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Italian political thought, 1450–1530

NICOLAI RUBINSTEIN

The middle of the fifteenth century was a turning point in the relations between the Italian states, and the relative stability which Italy enjoyed until the Neapolitan expedition of Charles VIII in 1494 forms part of the background to the history of its political thought during that period. The peace of Lodi had put an end, in 1454, to a succession of wars which had begun in the 1420s. It had been followed by the conclusion of an Italian league, aimed at safeguarding the integrity of the Italian states as well as peace among them; in fact, wars were chiefly prevented or contained by triple and dual alliances between the five greater powers which were its members, Milan, Venice, Florence, the papacy, and Naples.

To the relative stability and equilibrium in inter-state relations, threatened primarily by the expansionist policies of Venice and the papacy, there corresponded a similar stability in the internal conditions of the Italian states, although it too could be temporarily threatened. Domestic crises occurred in Milan in 1476 with the assassination of Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza, in Florence in 1478 with the Pazzi conspiracy, but these were of short duration; far more serious and lasting was the revolt of the Neapolitan barons against Ferrante of Aragon in 1485. The lesser princes, such as the Malatesta at Rimini and the Este at Ferrara, were more vulnerable; a judicious policy of placing themselves under the protection of one or more of the greater powers, as well as serving them as *condottieri*, could help them to achieve security and dynastic survival.

i Monarchies and republics, 1450–1500

The Italian states of the fifteenth century could be divided into monarchies and republics; but within these categories, there was a great variety of constitutional structures. Of the former, only the kingdom of Naples

conformed to the type of western European monarchies; the others, with the exception of the Papal States, had communal or feudal origins; and even the most powerful and the longest established among them, such as that of the Visconti at Milan and those of the Este at Ferrara and Modena, were not entirely independent of superior – imperial or papal – authority and of popular support, and could consequently not rely on the same measure of sovereignty as a ‘natural lord’ like the king of Naples. Of the republics, the two leading ones, Venice and Florence, differed substantially in their political institutions; in Venice, the aristocratic constitution, established at the turn of the thirteenth century and perfected in the course of the fourteenth, remained the solid foundation of government and administration; in Florence, the republican institutions, which went back to the end of the thirteenth and the early fourteenth centuries, were at crucial points gradually eroded by the Medici and adapted to secure an ascendancy which was consolidated in 1458 and greatly increased under Lorenzo de’ Medici. Other republics experienced, in their turn, the rise of single families to supreme political power, or even to signorial position, as did Bologna under the Bentivoglio and Siena under the Petrucci while, like the despots of that region, Bologna and other communes of the Papal States were liable to have their independence substantially curtailed by the reassertion of papal authority and the consequent extension of the central administration.

The history of Italian political thought during this period reflects, in several respects, these developments and problems. Treatises on princely government composed by humanists continued the medieval tradition of Mirrors of Princes,¹ but there were significant differences between those addressed to lesser rulers whose security could be enhanced by good government, and eulogistic works addressed to the king of Naples which emphasised the majesty of a ‘natural’ monarch.

Bartolomeo Platina’s *De principe*, written in 1470 for Federico Gonzaga, heir of the marquess of Mantua (Platina 1979), while broadly modelled on Giles of Rome’s *De regimine principum*, is a typical product of humanist didactic literature; making ample use of the works of moral philosophers such as Cicero, he illustrates his teachings by a wealth of examples drawn from ancient history. Platina takes for granted the superiority of monarchy as the best form of government (pp. 53–6), as well as the absolute authority of the prince; but this authority, which in fact corresponded to that of Italian despots, was to be tempered by his duty, spelled out under the

1. See Gilbert 1939, pp. 460ff (repr. 1977, pp. 98ff).

headings of the cardinal and other political virtues, to govern his subjects justly and liberally and see to it that his officials did so likewise. The *optimus princeps* is, briefly, a benevolent despot, and as such the opposite to a tyrant who, deprived of friendship and loyalty, is liable to be toppled from power (pp. 70–1). His is also a military leader, as the Gonzaga were; the third book of the treatise deals with warfare and military science.

