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Machiavelli and Florentine republican experience

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Florence, wrote Machiavelli in 1519 or 1520 in his Discorsi on the reform of the Florentine government, has never been a 'repubblica... che abbi avute le debite qualità sue' — an observation which recapitulates the statement made a few years earlier in his Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Titus Livio that 'per duagento anni che si ha di vera memoria', Florence had never possessed a 'stato, per il quale la possa veramente essere chiamata repubblica'. In the Discorsi, he attributes this to the fact that before acquiring its independence from the Hohenstaufen Empire, Florence had always lived 'sotto il governo d'altrui'. That it had never been a true republic, he states in the Discorsi; is borne out by the regime, the stato, it had had since 1391, when under Maso degli Albizzi's leadership the city became a 'repubblica governata da ottimati' and thus acquired an oligarchical regime, which lasted until 1434, when it was replaced with the Medici regime. Its 'difetti' were the excessive power, and yet insufficient 'reputazione', of the Signoria, the long intervals between the electoral scrutinies which qualified citizens for office-holding, the influence which private citizens exercised over the decisions of the government through their membership of advisory bodies, the pratique, the lack of institutional safeguards against the formation of factions or sitte - 'le quali sono la rovina di uno stato' - by great citizens, 'uomini grandi'. But the worst of these 'disordini', the one 'che importava il tutto', was the virtual exclusion from the regime of the people, 'il popolo', which 'non vi aveva dentro la parte sua'. These criticisms, which reflect Machiavelli's disapproval of government by ottimati, as well as his passionate concern for a true 'ordine civile', contrast with the praise his friend Francesco Guicciardini had lavished, about ten years earlier, on the aristocratic regime of the early fifteenth century, of which 'meritamente si dice che... è stato el più savio, el più glorioso, el più felice governo che mai per alcuno tempo abbi avuto la città nostra' — a judgement which echoed the nostalgia which that regime had evoked, later in the fifteenth century, among ottimati. Florence, it

1 Discorsi fiorentini a cura post mortem iunioris Laurentii Medici, ed. M. Martelli, Niccolò Machiavelli, Tutte le opere (Florence, 1971), p. 24. 2 Ibid. 1, 49, p. 131. 3 Ibid.


was said, was then ruled by citizens who 'non dovriano dirsi inferiori a quei più savi Romani cosi celebrati dall' antichità'18 and who placed the common good before private interest; Niccolò Soderini, one of the leading opponents of Medici ascendance in 1451–6, declared that 'chi non governò istanza al 33, non sa governare.'

By way of criticism, as well as of praise, the regime under which Florence was governed in the early fifteenth century was thus considered by later generations the most significant manifestation of republican government the Florentines had experienced before the establishment, in 1494, of the Great Council. In this chapter on republican experience in fifteenth-century Florence, I shall therefore concentrate on the period before 1434, and then briefly discuss the changes which that experience underwent under the Medici, and after their expulsion in 1494.

This is a large subject, and in order to do it a modicum of justice, I propose to distinguish, in what must perform be very general observations, the following three aspects of that experience: the concept contemporary formed of Florence's republican institutions; the ways in which the working of these institutions affected Florentine citizens; and the extent to which they actively participated in the government of Florence.

If we want to ask how the Florentines conceptualised their republic, we have to go back to the fourteenth, and even the thirteenth century, when the rise of the Signoria in Northern and Central Italy brought about, in the surviving Italian city republics, the perception of a fundamental antithesis between despotic rule and the 'popoli che vivono in libertà,' the 'libertas populi,' a term which, in the fifteenth century, the humanists replaced with the classical one for commonwealth, res publica. According to Cicero's definition, as explained by St Augustine,20 omnino nullam esse rem publicam, quoniam non esset res populi; and, in his translation of the Politic, Leonardo Bruni rendered Aristotle's term for the third true constitution, politycia, with res publica.21 The chief difference between the republican and the despotic regime was to contrast the contrast between the absolute and arbitrary exercise of government and its limitation by law and the will of the people.

