The books in this series discuss the emergence of intellectual traditions and of related disciplines. The procedures, aims and vocabularies generated will be set in the context of the alternatives available within the contemporary frameworks of ideas and institutions. Through detailed studies of the evolution of such traditions, and their modification by different audiences, it is hoped that a new picture will form of the development of ideas in their concrete contexts. By this means, artificial distinctions between the history of philosophy, of the various sciences, of society and politics, and of literature, may be seen to dissolve.

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dissipatore di tutte le civiltà degli uomini come sono i principe orientali’, he loves ‘le città sue suggette equalmente, ed à loro lascia l'arti tutte e quasi tutti gli ordini antichi, taliché se le non possono crescere come libere elle non rovinano anche come schiave’ (II, 2). Under princely government it seems that the territory can be enlarged on a basis of parity between the subject bodies.

In the Discourses, therefore, alongside the ideal model of the grotteissima città of Rome with its empire, the real-life models of the great monarchies and of the principalities that embrace many cities once again come to the fore. And it is in the light of this double comparison that Machiavelli, from within the archaic republican and communal world to which he so deeply belongs, interprets and gives witness to the nature of its crisis.

Florentine republicanism in the early sixteenth century

GIOVANNI SILVANO

I

The overthrow of the Medici regime in Florence in 1494 marks a turning point in the history of Florentine republicanism. Although a vital presence since the thirteenth century, only at the end of 1494 did republicanism inspire the reform of the city government to an extent that led eventually to the establishment of the Consiglio Maggiore.

One clear aim of the constitutional reforms carried out by the Medici regime from 1434 onwards was to have the Councils of the Popolo and of the Commune deprived of their traditional powers. These were then bestowed upon the new Councils of the Cento and of the Settanta, thus making all the more apparent that the Medici’s policy did depart significantly from Florentine constitutional tradition. This specific aspect of sixteenth-century Medicean constitutional reform has a great deal to do with the events of late 1494, and in particular with the establishment of the Consiglio Maggiore. This institution was, in fact, regarded as a reinstatement of the old city’s councils.

The inability of Piero de’ Medici to orchestrate an effective defence policy against Charles VIII, who had crossed the Alps at the end of August 1494, and his haste to surrender Pisa and Sarzana to the French king, led to his exile on 9 November 1494. As an immediate consequence a constitutional crisis developed and the conflicting factions fought bitterly in an attempt to direct the reform of the city government:

1 This view has been proposed by, among many others, N. Strumey, The Language of History in the Renaissance. Rhetoric and Historical Consciences in Florentine Humanism (Princeton, 1970), p. 117, and more recently by Q. Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought (Cambridge, 1978), vol. 1 The Renaissance, pp. 77–84. Less inclined to recognize a clear articulation of the concept of liberty in the Middle Ages is R. Witt, ‘The Rebirth of the Concept of Republican Liberty in Italy in Studies in Honour of Hans Baron, A. Modica and J. A. Tedeschi, eds. (Delachaux, 1973), pp. 71–99; and R. Witt, Cohesive Subieties and his Public Letters (Geneva, 1976), pp. 71–84. Of course all of these views have to be read keeping in mind H. Baron’s major thesis that ‘civic humanism’ as a change in political thinking in Florence occurred at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and that Leonardo Bruni was a major figure in such a transitional moment. See H. Baron, The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance. Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny (Princeton, 1966).

The target was the intent of the Parlamento to establish a governo stretto, by restricting the eligibility requirements. This would have led the conflicting factions into an open fight:

Erano nella città molti che si opponevano al governo del Nerc, Nicolò Ridioli, Pierfrancesco, messer Agnolo, Lorenzo Tornabuoni, Iacopo Salvati e gli altri cittadini dello stato vecchio; alla quale cosa si opponevano molti uomini da bene, massime Piero Capponi e Francesco Valori, partiti maestri dal bene pubblico perché in verità si sarebbe giusta la città, parte dal privato loro. Perciò sendo loro naturalmente e' maggiori loro amici della casa de' Medici, e che nel 1434 avvennero tifosi Cosimo, dubitavano che spacciavano gli altri dello stato vecchio, e' quelli crudelmente si chiamavano bigi, loro non rassegnarono alcune delles in those 1434, naturalmente era anche inimici loro ... quando venne un aiuto non pensato, dafra Girolamo.7

The real political problem emerging from this passage of Guicciardini's Storia fiorentina has to do with the political expectations of the enemies of the stato vecchio who, despite Piero's defeat, felt threatened by the many Medici partisans who were still in power.

At this point, then, a governo largo seemed to be the right political choice, the only one capable, at least in theory, of extending full citizenship to the struggling political groups, from the Medici to their political opponents. To recognise the need of a governo largo in Florence was a very important political decision that found its legislative expression in the fundamental law of 22-3 December 1494, the constitutional cornerstone of the Florentine republic.

Here again, as had happened in the Act of the Parlamento, the law of 22-3 December was very careful in setting down the requirements with regard to eligibility for the Consiglio Maggiore. Basically, eligibility in the Consiglio Maggiore was granted to those who were or were veduti or seduti to the three highest magistracies or to those whose ancestors had been veduti or seduti during the previous three generations. Furthermore, the beneficio was also to be granted to those who had qualified in the scrutiny of 1484,8 and to a number of citizens who, although lacking the beneficio, would, however, show strong interest in it.9

On the one hand, then, the provvisione lays down the fact that eligibility to the Consiglio Maggiore is to be based upon a quasi-hereditary principle, and on the other, it recognises the need for flexibility in dealing with this matter. This law and its further amendments in fact provided a number of men who had been
institution could be politically manoeuvred only with great difficulty. The primi cittadini sitting in the Consiglio Maggiore, soon realised that the distribution of official republic posts would now be the result of a decision endorsed by the majority of the Consiglio's members. In this new constitutional framework, some of the governo stretto's staunchest supporters feared that their interests would no longer be protected. This is why aristocratic criticism of the Consiglio Maggiore aimed always at bringing political power back to the luoghi più stretti. The provisions of 22-3 December, however, had in fact enacted a republic or a vivere popolare, far removed from Medicean tradition. What was the Consiglio Maggiore if not the reinstatement of the old Councils of the Popolo and Comune?

An enquiry into Renaissance Florentine republicanism from the last years of the fifteenth to the first decades of the sixteenth-century can justifiably focus upon the perception among Florentines of the Consiglio Maggiore. Despite being abolished twice by the Medici, soon after their return in 1522 and 1530, the Consiglio Maggiore remained a central topic in many contemporary political and historical writings. In this large body of writings a favourable attitude towards this institution emerges. In time the Consiglio Maggiore, losing its original historical features, came to be conceived in a more mythical vein both among the nomini da bene and among the popolani. Following the story of this changing perception of the institution, commonly regarded as the embodiment of the republic, provides a better historical understanding of the Florentine debate over the governo largo and governo stretto between nomini da bene and popolani.