Some of Platina's practical advice for the security of the ruler appears, undiluted by humanist rhetoric and learning, in Diomede Carafa's *I doveri del principe*, composed before 1476 for the duchess of Ferrara, Eleonora of Aragon (Carafa 1899). States are ruled by love or by fear, he says, and it is preferable for the ruler to be loved (p. 266), yet at the same time he is advised to keep armed forces, for then his subjects will 'see to it to be obedient and will not indulge in wicked thoughts' (p. 270). Legitimate rulers have so often lost their power that it is essential to guard oneself against such an eventuality by making military and financial provisions, but above all by having soldiers at one's disposal to deal with emergencies (p. 272). For all this, the lord should treat his subjects as if they were his children, dispense justice equitably through his officials, and whenever possible avoid wars, which may harm them as much as him (pp. 276ff, 289). Compared with this pragmatic and paternalistic view on how to preserve power in a north Italian principality, whose ruler had only recently acquired the ducal title, the Neapolitan humanists have a more exalted vision of monarchy.

Giovanni Pontano, in his *De principe* (c. 1468; Pontano 1952), states, after a passing reference to the importance for the prince of justice and religion, that among the traditional princely virtues he should above all observe *humanitas* and liberality; for inhumanity is the mother of hatred, and it should be the prince's aim to be loved by his subjects (pp. 1040, 1042). But what determines most the opinion they have of him is what some call his majesty, which is the special property of the prince, 'principum propria' (p. 1046). It has its origin in his nature, but must be cultivated by art and diligence; it differs from Cicero's *decorum*, which belongs to private persons, not to kings; and it is borne out by the prince's behaviour (p. 1060). Pontano ends his advice to the young Alfonso, duke of Calabria, to whom the work is dedicated, by urging him to sustain the majesty of the prince by correct deportment, gestures, and dress – 'a subject neglected by the ancient philosophers' with which he could fill many books.

It was to majesty that in 1492 Iuniano Maio devoted an entire book, which he dedicated to King Ferrante, the duke of Calabria's father. He

begins his *De maiestate* (Maio 1956) by displaying his humanist learning in a long discourse, studded with quotations from classical authors, on the meaning of the term, follows this up by enumerating the princely virtues, and devotes, after describing the burdens of majesty, the penultimate chapter to the magnificence of the prince. His examples are drawn, in the customary humanist fashion, from antiquity, but are supplemented, in appendices to the various chapters on the prince's virtues, by others derived from the life of Ferrante, who thus appears as an exemplary prince.

These manuals for princes ignore, in contrast to Aquinas' *De regimine principum*, the existence of other forms of government: apart from a glancing observation in Platina's *De principe*,² the humanists keep strictly to their purpose of exhorting and celebrating monarchs. As rhetoricians schooled to defend 'the other side' (*alteram partem*), they were also perfectly capable of performing the same service for republics. Platina adapted, in 1474, his advice book for princes to fit the virtual ruler of the Florentine republic, and his image of Lorenzo de' Medici as *optimus civis* of the republic probably came closer to political realities and to Lorenzo's own views of his position than the eulogies of friends and clients (Platina 1944; see Rubinstein 1986, pp. 141ff). The Siensese Francesco Patrizi wrote two successive treatises praising first republics and then monarchies as the best constitutions; he admits in his *De regno et regis institutione* (Patrizi 1594b), which he dedicated to Alfonso, duke of Calabria, probably in the early eighties (Battaglia 1936, p. 102), that 'there will be those who will say that these things are self-contradictory' and that the same person cannot consistently argue both in favour of monarchies and republics. To this he replies somewhat feebly that 'men are free to praise alternatively whomever they wish' (1, 1), and launches into a celebration of monarchy. In his *De institutione reipublicae*³ he had pointed out that while monarchy was theoretically the best form of government, it was liable to degenerate (1, 1). 'Born and educated in a free city', he considers 'the life of a well-ordered republic safer.' Even though a prince possessed all the virtues, in a republic, which was 'nearly immortal', they may be spread over many citizens. As for its constitution, he counts himself among those who preferred one that was 'mixed of all classes of men' (1, 4), in which not arbitrary power, but 'only law rules' (1, 5). Yet happy are those republics

2. Platina 1979, p. 56: 'Laudare optimatum rem publicam popularemve, quarum altera ad tyrannidem vel paucorum potentiam facile descendit, altera ad principem vergit, instituti nostri nequaquam est'.