19 This is before the victory of the Almanzor faction, which, after Cosimo de' Medici's return from exile in 1434, was followed by the establishment of Medici ascendance. Ed. G. Pampaloni, 'Novel tentativi di riforme alla Costituzione fiorentina attraverso le consule', Archiò Storico Italiano, 126 (1963), p. 322 (tradotta di 8 July). For a contemporary narrative of the crisis of the Medici regime in 1455–6, see M. Phillips, The Memoir of Marco Farnetti. A Life in Medici Florence (Princeton, 1983 and London, 1986), chs. 7, 8, 10.
20 See e.g. Marco Villani, Cronica, ss. 87, ed. F.G. Dragomiro (Milan, 1848) VI, p. 175.
22 De civitate Dei, vi, 50; cf. Cicero, De re publica, i, 21.
23 Politici, 1295. Com amituro modo gubernet ad communi utilitatem, vocatur communis omne transtatus publicam [medievo] omnium, respubica [medevo], Aristoteles, Libri omnium quibus esse moralis philosophia . . . continetur (Lyons, 1779), v, p. 571.

Bruni was the first humanist to attempt, in his Landatio Florentinam orbi of 1403,23 an analysis of the republican constitution of Florence; but, largely owing to the panegyric nature of this work, his analysis is incomplete and necessarily biased; while his later, more objective account, in his short Greek treatise on the Florentine politia,24 suffers from his attempt to apply Aristotelian constitutional theory, in the form of the mixed constitution, to Florence. What does, however, stand out in these analyses are a number of basic principles, which were conceived by Bruni as fundamental to an understanding of the Florentine system of government: for the executive, the Signoria, a strict limitation, by a variety of means, of its almost regal authority, and its dependence, in the last resort, on the will of the people, as voiced in the legislative councils of the People and of the Commune; for the citizens, liberty under the law, and an equality which implied, among other things, as Bruni pointed out in 1428 in his funeral oration for Nanni Strozzi, equal opportunity to rise to high office;25 for the social classes, as he states in his constitutional treatise about ten years later, a balance between the patricians and the people which, while tilted towards the former, took no account of the extremes of private power and of poverty, whose representatives were excluded from government. How far did the political experience of Florentine citizens conform to these principles?

The overridting experience the average Florentine citizen had of his republic must have been the power, and indeed the majesty, of the Signoria, with its eight Priori and the Gonfalonier of Justice, a power which Gregorio Dati described, at the beginning of the century, as 'grande senza misura.'26 Decisively reasserted in 1382 after the Ciompi revolt of 1378,27 it included the authority to initiate legislation, as well as the right to intervene in criminal jurisdiction when the public interest might demand it. But the Signoria, which deliberated jointly with its two Colleges, the Sixteen Gonfalonieri di compagnia and the Twelve Buonomini, was not the only magistrate which the citizens would regard as the governing body of the republic. The Otto di Guardia, set up after the Ciompi revolt to protect the security of the state, had acquired extensive powers in policing it, the Dieci di Balia were, after 1384, in times of war, in charge of military operations and diplomatic negotiations, the Ufficiali del Monte administered the funded debt and had become the central financial magistracy of the Commune. The increasing range of the powers and competence of the executive branch of government was part of the political experience of the Florentines from the 1380s onwards: it was largely due to the

traumatic effects of the Ciompi revolt and its aftermath and of the wars against Giangaleazzo Visconti, and to the aggrandizement and reorganisation of the city's territorial dominion. But there were limits to this development. A permanent commission of eighty-one composed almost entirely of members of the executive branch, with full powers to hire mercenaries and levy taxes for this purpose, which had been set up in 1395, was for all practical purposes abolished eleven years later, and a contemporary diarist commented: "il popolo non fu molto lieto". It was significant of this reluctance to increase the powers of the executive even further, that when in 1411 a new council, of 100, was created, without whose assent no military action was to be undertaken, it consisted only partly of official members, and its decisions required in turn the assent of the councils of the People and the Commune. Indeed, these two ancient councils of the republic, whose membership totalled over 500, provided the most important of the checks to the powers of the executive. They could be seen to represent the broad foundation of the republican structure of government. As Bruni puts it in his Landeto, in terms derived from Roman law, 'quod enim ad multos attinet', must be decided by the many.

Bruni points out that another check to the great power of the Signoria was the short term of their office. All public offices were held for short periods, mostly for six months, those of the Signoria for two months only. This, as well as the proliferation of offices since the second half of the fourteenth century, provided the citizens with a wide range of opportunities to hold office, and consequently to participate directly in government and administration. This extensive availability of public office was thus a major aspect of the republican experience of the citizens, and thus of the Florentine libertas; another concerned the methods by which this availability was translated into fact, in other words, the methods by which citizens were actually elected to office.