13 In February 1497 a provvisione was enacted that also extended the beneficio to those citizens who could get in contravvenza. See N. Rubinstein, '1 primi anni del Consiglio Maggiore a Firenze (1496-1499). Archivio storico italiano, 112, 2 (1914), 151-96, p. 114. See also 121-27 for a clear exposition of the historical procedures in the Consiglio Maggiore. For a more general overview of the problem of citizenship in Renaissance Florence, see L. Martinez, Layers and Stratification in Renaissance Florence (Princeton, 1968), pp. 119-34. J. Kirschen has also some interesting remarks in 'Firenze e le istituzioni del governo pubblico', a controversy over the legal qualifications for public office in early sixteenth-century Florence in Studies in the History of Law, Bem, pp. 229-45.

14 See N. Rubinstein, '1 primi anni', 155, where it is said that the equitato was maintained only for the privileged. However, it is true that the provvisione of 22-3 December 1494 permitted an equitato to be carried out only once, and not as a general rule.

15 This view was first proposed by N. Rubinstein, 'Oligarchies and democracy in sixteenth-century Florence' in Florence and Venice: Comparisons and Confrontations, 2 vols. 1 (Quadrante, S. Bertelli, N. Rubinstein, C.H. Smyth, eds. Florence, 1979-83), pp. 71-81. Very recently much archival evidence has been brought to light that illuminates Rubinstein's assumptions. See R. Pesman Cooper, 'The money-lending group under the governo pubblico', 1494-1512, Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History, (1987), 71-81. In this fundamental study, the author argues that the establishment of the governo pubblico did not alter the social composition of the Florentine ruling group if compared with the reggimento of the previous Medici regime - as it has been described by D. Kent, 'The Florentine reggimento in the fifteenth century', Renaissance Quarterly, 4 (1951), 775-818, and D. Kent, The Rise of the Medici. Faction in Florence, 1434-1482 (Oxford, 1975). Pesman Cooper, furthermore, is right when he conserves of the establishment of the Consiglio Maggiore a tare, the attempt at fixing the boundaries of the Florentine political class once and for all. More questionable is her thesis that the Consiglio Maggiore did not cause a broadening of Florentine citizenship. To say that only one-third of all members of the council did actually exercise their right of being elected does not necessarily mean that the purpose of the law of 22-3 December 1494 had not aimed at broadening this number. The number of cele did admit

16 A political, economic and cultural leadership of elite groups has long been recognised in Florentine Renaissance society of the late Middle Ages. An outstanding work in this direction is G. Brucker, The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence (Princeton, 1977). Important studies on the functioning of Renaissance oligarchies are in L. Martini, Power and Imagination. City States in Renaissance Italy (New York, 1979), pp. 148-161. In these and other works an attempt at defining socially and numerically the Florentine ruling group has been successfully carried out. However, historians have employed different terms to refer to the Florentine upper class than was customary in Florence: governo pubblico, primi cittadini, nomini da bene and forti were all synonymous terms identifying members of the most powerful class. The ruling group in Florence was never a legally closed body - with the partial exception of the time of the governo pubblico - and only after the Duchy had been established by Cosimo I de' Medici did the perception of belonging to an elite group become more and more apparent. See S. Bertelli, Il potere oligarchico nelle storie italiane medioevali (Florence, 1978), pp. 166-167 and F. D'Andrea, 'L’idea di una nuova “elites” sociale negli storici e storici dei del profundare', Rivista storica italiana, 92 (1980), 75-97, printed also in Firenze e i suoi committenti nel luogo degli orizzonti, 130 (1981), pp. 486-488.
II

After the Medici had been driven out of Florence in 1494, Girolamo Savonarola was one of the Consiglio Maggiore’s staunchest supporters. Even before these dramatic events, he had addressed himself to politics, when, in the 1480s, he worked on his Compendium totius philosophiae whose last book bears the title De politia et regno. In this period, his political perspective was cast fully in the Aristotelian and Thomist pattern of thought. The basic assumption is the belief that man is a social animal whose end consists in living together with other men. Therefore the next step is to find out which form of government would best serve this goal. Here Savonarola betrays his monarchical sympathies, based mainly on the apparent resemblance between monarchy and the divine government of the universe. Finally, the duties and virtues of the good king are thoroughly discussed. A piece of orthodox Thomist political philosophy, this tract does not address any political issue of the time, but rather stems from Savonarola’s philosophical education in the Dominican schools.

While retaining his inner philosophical beliefs, as soon as Savonarola faced the constitutional crisis Piero de’ Medici’s exile had provoked in Florence, he set himself the task of intervening in the historical situation in as effective a way as possible. As a preacher with a large following, he had a chance to advocate a reform of the city government from the pulpit, and he did so in the Advent sermons of 1494. Never before had the friar entered the Florentine political scene in such an open way.

In the sermon of the second Sunday of Advent, on 7 December, he called for a deep moral renewal. Only later did Savonarola speak of a political reform:

O Firenze, ora mi volto ad te. Se tu vuoi stagnari, o città nuova, se tu vuoi esser nuova e se tu hai mutato nuovo stato, bisogna che tu muti novi modi e novi vivere, se tu vuoi durare, e se tu vuoi reggere [...]. La prima cosa che tu debba fare èltra’ è questo: che tu facci tale legge, che nessuno pili per l’avventire possa farsi capo.

In keeping with a long tradition of thought going back to Bartolus of Sassoferrato and Coluccio Salutati, Savonarola endorses the view that tyranny is the worst form of government. He could not make a more direct allusion to the Medici regime. In this sermon Savonarola addresses the issue of political reform in Florence only in very general terms; there is no mention of any specific reform, the foremost concern being the absolute necessity of establishing a government capable of checking any attempt at tyranny.

A week later, on 14 December, Savonarola managed to propose to his audience some reforming thoughts in more technical terms. Taking great care to convey the idea that: ‘Dio ha voluto che tu vegga ed esperimenti la mia inettitudine, accio che tanto piu tu vegga e consideri che gli è lui e non te che fa el tutto’, Savonarola argues that, although theoretically government by one man is best, for Florence, governo dei piu is the most suitable. The friar implies that he is for an aristocratic form of government, because, according to his classification of the forms of governments, i piu refers to the aristocracy. At this point it seems that the Florentine aristocracy succeeded in enlist Savonarola’s support to its cause. Furthermore this would certainly be consistent with the two references he makes to the excellence of the Venetian government. Although careful to provide details of a long-awaited fiscal reform in Florence, on the constitutional score, Savonarola does not go further than expressing his preference for the Venetian government. In this sermon there is no direct mention of the Consiglio Maggiore and only his calling upon the Venetian model could be interpreted as an unspoken but strong advocacy of the Consiglio Maggiore. Only later did Savonarola refer openly to the Consiglio Maggiore, and only dealt with it fully in 1498 in his Trattato circa el regimento e governo della città di Firenze.

This short treatise was composed at the request of the Signoria which was


G. Savonarola, Prediche, p. 212.

Some say they regressed for one capo solo, others by more people, some of them are said to be the whole population entire’, Abd. p. 210.