3. Patrizi 1594a. See Battaglia 1936, p. 101: completed between 1465 and 1471.

which, 'as Plato says, are governed by the wise and learned' (I, 8). In the *De regno*, on the other hand, he concedes that a well-governed republic 'may be praised' (I, 3), but it is prone to turn into a tyranny or mob rule. He quotes a large number of classical authors to support his arguments in favour of monarchy; it is of divine origin, and the king resembles God on earth (I, proem, IX, 2). In describing the ideal prince, Patrizi says, he is going to imagine one 'who may never have existed', thus following the example of Plato who 'conceived a new, imaginary, perfect city' (II, 4). He provides an extensive and detailed advice book for princes, with a long catalogue of their virtues. Foremost among these is justice (II, 1); magnificence 'is fitting only for kings and princes', and differs from liberality, the former concerning 'the great and the public', the latter 'the small and the private' (VII, 11). Under a just king, there reigns what Plato calls 'civil or social friendship' among the citizens, which 'is more appropriate to the king than any other' (VIII, 10) – a form of consensus which should form the foundation of a well-ordered state (Battaglia 1936, p. 124). In many ways, Patrizi follows the tradition of the medieval *specula principis*; but he does so by amply drawing on classical authorities and exemplars, as he had done in his *De institutione reipublicae*, which may help to explain why these two rather unwieldy humanist works enjoyed an impressive degree of popularity during the sixteenth century (pp. 102ff).

While the humanist authors of advice books for princes were concerned with their moral virtues, Giovanni Simonetta's history of Francesco Sforza, the *Commentarii*, written in the seventies as a semi-official work which could serve the dukes of Milan as propaganda, offers a different and more realistic picture of a new prince (Simonetta 1932–59; see Ianziti 1988, pp. 151ff). Simonetta portrays the *condottiere* founder of the Sforza dynasty as a military leader endowed with qualities, among them foresight and speed of decision, that were conducive to the success of his actions, even though these could at times be considered to be immoral, the end, that is victory, thus justifying cruel means such as the sacking of towns (Ianziti 1988, pp. 184ff). Similar lessons could be drawn from Flavio Biondo's innovatory history of contemporary Italy, which as early as 1437 had elicited the comment that it provided precepts for political action at home and abroad.⁴ Historiography could serve as a corrective to eulogistic works on princely conduct in showing a new sense of the power politics of fifteenth-century Italy, in which both princes and republics were involved.