Since early in the fourteenth century, election to public office was based on periodical vetting for eligibility in so-called scrutinies (squittioni), which were carried out by specially convened commissions consisting of the Signoria, its two Colleges, a number of other ex officio members, and eighty additional members elected by the Signoria and the Colleges, which gave the executive a key role in determining the composition of the commission. Actual appointment to office followed on the extraction of the names of eligible citizens from the pouches in which they had been placed after the scrutinies. There were separate pouches for different offices or groups of offices, and of these the most prestigious contained the names of the citizens who had been made eligible for the so-called three highest offices, the Signoria, the Sixteen Gonfalonieri di compagnia, and the Twelve Buononnomi. Scrutinies – that of the Tre Maggiori Uffici was separate from that of all the other public offices – were to take place every five years (in fact, the intervals were usually longer), and votes were cast on nominations by the Gonfalonieri of the ancient militia companies, who could be assumed to be well acquainted with the citizens of their sixteen districts; and both the identity of the voters and the results of the vote were kept strictly secret. This meant that citizens who had been nominated would not know whether they had been made eligible until their names were extracted from the pouches prior to the filling of a vacancy. This was a matter of particular importance for the three most prestigious offices, which included the Signoria; accordingly, even if a citizen, though eligible to them, was temporarily barred from being elected (for instance, because he had held the same office recently), he was now known (seduto), as were those who were actually elected to office (situato), to have been qualified for government. This gave the group of seduto and situato a preferential position not only in subsequent scrutinies, but also when it came to electing the membership of councils, such as that of 200, which were endowed with special responsibilities and powers, and hence affected the participation of citizens in political life.

The secrecy which was an essential feature of the Florentine electoral system conformed to that which surrounded the working of both the executive and the legislative organs of the republic; it formed an essential part of the republican experience of Florentine citizens. Just as the deliberations of the Signoria were meant to be kept secret – an obligation which was physically reflected in the separate location of their living quarters on the second floor of their palace – so the vote in the councils was secret ballot. This concern with secrecy was underlined by the lengths to which the government would go in trying to prevent the formation of caucuses, in the temporary suppression of religious confraternities, which were banned, for instance, in 1419, on the grounds that some of them encouraged factionalism; later in the century citizens who, as seduti or situati, were known to be eligible to government, were forbidden to attend meetings of confraternities while electoral scrutinies were in progress. But there were ways of evading such restrictions; we know of at least one of the more prestigious confraternities which, around the middle of the century,
citizens would agree, Giovanni Rucellai, for example, during his time in the political wilderness after Cosimo’s return from exile and before being accepted, nearly thirty years later, into the Medici regime. For the vast majority, however, high office represented the peak of their republican experience. The memoirs of fifteenth-century Florentines clearly show the role office-holding played in their lives. The ‘ cursus honorum ’ might begin with the election to the consulate of one of the guilds; communal offices would follow, until finally successful citizens would reach the plateau of the top offices of government and administration, which included, first of all, the Signoria and their Colleges, but also such powerful and prestigious magisteries as the Dieci di Balla, the Ottavi di Guardia, and the Ufficiali del Monte.

The citizens who had reached this plateau, after having been made eligible for the government, constituted what the Florentines called the reggimento; after the scrutiny of 1411, it amounted to just over 1,000 citizens; by the time the scrutiny of 1433 had completed its business, it had risen to over 2,000. While this shows a remarkable degree of social mobility, it should be noted that only a fraction of these men (185 and 327 respectively) belonged to the craft guilds, although these constituted a quarter of the members of most offices: evidently because only a very small section of the lower classes were considered fit for positions in the government. Another significant feature of these figures is the prevalence of single families: of the 1,737 citizens of the greater guilds who were made eligible to the three highest offices in 1433, just under 100 were individually successful, the rest belonged to 227 families. Among these a very small group was represented with far greater numbers than the average of 7.3 per family—such as the Capponi with 20 and the Strozzi with no less than 40 members. The reggimento, it has been said, has to be seen ‘as a constellation of families rather than as an aggregate of individuals’.