La forma che avesse principiato non può stare, se non la riordinata meglio. Credo che non sia la migliore di quella de Veniziani e che vo pigliato esempi da loro’, Abd. p. 246.

arising from the presence in Florence of conflicting social groups. The governo
civile in fact goes beyond factions by allowing a very large number of citizens in
the Council. It therefore promotes the common good of the city in the most
effective way:

... e se fu divisa e piena di discordia nelle tempi passati per la ambizion e per li idoli
del principali cittadini ... essendo ritornati li cittadini, li quali furono scacciati in diversi
tempi da chi ha governato, massime dal ’54 in qua ... il consiglio e governo civile, il
quale fu in lei fundato non da uomini, ma da Dio, è stato instrumento ... a mantenerea
nella sua libertà.

Savonarola’s paramount concern is with the liberty of Florence. His basic
assumption is that to promote and preserve a governo civile, no private citizen
ever has the authority to bestow upon other fellow citizens honors and offices
in the state. If this occurred, very likely all citizens would hasten to submit
themselves to the one holding out promises of honors, thus paving the way to
tyranny. The power of such distribution of honors ought then to remain with
the people, to prevent any private citizen from becoming a tyrant. Fatto
dunque questo numero di cittadini, il quale si domanda Consiglio grande, e
avendo lui a distribuire tutti li onori, non è dubbio che questo è il signore della
città, the only authority legitimising the distribution of honors in Florence.
In Savonarola’s view, the Consiglio Maggiore embodies a truly popular
republic, capable of bringing to the city the prosperity and freedom from tyranny.

The fall of Piero de’ Medici and the immediate return to Florence of his
enemies, along with some internal divisions among the same Medici friends,
had convinced the friar that only a republic – governo largo – would restore to
Florence the much-awaited and needed unity. To this urgent demand
Savonarola’s answer was the Consiglio Maggiore. But what had some of the
nomini di bene to say about the Consiglio Maggiore? Did they share Savonarola’s
belief in the unifying role of the Council?

In some interesting political memozandas written just before the prodeziones
of December 1494 was enacted, some nomini principali seemed to welcome the
institution of the Consiglio Maggiore, aware, as they had to be, of the difficulty
they would meet in establishing a governo stretto. This comes to light in Piero

22 ‘Ma perché le Signorie Vostre ma richiedono, non che io scriva del governo de’ regni è città in
generale, ma che particolarmen tràl del nuovo governo della città di Firenze ... ’, Trattato, p. 433.
23 See G. Savonarola, Prediche italiane ai fiorentini, ed. F. Cognasso (Venezia, 1930), vol. III,
pp. 1-2, p. 16, p. 214
24 ‘La natura dunque di questo popolo non è da supporre g il governo di uno principe, ma che fosse
26 A number of essays are devoted to this issue in the volume Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian
Martines’ introduction, pp. 3-18.
Capponi’s answer to Domenico Bonsi’s proposal on the institution of the Consiglio Maggiore. The new institution, although not perceived as the magical solution to the city’s political future, is much respected. In keeping with the aristocratic viewpoint, Capponi asks that a senate be established:

Non si menzioni Messer Domenico di fare uno Consiglio di scelti, il quale è necessariissimo et per fare alcuna electione di più importanza et per fare alcune deliberazioni come a Venizia si costuma, et per adoperarlo più spesso come una pratica et consiglio della Signoria... Et questo Consiglio fa molto uility alla libertà nostra, perché la Signoria non oserebbe di fare cosa alcuna senza questa pratica, né potrebbe dare reputazione ai cittadini in chimare più uno che un altro. 38

It is all the more important to note that neither Savonarola nor Domenico Bonsi ever mentions the senate as an essential institution in their popular republic.

In the grandi’s view the Consiglio Maggiore, if essential in Florence, ought, however, to be helped in its functioning by a much smaller Council, like a senate. The allusion is here to the Venetian Consiglio dei Pregadi. 39 In Capponi’s mind such a Council is to work as a practice in such a way that only a very select group of influential citizens would actually have a voice in it. 40 Furthermore, this Council was to check the power of the Signoria which would always act after the Council’s deliberations. In Capponi’s proposal, then, a small number of nominis da bene were to rule the republic, thus dramatically decreasing the prestige and the actual power of the Consiglio Maggiore. Capponi’s interest in the Consiglio dei richiesti was to become a major political issue for the Florentine aristocracy for many years to come. And in fact in 1494 a smaller council than the Consiglio Maggiore was established. Such Consiglio degli Ottanta did not, however, fulfill the grandi’s demand for a permanent place in Florentine politics. In fact its members had to be elected every six months in the Consiglio Maggiore. Furthermore, the Ottanta had very limited power, limited mainly to the election of ambassadors and commissaries. At the end of the fifteenth century in Florence, supporters of the popular and aristocratic republic challenged each other on this very issue. From a constitutional viewpoint the former wanted all political power in the Consiglio


Maggiore, while the latter would have preferred a Consiglio Maggiore playing only a marginal part in the city’s policy-making process, thus leaving the most relevant part to the senate. In Florentine constitutional language these two different perspectives on the republic were alluded to by the expressions governo stretto and governo largo which, however, do not advocate a totally different constitutional organisation of the city. 41 If the popolani praised the Consiglio Maggiore because it increased the number of Florentine citizens, the nominis principali praised it only to the extent that it proved to be an effective way of preventing any private citizen from becoming a tyrant, something they wanted to avoid at all costs. On this point, Francesco Guicciardini holds that if any citizen of a good republic expects to participate and enjoy the benefic the city can offer, it is of the greatest importance:

avere rispetto di non desiderare tanto lo allargare e volere tanto che ognuno partecipi, che ne seguiti qualche disordine o qualche danno al pubblico, che sia di più importanza che non è il bene che nasce dallo allargare. 42

Even if a very technical issue regarding the election procedures in the Council is at stake here, Guicciardini, while making his point, expresses a political persuasion which was to become a cornerstone for many Florentine citizens: the quest for a governo stretto. Furthermore, Guicciardini, by holding the view that the Consiglio Maggiore was introduced in Florence after the Venetian model 43 sees the revolution of 1494 as an achievement by the nominis da bene.

During the first years of the republic, some of the city’s nominis da bene expressed their criticism of the Consiglio Maggiore by pointing out the need to establish – through a senate – a governo stretto. In their government, however, the Consiglio Maggiore would have retained an important place among the many city’s institutions, even if not the most prominent. It seems that the same political adversaries of the governo popolare in Florence did not dare to attack the Consiglio Maggiore directly: their strategy was to override it and to approach the question of the city’s reform from an alternative perspective, and in this effort, a major victory was the establishment of the gonfalonierato a vita in 1502.