4. Ianziti 1988, pp. 51–3, on Lapo da Castiglionchio's letter to Biondo praising his third *Decade*.

Only one humanist attempted a systematic comparison between the monarchical and the republican forms of government, and it may not be a coincidence that Aurelio Brandolini, although once a resident of Naples, was a native of Florence, where the enduring tension between republican and Medicean views on government had kept alive the issue, so important in the political literature of the early Quattrocento, of the relative value of republic and monarchy. Brandolini, who began his dialogue *De comparatione rei publicae et regni* at Buda, originally planned to dedicate it to King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary, who figures in it as the principal interlocutor; after the king's death in 1490 he completed it, with a dedication to Lorenzo de' Medici, in Florence (Brandolini 1890, pp. 79–80, 81–4). In the dialogue, Domenico Giugni, a Florentine resident in Hungary, defends the republican form of government; Matthias defeats his arguments that it secures liberty, equality, and justice more effectively than a monarchy. While he does so in a general fashion, the republic which Giugni defends is Florence. As a result, the debate turns on the superiority of that city's republican institutions, which Giugni describes in considerable detail and which are subjected to a scathing critique by the king. His task is facilitated by the fact that Giugni is concerned less with the actual working of those institutions than with their original purpose, and thus conforms to the idealisation of the Florentine republic by civic humanists such as Bruni. He does not take into account the changes brought about by the Medici and the ascendancy of Lorenzo de' Medici, which Matthias sees, precisely, as the saving grace of the Florentine republic. In the end, Brandolini may have agreed with this view, if his dedication of the dialogue to Lorenzo is an indication; Matthias' critique of Florentine republican institutions and his praise of monarchy should, he says, be acceptable to a man who was 'in ea re publica princeps' (p. 84). Brandolini tried to compare the Florentine republic with a feudal monarchy; comparisons between different types of monarchical and republican regimes, so obvious to modern historians, are notably absent from the political literature of the period. However, the admiration of the Venetian republic which we find among Florentine patricians during the fifteenth century implies a comparison between its aristocratic constitution and the government of Florence under the Medici (see Gilbert 1968).

Another comparison which continued to be discussed by the humanists, that between *condottieri* warfare and native militia, could have political implications. Platina advised the prince on practical grounds to choose his troops from his own territory (Platina 1979, p. 162). Patrizi, who

considered *condottieri* unreliable, in his turn proposed, in the *De institutione reipublicae*, to raise a militia from the *contado* (Patrizi 1594a, p. 42; III, 5; IV, 4; see Bayley 1961, pp. 231–3). The admiration for the heroes of antiquity, perpetuated in innumerable examples by classical authors such as Valerius Maximus, and represented, in the fifteenth century, in public palaces in paintings of famous men, made the connection between civic patriotism and military valour a favourite humanist topos. In contrast to warfare, scant attention is paid in the political literature to the relations between states. Platina's sole reference to them in the *De principe* occurs in the chapter 'de fide'; like earlier authors of *specula principis*, he conceives the question in ethical terms; following Cicero, he demands that 'servanda [est] fides' (Platina 1979, pp. 116–19; cf. *De officiis*, III.29.104). For new and wide-ranging insights into the realities of foreign policy and diplomatic practice, we have to turn to despatches of ambassadors and letters of statesmen such as Lorenzo de' Medici, whose correspondence shows, among reflections on the relations between states in war and peace and on the techniques of power politics, the emergence of the concept of balance of power as a prerequisite of Florentine independence and influence and as a foundation of the peace of Italy.

Among the Italian republics, the political thought of Venice in the fifteenth century was, like its constitution, marked by stability and continuity. There is no evidence of debates on political principles, of discussions of problems affecting the government, as in Florence. The Venetian republic is seen as a uniquely successful realisation of the notion of the mixed constitution. Since the turn of the century, humanists had supplemented the Venetian tradition, according to which during the barbarian invasions the city was founded in the lagoon by emigrants from the mainland as the home of liberty and justice;⁵ her constitution, they argued, conformed to classical models. The translation, at the middle of the century, of Plato's *Laws* was taken by its translator to provide triumphant support for this thesis: George of Trebizond asserts, in his preface to Francesco Barbaro and the Venetian republic, that its founders followed Plato's teaching by creating a constitution that was a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy (George of Trebizond 1970, pp. 498–501, 1984, pp. 198–203). He thus reinforced the argument, stated as early as c. 1300 by Henry of Rimini, that Venice possessed a mixed constitution (Robey and Law 1975, p. 54), an argument which remained a fundamental theme of

5. On the 'myth of Venice' see Gaeta 1961; Fasoli 1958; Robey and Law 1975; King 1986, p. 174 n. 231 (bibliography).

Venetian political thought⁶ and which was authoritatively reaffirmed in the 1520s by Gasparo Contarini in his widely read *De magistratibus et republica Venetorum* as the principal reason for the incomparable excellence of the Venetian constitution.⁷