Nor was the elitist tendency in the access to high public office, and hence to a high level of political participation, confined to the procedure of qualification for these offices. The methods by which the results of the electoral scrutines were used in the final stage of the electoral process, that is the extraction from the pouches which had been filled with the names of the successful candidates, included in their turn an element of selection. The Signoria comprised, besides the eight Priori, the most prestigious and influential member of the government, the Gonfalonier of Justice, and, to make appointment to this office exceptionally difficult, there had always been a separate pouch for it. To select...
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names to be placed in this pouch from among those who were eligible to the Priorate, was the job of the officials who were in charge of the technical aspects of the scrutinies of the Tre Maggiori Uffici; but from 1387 onwards, these officials, the accoplati, could also place the names of those citizens into a special pouch for the Priorate, the borsellino, which, owing to the smaller number of name tickets it contained, provided their owners with greater opportunities for being actually elected to office.44

Even so, on the eve of the establishment of the Medici regime, the citizens who were eligible to government represented a sizeable part of the population of Florence, which in 1437 amounted to about 17,000 persons.45 Of these, well over half were men (c. 20,000); on the other hand, again according to the calculations of Herlihy and Klapisch, 46 per cent were under 20;46 30 was the minimum age for office-holding, 30 for the Priorate.

At the same time, one has to bear in mind that the Tre Maggiori Uffici represented only a fraction of the offices that had to be filled recurrently within the city and its territory. Only a few of the most sensitive of these were temporarily filled by way of direct elections, as were many of the minor ones, but here too the normal method was by sortition preceded by scrutiny. These scrutinies of the 'internal and external offices' concerned magistracies such as the Dieci di Balla and the Otro di Guardia, whose importance could in some respects equal or even surpass that of the Signoria, as well as top offices of the territorial administration, such as those of the Captains of Pisa and of Areezo, which combined great responsibilities with extensive powers; but the scrutinies also made citizens eligible for a host of minor administrative offices in the city and its territory. If republican experience, in terms of participation in government and administration, was to be based on eligibility to office, its range, despite all the gradations of that eligibility, was remarkably wide.

But if we define republican experience in terms of actual participation in decision-making, the picture is very different. Among the 5,000-odd posts, including membership of the councils, that had to be filled every year,47 those which belonged to the executive branch of government were, at any given point in time, occupied by a small section of the citizens who were eligible for them. On the other hand, while participation in actual decision-making was restricted to a small group of citizens, this was counterbalanced by the rapid rotation of office. It was further compensated by the regular use, by the Signoria, of advisory committees, which consisted, apart from ex officio members, of citizens who at the time did not belong to the executive branch of government.

46 Ibid., pp. 268, 177.

Without any status in the constitution, the composition of these meetings, or pratichi, was determined by the choice of the Signoria, a choice which in its turn was based on convention. That eminent citizens should be summoned was long-established practice; under the regime established after 1382, the pratichi were the most reliable mirror of its aristocratic features. Since the Signoria seldom ignored their advice, they formed an essential, usually decisive, element in the process of decision-making. The new elitist style of politics is borne out by their increasing frequency and also by the shift, noticeable after the turn of the century, from advice being given by speakers on behalf of corporate bodies to being offered independently, or on behalf of other members.47 The citizens who were regularly summoned to these consultative meetings represented the elite of the reggimenti; in the early fifteenth century, they amounted to about seventy men.48 In this inner circle of the regime, Maso degli Albizzi held, from 1393, a dominant position, in which he was succeeded, after his death in 1417, by his son Rinaldo. However, they shared this position with a few other prominent citizens, such as Rinaldo Gianfriulzi and Niccolò da Uzzano, and their status within the reggimenti, influential as it was, did not materially detract from its prevalently aristocratic character.