A number of reasons may account for this reform: Florence, threatened by Cesare Borgia’s army, 44 was still to recover Pisa and was now also facing a dangerous revolt in Pistoia. 45 Furthermore, dissatisfaction and opposition

41 The most recent allusion to this political terminology is in P. Burke, The Italian Renaissance Culture and Society in Italy (Princeton, 1987), and edn., pp. 188–9.
42 Non credete voi onorevoli cittadini, che a Venezia, a esempio della quale fu nominata queste Consiglio grande,..., Ibid. p. 247.
43 E però sendo tornato Valentiniano in Romagna e preparandosi alla guerra di Bologna, sentendosi che ebbero questo Vicentizzo e gli Orsini... considerando che se el Valentiniano pugnasse Bologna, avrebbero tutti un a sua discresione, si ristirono insieme... così accaderendo uno principio di nuovo foco, la città diminuì assai la paura del Valentiniano, e così di Vicentizzo e degli altri, F. Guicciardini, Storia fiorentina, p. 196. 44 See ibid. p. 191.
Despite growing opposition to the gonfaloniere's government, culminating in the reconciliation of the Medici with the Strozzi, Piero Soderini managed to maintain his office until 1512, when the Medici returned to Florence. During these ten years no further constitutional reform took place. In particular, at this point, the Consiglio Maggiore was no longer at the centre of Florentine political and constitutional thinking.

The time for constitutional experimentation was now over in Florence. Another radical reform wave was to be witnessed only in the 1530s, when the Medicean lordship over Florence was institutionally formalised in the Duchy. But before that happened, in the 1520s and 1530s, while the Medici were struggling to have their pre-eminence in Florence recognised, the Consiglio Maggiore re-emerged not only in the writings of the great Florentine republicans, but also in the last Florentine republic. The Consiglio Maggiore had become an essential part of Florentine history, despite the fact that the Mediceans—especially after their return in 1512—had done their best to destroy even the memory of the revolution of December 1494.

III

Niccolò Machiavelli describes the political situation in Florence after the Medici had returned to the city in 1512 as being potentially explosive:

Essendosi in quel tanto fatto certo nuovo ordine di governo, nel quale non parendone al re che vi fusse la sicurtà della casa de' Medici né della lega, significò a questi signori, essere necessario ridurre questo stato nel modo era vivente il magnifico Lorenzo, desideravano li cittadini nobili salire a questo, ma tenevano non vi conoscessero la moliteudine.49

Despite this fear, the reform was actually achieved: the Consiglio Maggiore was dismissed, the Gonfaloniere a vita abolished, and the Council of the Settanta and Cento restored.50 This mutazione di stato witnessed the clash between the Medici and the great majority of the city's nomini principali who had hoped to come to terms with the Medici, now thanks to Lorenzo's political leadership, moving further in the direction of the principata.51

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43 '... ma pensare a modo che, mantenendoci il consiglio, si necessitasse quanto più si poteva e mai della città e loro e quali erano in somma, che le cose grasse e importanti si trattavano per compostione, e non di mano di chi non le intendeva; e cittadini savi e di qualità non avessero grado ne reputazione. A quanto è necessario, ma in che senso il gonfaloniere, con il grande sospetto che aveva che non si mutasse il stato, come è detto, Battuti, Government and Government in Early Sixteenth-century Florence, 1522–1534 (Oxford, 1981), pp. 107–109.


45 For the beginning of Piero Soderini's career see R. Pesman Cooper, 'L'elezione di Piero Soderini a gonfaloniere a vita. Note storiche', Archivio storico italiano, 121 (1967), 141–163. This article has been read together with 'Pier Soderini aspiring prince or civic idealist?', Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History, 1 (1978), 71–108, where the author argues that Piero Soderini intended his mandate to strengthen the governo popolare. In opposition to this view S. Berelli is inclined to conceive of Piero Soderini more in terms of making a personal bid for supremacy in Florence. See S. Berelli, 'Piero Soderini: Vexillifer Perpetuus Republicae Florentinae' 1502–1512 in Studies in the history of Europe, 45 (1981), 195–226, where the gonfaloniere's weak response to the events of 1512 is considered a major reason for his defeat.


47 See L. Landucci, Divite, p. 155.

48 For more details, see S. Silvano, 'V'ggero ciudite e' governi misto a Firenze nel primo Cinquecento' (Bologna, 1985), pp. 15–6.

Medicean lordship in Florence did not, however, go unquestioned since it took about two decades before the principato could be institutionally recognised. It is hardly a surprise then that during this period the political and ideological debate on the best form of government for Florence reached its peak. In this context the Consiglio Maggiore was broadly discussed, despite the effort of the Medici to cancel its memory. In this debate, affinities and dissimilarities emerge among Florentine republicans, who could not agree on the political significance to be attached to this particular institution. This was a period of intense thinking about politics, the age of Machiavelli, Guicciardini and Giannotti to mention only a few among the many.

During the last days of Piero Soderini’s gonfaloniere, at the end of August 1512, Francesco Guicciardini wrote his Discorsi di Logroño, an important political document addressed to the broad issue of the best form of government for Florence. For the first time since the beginning of the sixteenth century this short treatise addresses at some length the issue of the Consiglio Maggiore. Regarded as the cornerstone of Florentine liberty, it is praised as the foundation of the vivere civile.

E però per fondamento della libertà bisogna el vivere popolare, del quale è spiritato e basa el consiglio grande, che abbi a distribuire e' magistrati et dignità della città. Tenendo ferme queste, si può fare uno difficilmente grande nella città, perché non sendo in mano sua dare stato e reputazione a persona, non ha chi si trova in magistrato cagione di ubbidirsi o per pausa o per speranza; levato questo non è la città libera, né può essere, perchè è necessario che la si empi a sette e fazione, e almeno con corso di qualche anno si riduca in mano di uno solo.14

Guicciardini maintains that the Consiglio Maggiore, by advocating the exclusive right to distribute the dignities in the state, makes it impossible for a private citizen to usurp power. Although he seems to endorse what looks like the Savonarolan view on the Consiglio Maggiore,15 at the same time he advocates a privileged role in the political life of the republic for the city’s primi cittadini. Willing to leave the task of electing the magistrates of the city with the Consiglio Maggiore on the grounds that the Council’s choice would naturally fall upon men of great reputation and experience,16 he is not anxious, for instance, to consult the Council on matters of financial policy requiring such experienced deliberations as may be found only ‘nei luoghi più stretti’.17


16 This, however, does not mean that F. Guicciardini may not have expressed a more critical view like ‘Se se bene con questa larghezza vi concorrano alcuni pazzi, molti ignoranti e molti maligni, nondimeno...’ ibid., p. 216. ‘Ibid., p. 217. ‘Ibid., p. 219.

Guicciardini is sceptical of the Consiglio Maggiore’s ability to handle those matters of republican life which require extensive experience as is the case of the election of ambassadors or the approval of financial legislation.

