even when it came to complex political debates, which have always been perceived as alien to the ignorant masses.

The second part of the book is dedicated to the communication during the plague. The first two articles are focused on Florence (Dooley) and Naples (Fusco) and they showcase the many parallels that can be found between the two cities. Denying the reality of the plague in the hope of maintaining a false sense of security and the attempts to harness, control and redirect rumours about *untori* in a way that was the least damaging to the authorities were common strategies put forth in both cities. These essays also bring forth the problem of the veracity of information and how both true and false news could and were intentionally used by authorities. In such a time of crisis, the construction of information itself became an exercise in power. This last point is further brought home by the essay of D'Alessio. She focuses on the correspondence of the Papal *nuncio* Giulio Spinola as a source of information for the reality of the plague in Naples. In a unique position of being both an external observer and someone who had the ears of the Viceroy, the correspondence of Spinola highlights his awareness of the political and intentional use of false information by the Viceroy. The Spanish authorities crafted a careful tale that was both based on and reinforced by rumors and false information. Spinola carefully dismantled this tale in his letters. He warned Rome about the reality of the situation in Naples while at the same time urging the Viceroy to act not on the false narratives that he himself contributed to spread but on the reality of the situation.

The third section of the book deals with media events surrounding scandals and trials. It opens with the story of the conversion of the Jew Vitale Medici and how this seemingly private event in reality had an extraordinary impact and repercussion on the public sphere. Biasiori and Marconcini recount the complexity of the case and focus their attention on the information and communication network that emerged from this event, using the records of the Inquisition as the basis for the reconstruction. At the heart of the article is the knowledge, thoroughly demonstrated, that the secret ceased to be so when through often one-sided communications, more actors were brought into play.

Eliszezynski examines two different Neapolitan judicial scandals that played under public scrutiny and generated media and news circulation. One was an accusation of crypto-Judaism levelled against the Count of Mola. Although there was a certain level of public interest and a thirst for news, the buzz that it generated was subdued and died down quickly. The same cannot be said for the other case, that saw the coachman of Cardinal Filomarino, mister Carcioffola, accused of a heinous murder. This trial took place fairly quickly and it attracted a lot of attention. In both cases the public attention was high and it is clear by the ambassador's letters that they were discussed at length in the street of Naples, thus proving the existence of a public dimension in which news deemed worthy or interesting was discussed.

In Roscioni's essay, we move to Florence, dealing with the fallout of a trial against a canon of Santa Maria del Fiore who was accused of creating a *setta* and performing lascivious acts within a refuge for poor girls. The sheer number of handwritten copies of the sentence that can be found across Europe proves a remarkable interest in this event outside the confines of Florence. This essay deals with the relation between print and manuscript but also with the problem of "lost books", reminding us of the difficulties in proving or disproving the circulation of a specific piece of information in both manuscript and printed form in the face of a lack of surviving evidence. Lagioia examines the role of *ciarle* and rumors in the construction of the reputation and public image of the last Medici ruler, Gian Gastone. Examining both Florentine official chronicles and the foreigner's point of view he provides a summary of available sources, more or less objective, on this controversial figure. This essay offers the interesting question of how to judge the credibility of contemporary sources.

Palmieri offers an inspired insight into the relationship between power, political stability, and news circulation during the epidemic that struck Naples in 1764. This essay offers also an interesting case study on the changes in the dynamics between power and communication in the time of a plague. It appears that in this instance the authorities invested a lot of effort into producing a narrative that was pro-Bourbon government and in ensuring that that was the mainstream message on the streets, in an effort to strengthen the position of the monarchy.

The last section of the book is dedicated to the relationship between fiction and news events, providing a precious insight into which news-worthy events became "fiction-worthy". Analyzing the real-life inspiration behind popular fiction works of the time provides both an exploration of the evolution of certain literary genres and a precious insight into which news-worthy events became "fiction-worthy".

Caputo examines the Neapolitan literary production about the battle of Lepanto, in particular in the production of Tomaso Costo. Rizzarelli analyzes the works of the Florentine Anton Francesco Doni, who combined microhistory and an almost chronic-like narration to the monumental, historically relevant events. Calonacci analyzes the various narratives of a double homicide that happened in Florence in 1652.

Lastly, Marangolo examines the evolution of the narrative form in the *ancien régime*.