The aristocratic and elitist tendencies in the regime were counterbalanced by the role the legislative councils continued to play in it. Membership of these, and in particular of the council of the People, could be regarded, by way of the assent they had to give to the decisions of the government, as the most democratic feature of political participation within the regime, and hence of republican experience. But for the mass of Florentine citizens there was still another, more restricted sphere in which this experience could make itself felt. Dale and F. W. Kent have recently shown, in a seminal study, the role played in civic life by the gonfalonieri, that is the sixteen districts into which the city was divided.49 The gonfalonieri had their own assemblies which were presided over by the Gonfalonieri of compagna, who represented their district in the electoral scrutinies by nominating residents for eligibility to office, and who helped the Commune in the distribution of the tax burden that had been allocated to their districts while the Catasto was not in force, that is, before 1437 and between 1434 and 1458. Meeting periodically in the principal parish church, they elected committees of residents to function as syndics for the tax assessments, and this provided a modicum of civic participation on the local level. Yet here too, appearances can be deceptive: in the district studied by these authors, Lion rosso, over a period of forty-six years about two-thirds of the citizens who attended these assemblies belonged to ten to fifteen families: the 'patrician families who ruled the city also provided leadership in the local world of the gonfalonieri'.50

49 Ibid., pp. 18ff. 50 Neighbours and Neighbourhoods, pp. 17-19. 51 Ibid., pp. 77-8.
On an even more general level of republican experience the popular assemblies, or parlamenti, of all citizens were, like Marsilius of Padua's legator humanus, considered to possess the ultimate political authority in the republic. However, they were summoned only on rare occasions to approve constitutional reforms or to grant full powers to decide on such reforms to specially elected councils (bailie).

Insofar as Florence's political system was based on direct participation, republican experience manifested itself in the membership of the legislative councils and of pratiche and in the holding of public office. This participation could, in a generalised fashion, be conceived ideally as representative; 'ogni buono cittadino', writes Palmieri, 'che è posto in magistrato dove rappresenti alcuno principale membro civile, inanzi a ogni altra cosa intenda non essere privata persona, ma rappresentare l'universale persona di tutta la città'. 44 Palmieri here reiterates pleas to set public over private interest, which were particularly frequent and emphatic during the years after 1426, a period which ended with the collapse of the regime by which Florence had been governed since the 1380s. Now the 'ambito officiorum' became one of the major causes of the formation of two rival factions. Nothing shows better the extent to which the political fabric had been shaken than the creation, in 1449, of the new magistracy of the Conservatori di legge: their function was to exclude unqualified citizens from office-holding and to prosecute citizens who abused their public positions. This led to a flood of denunciations, but did little to restrain the sectarian spirit in the regime and, on the contrary, may have increased it. 45

Machiavelli, who considered factionalism a deep-rooted disease of the Florentine body politic and a pervasive theme of the city's history, argues in the Discorsi that one of the causes of the downfall of the aristocratic regime of the early Quattrocento was that 'non si era costituito un timore agli uomini grandi che non potessero far sètta, le quali sono la rovina di uno stato', that is of a regime. 46 But this had been precisely one of the aims the Conservatori di legge were meant to achieve. That the new office proved to be, in this respect, largely counterproductive, may be taken to show that, contrary to Machiavelli's belief, there was no institutional remedy of this problem - as there was none to stop the calamities, notwithstanding his belief 'che se fosse stato in Firenze ordine d'accusare i cittadini, e punire i calunnianti, non seguivano infiniti scandali che sono seguiti'. 47 But Machiavelli's overriding critique of that regime was that it was a 'repubblica governata da ottimati', 48 a form of government liable to turn into an oligarchy, which he condemned as corrupt. 49 Whether he gave a balanced account of it is a different matter. It could be argued that his analysis of its defects was profoundly influenced by his own experience of the working of a republican regime in Florence, which was in many respects a very different one from that of the early fifteenth century.

The new regime had been established after the expulsion in 1494 of the Medici, under whose dominance Florence had been governed for sixty years. The Medici regime, 'lo stato di Cosimo', which replaced the preceding one in 1434, 'pende', Machiavelli says, 'più verso il principato che verso la repubblica', 50 thus implying, correctly, that however effective and pervasive its institutional reforms and the dominant influence of Cosimo were, the new regime had by no means eliminated republican experience. What it did do was to modify it profoundly. I shall, before concluding this chapter, touch on a few major changes which that experience underwent after 1434.