For this reason and to check the authority of the gonfaloniere... is necessary for a man or a council of citizens, a question that is now the subject of the city’s deliberations, to be discussed by people belonging to the city, and to be debated upon the same Council: ‘... venendo giù in consiglio di persone di più luoghi più stretti e già presuppone util, non è necessario che le si disputino...’ and the same holds true for legislation on financial matters which Guicciardini asks to be deliberated on by the very few.18

At the end of 1512 Guicciardini has thus laid down the main lines along which an aristocratic republic ought to be founded: between the Consiglio Maggiore – the many – and the Gonfaloniere – the one – there is the senate – the few – the timone della città, the expression of the primi cittadini’s political wisdom and experience.19 ‘E in effetto tutto ’l mondo del governo si riduce alla fine in nelle spalle di molti pochi, e così fu sempre in ogni repubblica et a’ tempi antichi et a’ moderni,’20 a belief which enlightens the oligarchic character of Guicciardini’s republican feelings. If the Consiglio Maggiore is maintained, it is only to make it appear that the many have the final word in the city’s politics,21 an illusion the uomini di bene would be careful to maintain. From Savonarola’s time when the Consiglio Maggiore was thought of as an institution through which more Florentines could become citizens than ever before, the meaning of the reform increasingly faded into shadow. To Guicciardini the Consiglio Maggiore was only the constitutional channel by which the many could approve the deliberations of the few.

A few years later in 1516, when the Medici were well established in power in Florence and the Consiglio Maggiore was no longer a reality, Guicciardini in his Discorsi del modo di assicurare lo stato alla corte de’ Medici allows no role for the
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Consiglio. Mentioning the universale, he does not regret that this large portion of Florentine citizenship no longer has institutional representation in the Consiglio Maggiore. He only suggests that at this time things would still be good, perhaps even better than during the previous republican regime, if only 'fusse stato possibile che il vivere e conversare con loro [Medici] fusse stato più civile e più equale, a uso di Lorenzo vecchio'.

In this memorandum, Guicciardini points out that the previous republic had come close to the perfect republic during the first years of Piero Soderini's governo (1494). In his memory it is likely that the reform of 1502 was more important, because more aristocratic in nature, than the reform of 1494. During Lorenzo de' Medici's tenure of power the Consiglio Maggiore could no longer be a topic of discussion, given the character and trend of Medicean policy in Florence.

In these years, despite growing opposition to Lorenzo's policy, the Medici in Florence could still count on the powerful support of Leo X, whose worldly name was Giovanni de' Medici. This alliance between Rome and Florence strengthened Medicean policy within and without the city's walls to an extent that only the sudden death of Lorenzo in 1519 and of Leo X in 1521 could shake it. Deprived of its head both in Florence and in Rome, the Medici family looked now to Cardinal Giulio de' Medici as heir to the pope's legacy. The future of Florence was now in the hands of a leader who, at the beginning of the 1520s, seemed anxious to restore the city to its republican past. The reform of the state seemed to be his foremost concern and for this reason he asked that proposals on this issue be presented to him. Among the first who responded to his appeal was Niccolò Machiavelli.

On this occasion he wrote the Discorsi florentini recens post mortem inimi consiliorum Laurentii Magni, a tract in which he set down his thoughts on the reform of the city's government. Aware of writing the Discorsi for the Medici family whose benevolenza he had been struggling to obtain since 1514, Machiavelli outlines a constitutional reform which the Medici could easily welcome. As is the custom in this kind of memorandum, the approach to the subject matter is historical: past Florentine history provides the ground to support the view that the city's government needs reforms. The first section of the Discorsi, especially the part dealing with the governo popolare, which may give a sense of what Machiavelli would have said in his Istiti, had he covered the period, brings the author into a close debate with his contemporaries. Here he criticises those reform projects which, patterned after the fifteenth-century Medicean model, look back nostalgically to the past, and those which, looking at the beginning of the governo popolare, are for an indiscriminate broadening of the regimento.

This criticism helps Machiavelli to present his reform project as the most suitable for Florence. He argues that, given the 'equality' existing among its citizens only a republic may be successfully established in the city: 'E per il contrario, a volere uno principato in Firenze, dove è una grandissima egualità, sarebbe necessario ordinare prima una ineguaglianza'. From this general view of the social composition of the Florentine citizenry, the reform has to take into consideration that in Florence there are three sorts of people whose ambitions ought to be fulfilled in the government of the city. The conclusion is that the primo should sit in the Signoria, the mezzani in the Consiglio degli scelti, and the ultimi in the Consiglio de' mille.

In this constitutional reform project — very conventional in essence — there is an element of novelty in that Machiavelli makes it clear that the imboscation for the city's magistrates has to be carried out by accoppiatori chosen for their loyalty to the Medici family. Machiavelli is here for an oligarchic republic, certainly più stretta than Savonarola's governo popolare had been. His recommendation as to how members of the inner circle of the regimento have to be selected shows how deeply Machiavelli perceived the political role of the accoppiatori, the magistrates who safeguarded Medicean pre-eminence in the fifteenth century. He now tries to make good use of these magistrates in a constitutional framework including the Consiglio Maggiore. In the 1520s, Machiavelli seems to disregard an essential aspect of the reform of 1494. He has no interest in the Council as a means of broadening Florentine citizenship, as was the case in 1494. In the Discorsi, the Council is not the most important institution of the republic, and
its very existence responds largely to the Machiavellian wish to cast his reform thoughts in a form already traditional even among the primi cittadini.

Machiavelli’s attitude towards the Council has to be placed in a context broader than the one offered in the Discorsi. In a largely historical context, how did he look at the crucial events of late 1494? As it is well known, Machiavelli expressed mixed feelings about Savonarola’s doings,96 and it is apparent that he never believed the friar could be counted among the great reformers of the past.

E però conviene essere ordinato in modo, che, quando non credeano più, si possa fare credere loro per forza. Moisè, Ciro, Teseo e Romolo non sarebbero mai stati disamati, come ne’ nostri tempi intervenne a fra’ Girolamo Savonarola; il quale ruine ne’ suoi ordini muove, come la moltitudine cominciò a non crederli, e lui non aveva modo a tenere ferme quelli che avevano creduto, o a far credere e’ discrenti.79

Machiavelli, while not acknowledging fully the friar’s contribution to the establishment of the Consiglio Maggiore, seems anxious to point out the weakness of the governo popolare as it was established in 1444. Because Savonarola, as well as the reggimento as a whole, did not consider the defence of the new government by means of a militia propria the foremost political concern, his efforts were doomed to failure.

Savonarola overlooked what Machiavelli considered to be a cornerstone in the life of a healthy republic: the tight and vital relationship between the buoni ordini and the buoni armi:78

tutte le arti che si ordinano in una civiltà per cagione del bene comune degli uomini sarebbero vani, se non fossero preparate le difese loro ... buoni ordini, senza il militare sinu, non altrimenti si disordinano . . . .