The principal classical authority for Venetian political thought was, however, Aristotle, whose *Politics* could also be interpreted to favour aristocracy.⁸ Lauro Quirini made a digest of that work, which he dedicated in about 1450 to the Doge Francesco Foscari under the title *De republica* (Quirini 1977b, pp. 123–5; on the date, p. 109). Quirini considers that political regime the best which preserves liberty through being governed, with the consent of the people, by ‘nobiles et generosi’ (p. 142). Quirini’s hierarchical vision of Venetian society under the government of ‘the few but elected’⁹ also underlies his *De nobilitate*, in which he affirms that no republic remained so long ‘in unanimous concord’ as Venice (Quirini 1977a, p. 89). Unanimity was a central political theme of Venetian humanism, and the nobility was uniquely fitted to secure it (King 1986, pp. 92, 172ff).

There could be differences of opinion on the precise structure of that nobility. In his *De bene instituta re publica*. Domenico Morosini, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, follows Aristotle more faithfully than Quirini had done. He advocates a society ruled, to the exclusion of the excessively powerful and of the plebs, by ‘middling’ citizens whom he identifies with the true Venetian nobility; a view which may have been prompted by a reaction against those nobles who had led the republic into a dangerous expansionist policy.¹⁰ Venetian expansionism on the mainland had been a major issue in determining Italian attitudes to Venice throughout the fifteenth century. Among Florentine patricians, criticism of that policy went uneasily hand in hand with admiration for Venice’s aristocratic constitution. During the second half of the century, the Turkish advance, from which Venice suffered more than any other Italian state with

6. Cf. the *De Republica Veneta* by Pier Paolo Vergerio, of about 1400, ed. Robey and Law 1975, pp. 38–9 (on the date, p. 29); see Gilbert 1968, pp. 468ff.

7. Contarini 1589, fos. 4r, 8v: ‘Eam vero in hac repub. moderationem ac temperamentum adhibuere, eamque. misionem omnium statuum qui recti sunt, ut haec una Respub. et regium principatum et optimatum gubernationem et civile item regimen referat . . .’. On Contarini’s constitutional theory see Gilbert 1969, pp. 110ff (repr. 1977, pp. 262ff).

8. As it was, for instance, by Vergerio; see above, n. 6. Aristotle considered aristocracy the best form of the mixed constitution: *Politics* IV, 1293b.

9. Quirini 1977b, p. 136: ‘paucorum sed electorum’, pp. 142–3.

10. Morosini 1969, p. 76. See Cozzi 1970, pp. 418ff, 429; King 1986, pp. 140–50. The work was written between 1497 and Morosini’s death in 1509.

the exception of Genoa, added further recriminations for her lukewarmness in supporting crusades, and Paolo Morosini defended, in a letter to the Milanese chancellor Cicco Simonetta, the republic on both counts as being 'avid for peace and content with her own boundaries' (King 1986, p. 139).

That the evolution of political thought was far richer and more varied in Florence than in Venice was due, in large part, to the political vicissitudes of the Florentine republic from the end of the fourteenth century onwards. The shift, after 1434, from the aristocratic regime of the early fifteenth century to Medicean ascendancy gave rise to new political ideas; but owing to its gradual development and oblique nature, and to the survival of republican values and institutions (Rubinstein 1966, pp. 7ff), it did not bring about a clear break with the ideology of civic humanism. Matteo Palmieri's dialogue *Vita civile*, which was written about five years later,¹¹ at a time when Cosimo de' Medici and his supporters were well on the way to establishing their control of government and legislation by manipulating elections to the Signoria and having legislation passed by specially constituted councils, contains no reference whatsoever to these developments. We are still in the civic world of the early fifteenth century, which had been celebrated by Bruni. The central figure of the dialogue is a patrician of the old elite, Agnolo Pandolfini, and the work is designed 'to show the proven life of the virtuous citizens' of Florence rather than of imaginary citizens, such as those described by Plato (Palmieri 1982, p. 7). Modelling his moral teachings largely on Cicero's *De officiis*, his educational ones on Quintilian, Palmieri follows Bruni in using classical sources, including Aristotle's *Politics*, to formulate a republican theory that conformed to the political conditions and problems of his city. The central principles of that theory are, as for Bruni, the supremacy of the common good, justice, equality, civic unity, and liberty. Office-holding, which is meant to serve the common good, is seen as representing 'the universal persona of the entire city',¹² justice involves equitable distribution of offices and taxes without regard to ancestry; his ideal is a meritocracy rather than an aristocracy, although he shares the views of the patricians who wanted the plebs to be excluded from government (pp. 136, 137–8, 187, 191). He insists, as Florentines had done since the days of Dante, on the destructive consequences of civil discord – a disease of the body politic which, as history shows, could be mortal (p. 133). Florence had only recently been