The electoral system based on sortition and scrutiny remained in existence, 51 but scrutines were held at increasingly long intervals by councils whose members were expected to be loyal to the regime, and, while the vast majority of offices continued to be filled as before by the drawing of names from pockels, the most sensitive and powerful ones, such as the Dieci di Balia, were increasingly filled by way of election in Medicean councils. Above all, sortition was at first temporarily suspended, and then in practice abolished, for the Signoria. The Signoria was now elected a mano - in fact, by a kind of highly selective sortition - by the acropatrii, who, from having originally been a technical office in charge of filling the pockels after scrutines, had become a key institution of the regime, since they had to see to it that the Signoria, whose powers were legally undiminished, and who could theoretically overthrow the regime (as that of September 1434 had done by having Cosimo recalled from exile) was recruited from responsible supporters of the Medici. The regime retained, as far as its social structure was concerned, the upward, as well as downward, mobility of its predecessor. However, that mobility, and hence the share in political participation, was now increasingly determined from above. This created a new and expanding network of political patronage. Instead of procuration being addressed to members of scrutiny councils, in order to obtain eligibility to public office, we now find appeals to the leaders of the regime, to have oneself or one's relative or friend elected to the Signoria, or at least to have their names drawn from the bags, so that they were, as redini, known to be eligible, even if they were not appointed to the office (redini). Under Lorenzo,

44 Vita civile, p. 131.
47 Discorsi, i, 8; Triora in opere, p. 89.
48 Discorsi, ibid., p. 34.
49 Discorsi, i, 12; cf. Interi fiorentini, vti, 3 and 4; ibid., pp. 85, 794.
50 Discorsi, ibid., pp. 24-1.
51 For the following see Rubinstein, The Government of Florence, pp. 36f.
these pleas had reached such proportions that on at least one occasion he asked, in despair, to be left alone: ‘de’ Priori’, he writes in 1483 to his secretary Niccolò Michelozzi, ‘non mi advisate cosa nissuna, perché non voglio anchora questo carico. Io barii caro solamente che fusse de’ Priori Filippo Carducci . . . G’altri faccino chi pare loro [i.e. the acoppiatori].’ Levaremi le pregherie d’adossor, perché io ho più lettere di Priori che vogliono essere, che non sono di nell’anno . . . As before, and even more so now, to have been seduto or seduto for the Tre Maggiori Uffici gave a citizen a privileged position in the reggimento, but within that group the men who had been sedati or sedati for the Gonfaloniere of Justice came to constitute the elite in a regime which was increasingly hierarchical. At the same time, the decline of the political influence and independent authority of the Signoria was bound to change the role it played in the political experience of the members of the reggimento. The same applied, to a much greater extent, to the legislative councils of the People and of the Commune, which were replaced, as the chief areas of political participation for the majority of the reggimento, first with the Medicean balle and, from 1459, with the new council of Centro. Conversely, the consultative pratiche, which had been so prominent a feature of the aristocratic regime, gradually declined in importance, together with the Signoria whom they were designed to advise, and were for all practical purposes abolished under Lorenzo, their place being largely taken by informal meetings in the Medici Palace. As Alamanino Rinuccini put it in 1479, in a scathing critique of the regime: while previously ‘viri graves de rebus agendis propositis sic in utrumque partem libere disputabant, ut facile quid in quaque verum esse inveniretur . . . Nunc . . . cum paucissimos ad maximarum rerum consulatam adhuc electos Catones nostris, ea plurum decerni videmus quae prostride idem ipsi . . . constituant.’ The Sestantes, which was created in the following year as the supreme council of the republic, while reaffirming Lorenzo’s dominant position after the end of the war of the Pazzi conspiracy, also responded to such criticisms by being composed of the leading citizens of the regime. Its size bears a striking resemblance to the inner circle of the aristocratic regime of the early Quattrocento, but, unlike the loosely structured elite of the earlier reggimento, that of the Medici regime was institutionalised and headed by one man.

