

Book Review: Humanism and secularization: from Petrarch to Valla

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And in terms of the history of the development of British comedy programming, why is it that in the racially sensitive times of the new millennium one of the central tenets of television comedy is still obsessed with, and dependent on, racist humour? (p. 106)

Representing Black Britain not only deals with the images of black and Asian people on British television in their sociopolitical context, it also brilliantly writes and represents a version of that history to us as an important area of study. This book deserves to be widely read by students and researchers interested in contemporary developments in race, ethnicity and diaspora in media, communication and cultural studies.

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Riccardo Fubini, *Humanism and Secularization: From Petrarch to Valla* (trans. Martha King). Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. 306 pp. ISBN 0-8223-3002-4 (hbk)

In *Humanism and Secularization*, Riccardo Fubini offers a sample of relatively recent Italian scholarship in the field of Renaissance (*Quattrocento*) studies. The original Italian version of the book, *Umanesimo e secolarizzazione da Petrarca a Valla*, appeared in 1990 from Bulzoni. The period that Fubini writes about ('from Petrarch to Valla') is certainly one of tremendous importance in announcing (and, eventually, giving shape to) that set of mental habits, cultural attitudes and mentalities we today call 'our' culture. Too sophisticated and rebellious to belong (in a substantial way) to the Middle Ages, but, at the same time, too indebted to the past to be (fully) 'modern', the *Quattrocento* humanists are accountable for the emergence of 'a new culture' that, in Fubini's own words, broke out of 'the authoritative and publicly sanctioned structures of late scholasticism, that is, of a culture especially intent on the systemization, or itemization, of inherited knowledge and age-old norms' (p. 3). Fubini's book is about *how* precisely some major figures of the *Quattrocento* Italian humanism (Francis Petrarch, Leonardo Bruni, Lorenzo Valla, Poggio Bracciolini and others) came to be involved in the emergence of this new culture and *Weltanschauung*.

The book is, in fact, a collection of five essays/chapters, relatively independent of each other. The first chapter ('Consciousness of the Latin Language among Humanists: Did the Romans Speak Latin?') tells the story of an interesting sociolinguistic and historical debate, which, in Italy, must have gone as far back as Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, about the relationships between Latin, spoken by an ecclesiastic and scholarly élite,



and *lo parlare italico*, whose usage and qualities were then advocated by increasingly urban and intellectual circles. The second chapter ('Humanist Intentions and Patristic References: Some Thoughts on the Moral Writings of the Humanists') is a discussion of the often ambiguous manners in which the Quattrocento humanists understood to use the writings of the Church Fathers and of other past authorities. Thanks to the employment of a sophisticated rhetoric and tricky textual techniques, the Church Fathers were often used by the humanists to appear as endorsing ideas that the former actually rejected in their lifetimes. As Fubini sharply notices, Bruni, Bracciolini, Valla and Biondo 'frequently cited the Church Fathers to confirm and defend their own classicism, or more precisely, their own secularism' (p. 42). The third chapter ('Poggio Bracciolini and San Bernardino: The Themes and Motives of a Polemic') discusses in detail Bracciolini's *De avaritia* (1429), especially in connection to San Bernardino of Siena's 'economic' sermons and to other contemporary authors who wrote on related topics. The fourth chapter ('The Theater of the World in the Moral and Historical Thought of Poggio Bracciolini') is, in a way, a fine introduction to the complex world of this lesser known Italian humanist. Bracciolini was indeed a fascinating Quattrocento character: a papal secretary who wrote anti-clerical (even anti-papal) pieces and a member of the church hierarchy who got married and took pride in doing so ('his entire career seems to have taken as its very purpose the dignifying of lay conditions within the framework of ecclesiastical hierarchy and in front of powers of this world' [p. 109]). Thanks to his deep pessimism and rebellious character, he might be seen as a 'modern' figure, one obsessed with 'the falsehood that hides behind appearances, the discrepancy between words and deeds, the foolish pretense of shaping reality with words' (p. 74). Finally, chapter five ('An Analysis of Lorenzo Valla's *De voluptate*: His Sojourn in Pavia and the Composition of the Dialogue') offers an extensive discussion of Valla's writing (better known as *De vero bono*, as he retitled it later), placing it within the philosophical, theological and rhetorical context of Quattrocento Italy and rethinking it in light of some of its most ancient sources: Cicero, Augustine, Lactantius, and so on.

Throughout the book, Fubini displays impressive philological minutiae, profound firsthand knowledge of both the humanists' writings and their ancient (pagan and Christian) sources, as well as an outstanding capacity for detecting the significant historical detail. A gifted philologist, Fubini is always able to follow the inner dynamics of an ancient text and to decipher the different textual layers that might coexist within the same piece of writing: 'Valla characteristically employs famous exempla, such as Cato, Lucretia, and Attilius Regulus, borrowed from *De civitate Dei*, but directly counter to the spirit of the original' (p. 63). At times, one might come across overly fine examples of social philosophizing (as well as stylistic accomplishments) such as this:



Culture . . . is tantamount to education and morality, a morality that is nourished by exhortation, that is to say, by rhetoric, with its storehouse of authorities and exempla. Therefore a transition like that we are considering from one cultural style and tradition to another also involves a change in the forms of morality and, reciprocally, in the way of dealing with the authorities and examples. (p. 45)

Nevertheless, there is something I would criticize about this book, which is a certain 'narrowness' of approach, which 'narrowness', in the case of a work quite ambitiously titled *Humanism and Secularization*, becomes particularly annoying. I will give only one example out of several possible. Within the context (in Chapter 3) delineated by his discussing of Bracciolini's *De avaritia*, San Bernardino's sermons, Leon Battista Alberti's *Libri degli famiglia* and Bruni's translation of pseudo-Aristotle's *Economics*, Fubini does not find it at all necessary to allude (to say the least) to a possible 'conversation' with what Max Weber says in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. No doubt, Fubini's book would have benefited immensely from placing his own analysis within a broader comparative context, one discussing how some economic issues (usury, money, wealth, and so on) were dealt with theologically *before* and *after* the Reformation. Not to mention that such a discussion would be crucial to elucidating the book's topic: secularization.

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Simon Winlow, *Badfellas: Crime, Tradition and New Masculinities*. Oxford: Berg, 2001. 192 pp. ISBN 1-85973-414-6 (pbk), \$23.00

In this book, Simon Winlow provides a sociologically informed discussion of masculinity, violence and crime in and around the working-class city of Sunderland in northeast England. This particular locale is central to the study as the author was originally from the area and therefore subject to the same forces of socialization that are the focus of his work (p. 5). Given his local knowledge and perspective, Winlow enters the *demi monde*, interviewing disenfranchised and disaffected men in an effort to assess how they have adapted to a post-industrial milieu where masculine codes of behaviour are in a state of flux.

Winlow begins by situating masculinity in its sociohistorical context, placing it within the framework of an industrial economy. Thus we see how men in the shipbuilding and mining industries constructed their identities in relation to their manual labour. Not surprisingly, violence was also a crucial part of this self-identity, as men brawled to distinguish themselves from their fellow proletarians both on the shop floor and on