The truly popular republic provides for its defence, if not for its expansion. In Machiavelli’s view the establishment of the Consiglio Maggiore is but one aspect, albeit extremely important, of a much more articulated constitutional reform project necessary to the foundation and preservation of a truly popular republic. After only a few years of service to the republic in the second Chancery, could Machiavelli, under the governo popolare’s protection, engage in what proved to be the difficult task of providing the governo popolare with the appropriate military defence. He showed a quasi-religious commitment to the organisation of the militia. Furthermore when, between 1519 and 1521, he wrote L’arte della guerra, Machiavelli strongly defended his ordigna, and the

idea that nothing expressed the vitality and perfect condition of the republic better than its ability to avoid corruption through the exercise of its military strength.90

The republic, as a product of human activity, is subject to ups and downs that will eventually lead it to face either a foreign threat or internal turmoil.91 This being so, the republican militia is not only a valuable means of defence, but a display of its virtue. In the Discorsi, Machiavelli outlines a republic in which the question of citizenship goes beyond juridical considerations to the point where it involves a political issue. Machiavelli finds that the inner problem of the Florentine republic resides in the fact that those who are fully-fledged citizens and consequently members of the Consiglio Maggiore, call upon others – not Florentine citizens – to defend and possibly expand the limits of their republic. If placed in this conceptual framework, Machiavelli’s scant allusions to the Consiglio Maggiore may be taken not only as indirectly blaming Savonarola and the primi cittadini, but as an indication that for him the republic cannot be embodied only in the Consiglio Maggiore.92

Although in his correspondence and in his writings Machiavelli hardly mentions the Consiglio Maggiore, he does, however, maintain the belief that authority in the state must rest with the people. This fundamental assumption is articulated fully in the Discorsi sopra la prima cosa di Tito Livio. Comparing the famous republics of Sparta, Venice and Rome, Machiavelli shows the superiority of the Roman republic on the grounds that the ‘guardia della libertà’ was in Rome entrusted to the universale, and not to the grandi because a’legislatori di Roma era necessario fare una delle due cose, o volere che Roma stesse quiese come le sopradette repubbliche; o non adoperare la spada in guerra, come i Vincitori; o non aprire la via a’ forestieri, come gli Spartani.93


97 ‘E’ una ribellione crede, che, potendosi, tenera la cosa bilanciata in questo modo, che o sarebbe il vero vivere politico e la vera quiete d’un cittadino. Ma sendo tutte le cose degli uomini in moto, e non potendo stare saldo, conviene che le salgano o che le scendano; e altre cose che la ragione non l’induce, indurre la necessità’. L’arte della guerra in Opere, p. 115.

98 ‘E senza dubbio crede, che, potendosi, tenera la cosa bilanciata in questo modo, che o sarebbe il vero vivere politico e la vera quiete d’un cittadino. Ma sendo tutte le cose degli uomini in moto, e non potendo stare saldo, conviene che le salgano o che le scendano; e altre cose che la ragione non l’induce, indurre la necessità’. L’arte della guerra in Opere, p. 115.

99 See L. Beltrami, Machiavelli’s early experience in the city-state institutions of Florence (Storia Firenze, CNV, pp. 126-7; CNV, p. 181).

100 M. Machiavelli, Discorsi, l. 64, p. 111.
reform. He proposes a mixed government, patterned after the Aristotelian paradigm,89 and comprising a Prince, a senate, and the Consiglio Maggiore. The senate, whose members ought not to exceed 100 men and are expected to be life-members, is the soul of the republic, while the Consiglio Maggiore's authority is lessened dramatically. This institution is not to be trusted for the past 'bisognava adulare al Consiglio Grande e ciurarlo, volendo vincere cosa buona, ovvero invocare i noci cori dell'angeli'.88 In the constitutional reform project that Alessandro de' Pazzi addressed to Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, the Consiglio Maggiore remains, but the senate is considered the soul of the republic, as was common in the writings of the Florentine nomini da bene.

Among them, at about the same time and up to 1525, Guicciardini was working on the Dialogo del reggimento di Firenze, the masterpiece which, better than any other work, outlines the features of the aristocratic republic to be founded eventually in Florence. The Dialogo is not to be read as a utopian plan90 for, deeply rooted in the past Florentine tradition of thought, it presents a constitutional reform which could be put into practice.91 In the first book, one of the speakers, namely Piero Capponi, maintains that after Piero de' Medici's downfall in 1494, while some nomini da bene aimed at establishing a governo stretto, Savonarola, together with another group of influential Florentines, managed to establish the governo largo and the Consiglio Maggiore.92 In the dialogue this institution, then, becomes the target of Bernardo del Nero's attack on the governo popolare. In essence the attack is made on the grounds that avendo voi, o per dire meglio chi ha ordinato questo governo nuovo, rinnaso al consiglio grande la elezione di tutti gli uffici, che non si possa aspettarne altro che molti errori, perché il popolo non sarà buono giudice delle qualità degli uomini, né misurerà con diligenza quanto peso ognuno, anzi andrà alla grossa e si governerà più con certe opinioni che andranno fuora senza fondamento, e per dire meglio con certi gridi, che con ragione.93

Guicciardini makes Bernardo express here the view of the most radical among the nomini da bene, of those, like Bernardo Rucellai, who would never come to terms with the governo popolare.

88 Translation of Aristoteles' political and moral works had been available in Latin since the Middle Ages. It was, however, among Florentine humanists that Aristotle was recognized among the fundamental C. Schmitt, Arisotles und die Renaissance (Cambridge, MA, 1981) where other relevant literature is discussed. To emphasise the presence of Arisotles' thought in the Florentine Republic was not to mean to neglect other sources of classical thought certainly vital in the same milieu, as is the case for Stocicism. On this point see G. Skinner, The Foundations, vol. 1, passim.

89 Alessandro de' Pazzi, 'Discorso' p. 419.

90 See V. de Capistrani, Francesco Guicciardini della politica alla storia (Bari, 1930), p. 31; and G. Sasso, Niccolò Machiavelli, Storia del suo pensiero politico (Bologna, 1980), pp. 618–44.

91 ‘Ma io non so se a noi è proprio il procedere così, perché non parliamo per estensione e vanamente, ma con speranza che il parlare nostro possa ancora essere di qualche frutto’, Dialogo, it. p. 339. The same attitude is expressed in ital., pp. 419 419.

92 See Dialogo, it. p. 316. "Ibid., pp. 347–2.”
But in the second book of the *Dialogo*, Bernardo del Nero attenuates his position to the extent that the Consiglio Maggiore is given a role in the new aristocratic republic. This apparent contradiction between the first and second book—between blame and praise for the Consiglio Maggiore—has often been pointed out and explained in different ways. It may, however, be argued that Bernardo’s change of mind about the Consiglio Maggiore can be understood by considering the different character of the two books: the first is a retrospective analysis of the revolution of 1494 and a comparison between the Medicean government and the governo popolare, whilst the second is a constitutional reform project. Although in historical perspective those grandi who were for a governo stretto might well regard the introduction of the Consiglio Maggiore as their political defeat, in more practical and political terms their attitude became more favourable towards this institution as they realised how the Consiglio Maggiore could serve their cause too, by preventing any private citizen from usurping power.