If, then, republican experience in terms of participation in government underwent profound changes under the Medici, the same applied to the citizens’ perception of republican government itself. The awe with which they had regarded the power and majesty of the Signoria was now shifted to a large extent to the head of the regime who, unlike the Signoria, could dispense a vast amount of political patronage, and who was eulogised by humanists and courtiers as a sort of Platonic ruler, although Lorenzo himself insisted on his being a private citizen. There were criticisms in the reggimento itself of the controls and restraints the Medici had imposed on the republican constitution, and in particular of the abandonment of the traditional methods of electing the government. These criticisms came to a head under Piero de’ Medici in 1463, when elections a mano were in fact temporarily abolished. But the same partisans who played a leading role in the abortive republican reaction against Medicean controls would have agreed with Lorenzo that ‘a Firenze si può mal vivere senza lo stato’, that is without a prominent position in the regime. They would witness, and reluctantly accept, a social mobility which was, owing to the manipulation of the electoral system, less open to free opportunity than it had been in the aristocratic regime at the beginning of the century. As Piero Guicciardini put it at the time of the last Medicean scrutiny, in 1484, ‘continuavamente viene su gente nuova, onde è necessario, chet mettendosi nel reggimento tuttavia de’ nuovi, un rincontro se ne cacci de’ vecchi; et così si fa.’ As for the reaction of the people to the progressive emasculation of their share in the government of the republic, and thus of their republican experience in terms of participation, this is far more difficult to gauge. The violence of the uprising against Lorenzo’s son Piero only two and a half years after his death suggests that the regime was not as universally popular as later apologists of it would imply, and the enthusiasm with which the Great Council was embraced after 1494 confirms this impression.

However great the changes which republican experience had undergone under the Medici, the experience still had much in common with that which prevailed in the early fifteenth century. One of these common features was the share in government through eligibility to office being provided by electoral scrutinies, another the elitist concentration of effective participation in decision-making in relatively small groups of citizens; a third the mobility within the social structure of the regime. The constitutional reform of December 1454 changed the forms of political participation, and hence of republican experience, to an extent which can be compared with the establishment of the Priorate in 1382. The 1,500-odd members of the Great Council became a virtually closed class that monopolised office-holding as well as legislation and, through electing to the Signoria and to other high offices, exercised an unprecedented control over the executive. Admission to the Great Council

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47 Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, Fondo Gino Conti, 19, 120, (Bagno a Morbo, 17 April).
was based on the group of seduti and seduti appointed to the Tre Maggiori Uffici over three generations, although some additional admissions were provided for. Membership was, for all practical purposes, restricted to the citizens, or their forbears, who had been made eligible to government under the Medici regime. This continuity was characteristic of the social structure of politics in the Florentine republic, which was relatively little affected by the changes in its regimes. The tensions and conflicts between aristocratic, oligarchical, and democratic tendencies were now played out within the Great Council in terms of extending, or restricting, participation in government and decision-making, and led to changes in the methods by which the Council conducted its elections and, finally, to the transformation of the Gonfalonierate of Justice into an office for life.

The Great Council provided the framework for the republican experience of Machiavelli, who had just reached the minimum age required for office-holding when the new republican constitution was established. But that experience will be the subject of another chapter.

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Machiavelli and the crisis of the Italian republics

ELENA FASANO GUARINI

It is impossible in Machiavelli's writings not to feel the pressure of the events of his time. His reflections and his political proposals refer directly to those events. Hence scholars, although using very different criteria for their interpretations, have often considered Machiavelli's major writings to be a direct and passionate response to the crisis of the republics or, on a wider plane, to that of the small Italian states—a crisis which he lived through without being able to witness its final outcome. This is the dominant theme in Federico Chabod's classic work on The Prince. But this same general conception already underlies Pasquale Villari's and Oreste Tommasini's massive nineteenth-century biographies, in which the Florentine secretary's life, his writings and his 'times' are tightly interwoven. This basic interpretation has recently been used, for instance, by Corrado Vivanti, who considers the Discourses to be not a theoretical work, but rather a concrete political proposal, a sort of manifesto for refounding the Italian republics in a political situation in which it was not yet clear what the final outcome would be. 'Machiavelli and the crisis of the Italian republics' is hence much too broad and much too widely debated a problem for me to be able to discuss it without restricting it somewhat and without making some preliminary remarks.

Other scholars have given particular attention to the intellectual and ideological background from which The Prince and the Discourses emerged. One can see this emphasis in Felix Gilbert's novel classic works. For Gilbert, however, this side of the question is deeply linked to a general evaluation of the specific political and cultural situations that Machiavelli experienced. In other

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2 P. Villari, Niccolò Machiavelli e il suo tempo (Milan, 1897), 3 vols.; O. Tommasini, La vita e gli scritti di Niccolò Machiavelli (Rome, 1881-1911), 2 vols.
3 Introduction to N. Machiavelli, Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Titus Livius, Corrado Vivanti, ed. (Turin, 1983).