11. On the date (between 1437 and 1440) see Belloni 1978.

12. Palmieri 1982, pp. 131–2: 'rappresentare l'universale persona di tutta la città, et essere facta animata republica'.

torn by party struggles, which in the end had brought Cosimo and his faction to power, and Palmieri's warning to those 'who own sweet liberty' that there is no greater cause of 'civil dissensions and seditions' than unjust government,¹³ may well have been addressed to the new ruling group.

Palmieri could still believe that the Medici regime, in its formative period, would not seriously alter the political traditions of the Florentine republic. The restoration and extension, in 1458, after a brief period of abolition, of the Medicean controls taught Florentine republicans a different lesson; but the vigour and militancy with which republican values were reasserted during a spell of anti-Medicean reaction in 1465/6 bear witness to their survival in Medicean Florence.¹⁴ So, with a sense of fatalistic resignation, does Alamanno Rinuccini's dialogue *De libertate*, which he wrote, during the war of the Pazzi conspiracy, in 1479 (Rinuccini 1957). Rinuccini condemns Lorenzo de' Medici (who had succeeded Cosimo's son Piero in 1469), as a tyrant, under whom the ancient laws of the city were being violated and equality, 'the chief foundation of the citizen's liberty', and freedom of speech and elections by lot abolished, while only few citizens were allowed to participate in government (pp. 283ff). Since resistance was impossible, it was preferable, rather than serve under such a regime, to retire into the private sphere of contemplative life (p. 302). That Rinuccini joined, in the following year, the special council set up to consolidate the Medici regime, reflected an ambivalence characteristic of patrician attitudes to it (Rubinstein 1966, p. 312). Rinuccini's political ideals were still those of the civic humanists of the early Quattrocento, his principal classical sources, like Bruni's, Aristotle and Cicero; and it was the *Politics* which provided him with the view, fundamental for his political theory, that a free republic resembled 'one body with many heads, hands, and feet' (Rinuccini 1957, p. 284; cf. *Politics*, III, 1281b).

Rinuccini, like Palmieri before him, also quotes Plato; but Plato had by then become, in Florence, the favourite classical source for those who, by way of eulogy or prescriptive teaching, pointed to the union in the same person of political power and philosophy as the key to Lorenzo's position in Florence (Brown 1986, pp. 388ff). At the same time, the image of his grandfather was transformed from that of the republican statesman, who by public decree had been posthumously named 'pater patriae', to that of

13. Palmieri 1982, pp. 135–6: 'Pigliano exemplo coloro che posseggono la dolce libertà'.

14. Pampaloni 1961, 1962; see also Rubinstein 1966, pp. 136ff, 1968, pp. 456–60; Phillips 1987, pp. 169ff.

the philosopher-ruler (Brown 1961). In the version of the *De principe* which he dedicated to Lorenzo under the title *De optimo cive*, Platina held him up as an example of 'the father and leader' of the republic. In this dialogue, Cosimo himself quotes Plato's 'divine words' that 'republics will only then be happy when the learned and the wise begin to rule them, or those who rule them place all their endeavour in learning and wisdom' (Platina 1944, pp. 185, 212). Cristoforo Landino, in his *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, written about the same time, quotes the same passage, while Marsilio Ficino, in his dedication to Lorenzo of the *Theologia Platonica*, asks him to combine philosophy with the 'supreme authority in public affairs'.¹⁵ But Ficino did not always give that authority his wholehearted support (Fubini 1984, pp. 24ff), and Platina subjected it to the observance of republican liberty, of which the 'optimus civis' should be the guardian (Platina 1944, pp. 192–3). However much eulogists may have praised Lorenzo in Platonic terms, Platina came closer to the real nature of a regime in which the position of its leader as the virtual head of the state had gradually evolved within the framework of the republican constitution.