Bernardo himself seems to be aware of the difficulty in reconciling his opinions on the Council as expressed in the two books and perhaps for this very reason he states:

Però si ha a attendere non solo che il governo sia popolare, ma ancora che sia bene ordinato, e per questo ho io discorso e differiti di che io ho paura, per dare occasione di pensare a ricorrergli. E’ qualunque principalmente sono, che le cose importanti verranno in mano di chi non tenei deliberare né governare...

This being so, Bernardo’s outline of the constitutional role of the Consiglio Maggiore in his aristocratic republic is all the more important.

In Bernardo’s view, the sole source of the governo popolare is the Consiglio Grande, the Council which, then, has authority to bestow honours and distribute official state posts. But this Council should not be entrusted with any important deliberation for “Non bisogna mettere la salute dello stato in mano di medico imperito, né in mano del popolo, per la incapacità sua.” On this assumption—which is also Bernardo’s point in the first book—the Consiglio Maggiore ought only to enact new legislation, leaving to much smaller bodies of citizens the discussion and formulation of the legislation itself. In this sense, Bernardo asks that policy made by the few be approved by the many. Something of the popular government is thus retained, although in essence this republic is oligarchic. If Bernardo maintains that the Consiglio Maggiore is the *princeps* of the city, this may well be due to Guicciardini’s use of key political terms characteristic of the Florentine political vocabulary of his time.

For in Bernardo’s judgment the real soul of government is the senate, since it numbers all the wisest and most politically experienced citizens of Florence. Bernardo’s comparison between the governments of Florence and Venice must be read in this sense.

E se bene ha nome diverso da quello che vogliamo fare noi, perché si chiama governo di gentilomini e nel nostro si chiama di popolo, non per questo è di specie diversa, perché non è altro che uno governo nel quale intervengono universalmente tutti quegli che son abili agli uffici, né vi si fa distinzione o per ricchezza o per stazie, come si fa quando governano gli ottimati.

And indeed it was public knowledge that Venice was an aristocratic republic. No surprise, then, if Bernardo del Nero devotes several pages to the senate’s role in the republic where the *nomini da bone*’s ethos emerges in its most refined formulation. In the senate sit only the *nomini da bone* whose wisdom is at the service of the city’s needs. Furthermore senatorial authority will prove to be also a check on the gonfaloniere’s power and a corrective to the Consiglio Maggiore’s ignorance. In Bernardo’s constitutional thinking, then, the senate and not the Consiglio Maggiore is the most relevant agency of the state if this senato ha adunque in esso que’ privati autorità; deliberare le cose importanti; di più rinunciare le provisioni prima che vadino al consiglio grande, eleggere gli ambasciatori e commessari e lo ufficio de’ dieci, oltre a qualche altra elezione di che io dirò de sotto.

Before 1527, then, Florentine republicans did not advocate a totally different constitution for their city. There seems to be general agreement on the fact that the new republican constitution would have to be essentially articulated in three major institutions: the Consiglio Maggiore, the senate, and the gonfaloniere. Of course, as pointed out previously, differences do exist, but the essential fact remains that the same *cittadini principali* in the course of time did change their attitude towards the Consiglio Maggiore. In Guicciardini’s or Alessandro de’ Pazzi’s writings the Consiglio Maggiore is something different, however, from the Consiglio Maggiore which had gathered in Florence at the end of the fifteenth century. From a position of absolute supremacy in 1494, the Council is...
In May 1125, the Medici family were once more overthrown, and, as had happened in 1144 and 1150, the city's constitution was altered. The Senate, which had caused so much trouble to the republic, was suppressed and its powers were transferred to a new Council of Nine. The Council was to consist of nine members, elected by the people, and would have the power to make laws and appoint the Magistrates. The constitution was much respected, and the new government was generally well-liked. The political situation was, however, still unstable, and the republic was not yet sure of its future.

The republican experiment of 1125, though, was soon to come to an end. The political situation in the city was becoming increasingly complex, and the Medici family was once more attempting to regain power. The Council of Nine was unable to hold the Medici in check, and in 1128, the Medici family were once more restored to power. The Republic of Florence was once more at the mercy of the Medici family.

In this new context, the Medici family was once more able to play a prominent role in the political life of the city. They were once more able to use their influence to appointment the Magistrates and to influence the decisions of the Council. The Medici family was once more able to use their wealth and influence to gain the support of the people of Florence.

At this point, the Medici family was once more able to play a prominent role in the political life of the city. They were once more able to use their influence to appointment the Magistrates and to influence the decisions of the Council. The Medici family was once more able to use their wealth and influence to gain the support of the people of Florence.

In conclusion, the political situation in the city of Florence was once more unstable, and the Medici family was once more able to play a prominent role in the political life of the city. They were once more able to use their influence to appointment the Magistrates and to influence the decisions of the Council. The Medici family was once more able to use their wealth and influence to gain the support of the people of Florence.
so, he emphasises the role of the Consiglio Maggiore. Membership of the Council ought to be large enough to include, along with the grandi and medici, the popolari. They pay taxes to the city’s treasury and therefore they may well expect to be considered citizens of the republic. This is Giornotti’s political argument, but

perché noi diciamo che non ci volevamo discostare molto da quello che si era usato nei tempi passati; perché lasceremo in dietro questi popolari, e ci contenteremo che a un certo anno se ne mandi a partito buono numero, come si usava; persuadendoci che quelli più ne saranno ammessi a’ magistrati, tanto maggiore base e miglior fondamento si farà alla repubblica. Dico adunque che in questo consiglio dovranno convenire tutti quelli che sono abili a’ magistrati. e perché il deetro Consiglio debbe essere il signore della Città (altrimenti la repubblica non inclinerrebbe nel popolo) debbe avere in poter suo dette azioni le quali sono principali nella repubblica, ed abbraccino tutta la forza dello stato. Queste sono quatro: cioè, la creazione de’ magistrati; le deliberazioni della pace e guerra; la introduzione delle leggi, e le provocazioni. 

Attachment and respect for tradition had always played a fundamental role in Florentine thinking about politics. This recalls Machiavelli’s persuasion that any political reform ought to look and go back to the principi. Nevertheless, although Giornotti does recognize the need to broaden the social basis of the Consiglio Maggiore, he is not willing to go too far in this direction.

The Council is to have the final word in any relevant political and juridical matter of the republic. On this score it is all the more important to note that, while leaving to the Senate the handling of foreign policy, Giornotti is careful to point out that senators do depend on the Council for their election. Machiavelli himself in the Discorsi had seen the Senate as an independent body from the Council. For Giornotti, the Senate has to retain its traditional political power and prestige, a position, however, which is never to surpass the political authority of the Consiglio Maggiore.

At the same time, Giornotti’s theory of the Florentine republic involves more than the presence of the Council. In the Repubblica fiorentina the issue of the militia cittadina is carefully investigated. Giornotti argues for the militia on the assumption of the citizens’ natural drive towards it. Only afterwards does he put the issue in political perspective by maintaining that a thorough conscription should be carried out of all suitable men, regardless of the fact that they may or may not have the beneficio. In speculative terms, in Giornotti’s

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115 See F. Diaz, Il Gran Consiglio di Firenze I Medici (Turin, 1956), pp. 80-81. This is vol. 1, part 1 of the Storia d’Italia edited by G. Galasso. Also fundamental is E. Pasini Guarini, La storia politica di Cosimo I (Florence, 1953).

116 See R. Stora, Courtois Communautaire, The Theme of Exile in Medieval and Renaissance Italy (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982). On the political activity of some fiorentini, see A. Stella, ‘L’opera e veiltia int üzerinden dei filosoferanti italiani (1347-1417)’, Bibliotheca di umanismo et rinascenza, 27 (1965), 113-61, documents, pp. 16-83.

117 I have prepared a new edition of Giornotti’s Republica fiorentina, based on the autograph manuscript Magliabechiano XXX, 450 of the Florentine Biblioteca nazionale which is in press in the series Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance, Geneva. The following quotations are, however, from F. Diaz’ reprint of Polidori’s edition (Milan, 1974), Opera, vol. 1, 11, 10, p. 141.

118 See ibid., p. 183. 119 See Machiavelli, Discorsi, 1, 551, 511.


122 ‘... che se si dovessino uscire solamente quelli che chiamiamo beneficiari, ma gli altri ancora, che abitano la città e sono padroni de’ carichi di quella, possedendo in essa, o case, o possessioni, e non solamente vogliamo questi amare, ma ciascuno il Comodo e Dominio, ibid., iv, 1. A remarkable and suggestive glorification of the citizen military virtus is Giornotti’s description of Francesco Ferrucci’s behaviour during the siege in ibid., iv, 1.
understood only if placed in their historical context. There is no possibility of drawing a simple line marking the boundaries between different formulations of republicanism. In constitutional terms, the Consiglio Maggiore was central to any republican reform project and differences among them only come to light if the details of such reform projects are analysed.

On one issue popolari and nomini da bene hold different, if not conflicting views. The latter paid less attention to the question of the militia, while the former tended to place service in the militia among the highest duties of the citizen. In regard to the Consiglio Maggiore, Florentine republicans agree on its fundamental role in the political life of the republic. The view of those nomini principali who, at the end of the fifteenth century, regarded this institution as a threat to their socially and politically pre-eminent position, in time became more favourable towards the Council. This change of attitude has been the major focus of this study. The primi cittadini had to learn how to face the revolution of 1494. In this way the Consiglio Maggiore became part of their thinking about politics, once the Council had secured an important place in Florentine political tradition.

Paradigmatic of this change of attitude is the persuasion that

It is difficult to find the institution appropriately, because it is in such a manner that the state, and so forth, is the extent to which this demonstrates the stability of the people. The institutions of the Venetian model to prove their case! A different understanding of the Venetian constitutional history lies behind their argument: the former is inclined to esteem the Venetian Maggior consiglio highly as the embodiment of the city's citizenship thus kept united and determined to promote the common good, the latter sharply criticises this view which counts the establishment of the dogeship as the most important among the many reasons for the Venetian political stability.

V

The story of Florentine Renaissance republicanism defies schematisation. Machiavelli and Guicciardini, to mention only the two most important protagonists of this story, often hold conflicting ideas which may be partially

133 See ibid., p. 211. 134 Ibid., p. 216.
135 Ibid., p. 216.
private citizen from usurping power in the republic, promoted a sort of ‘equality’ among the city’s citizens which alone would have been the basis of the republic.

Last but not least, the uomini da bene came round to the idea of the Council because it was difficult to form factions and divisions within it, in fact ‘sarebbe bene che il numero del Consiglio fussi maggiore, perché quanto è più largo, meno vi possono le sette’. The Council had changed a pattern in Florentine history. In the second decade of the fifteenth century, political success depended largely on Medici patronage, while in the stato popolare the patron/client relationship was no longer essential to the political success of a citizen. The Consiglio Maggiore was expected to promote and protect a new kind of political relationship among the citizens of the city. Republicanism developed and became a political answer to the fear that someone – whether Medici or not is less important here – might take over the state as his own possession.

This was a justifiable fear if one bears in mind that the Florentine republic was not yet a modern state. Political and historical theorists of the time had not formulated the concept of the modern state as an independent political and constitutional order which ought to be preserved and protected. To Florentine republicans, to Machiavelli or F. Guicciardini, to ‘rule’ and ‘to possess’ the state were largely the same thing in the sense that they thought the state comprised the rulers themselves. In this historical context, the expressions governo stretto and governo largo are highly significant, and common in Florentine political and historical writings. These expressions allude to the number of citizens allowed to participate in the government of the city and, therefore, to benefit from the many political and economic opportunities involved in service to the state.

125 N. Guicciardini, Discorsi, p. 480.
127 A good example is in F. de’ Nerli, Commentari de’ fatti civili accorsi nella città di Firenze dell’anno 1211 al 1567 (Firenze, 1839), p. 191.

Machiavelli, servant of the Florentine republic

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From 19 June 1498 until 7 November 1532, Niccolò di Messer Bernardo Machiavelli served in the chancery of the Florentine republic. The Florentine chancery consisted mainly of a body of quasi-permanent officials who administered the republic’s internal and external affairs, carrying out policies which had been determined by the city’s magistrates and councils. The internal business of the republic was executed by a number of autonomous chancery departments: the notary of the Signoria looked after the day-to-day business of Florence’s chief magistracy; the notary of the Tratte supervised elections to Florence’s many magistracies; the notary of the Riformagioni administered the business of Florence’s legislative councils. External policies were decided by the chief magistracy, the Signoria, as well as by a theoretically occasional magistracy, the Dieci di Balia. The business of these magistracies was administered by one department, presided over by the first chancellor; second in command of this department of external affairs was the second chancellor. In theory, the first chancellor was in charge of administering Florentine relations with foreign states, while the second chancellor was meant to supervise Florentine business outside the city proper but within Florentine subject territories; in practice, however, there was considerable overlap in the responsibilities of the first and second chancellors.1 On 19 June 1498 Machiavelli was elected second chancellor2 and less than a month later, on 14 July 1498, he was given the additional task of serving the Dieci di Balia.3 Eight and a half years later, on 12 January 1507, Machiavelli was given a third chancery office as chancellor to the newly created Nove Ufficiali dell’Ordinanza e Milizia Fiorentina, in charge of administering the business of the newly created Florentine militia.4

2 N. Rubinstein, ‘The beginnings of Niccolò Machiavelli’s career in the Florentine chancery’, Italian Studies, 12 (1956), 60. 3 Ibid., p. 71; Morriz, Compendio, p. 189.
4 G. Tommasini, La vita e gli scritti di Niccolò Machiavelli (Rome, Turin and Florence, 1883), p. 367. Machiavelli’s work with the Florentine militia has been analysed by N. Rubinstein, ‘Machiavelli and the world of Florentine politics’ in Studies on Machiavelli, M. Gilmore, ed. (Florence, 1972), pp. 1–16.