The enemies of Lorenzo described him as a tyrant, a description which was as far removed from reality as that of a philosopher-ruler; and the fall of the Medici in 1494, two and half years after his death, was hailed as a liberation from tyranny. That such 'tyranny' was contrary to the nature and customs of the Florentine people was one of the chief arguments of Girolamo Savonarola's *Trattato circa el reggimento e governo della città di Firenze* (Savonarola 1965, II, 3, pp. 469–71). Republican restoration had been followed, under his inspiration and guidance, by a fundamental reform of the Florentine constitution with the creation of a great council of over 3,000 citizens which, like that of Venice which served him as a model, was both the sole legislative and the electoral body of the republic's magistracies. Savonarola's treatise, which he wrote at the beginning of 1498 at the request of the Signoria, was designed to show that the great council, the guardian of the city's liberty and representative of its people, was divinely established, 'sent by God', and that a republican constitution was in accordance with its nature (III, 2). To prove this, he drew on the scholastic Aristotelianism of St Thomas Aquinas' and Tolomeo of Lucca's *De regimine principum* (Weinstein 1970, pp. 290ff). In about 1430, Leonardo Bruni had used the *Politics* to describe the Florentine constitution as mixed of aristocracy and democracy (Rubinstein 1968, pp. 447–8); Savonarola, in

15. Landino 1980, p. 11; see Rubinstein 1986, pp. 143–4. Ficino 1576, p. 78; see Brown 1986, p. 395.

the wake of sixty years of Medicean ascendancy and, in the end, virtual rule, used Aristotle's argument that different constitutions were suitable to different peoples (*Politics*, III, 1288a), to prove that, while monarchy was theoretically the best form of government, republican government was natural to the Florentines, 'the most intelligent (*ingegnossissimo*) of all the peoples of Italy', 'whose nature it is not to support the rule even of a good and perfect prince' (I, 3). The same Aristotelian argument had been related by Tolomeo to republican Italy in general (Aquinas 1948, IV.8, p. 76): Savonarola applied it, two centuries later, in an Italy in which only few of the old republics had survived the spread of despotism, to Florence in particular. At the same time, he blends the teachings of the *De regimine principum*, which went in its entirety under the name of Aquinas, with traditional Florentine notions of republican liberty (Weinstein 1970, pp. 305ff) – just as, in his chapters on tyranny, he combines Aquinas' description of the tyrant's devices with allusions to the tyrannical rule of the Medici (II, 2, 3). That rule had been discussed, in very different terms and with a different purpose, by the humanist Platina in his *De optimo cive*; a quarter of a century later, the Dominican friar from Ferrara provided the new Florentine republic with an authoritative declaration of its guiding principles. But Savonarola's theologically inspired political theory was ill-adapted to the problems which that republic had to face during the years following on its establishment, at a time when the balance of power in the peninsula had been upset as a result of the French invasion of 1494. To some of these problems, Machiavelli reacted in his first political writings in a spirit that had little in common with Savonarola's religious and moral stance; but they both shared a whole-hearted commitment to the republican cause.

ii A new epoch: Machiavelli

Although only briefly successful, Charles VIII's expedition to conquer Naples, the Anjou claims to the kingdom having recently devolved to the French crown, proved a turning point in the history of the Italian states. It not only put an end to the relative stability which had prevailed during the preceding forty years; large parts of the country soon passed under foreign domination: in the first years of the sixteenth century the duchy of Milan under the rule of France, the kingdom of Naples under that of Spain; and in 1509, the league of Cambrai came close to destroying the *terraferma* empire of Venice. The destabilisation of inter-state relations offered Cesare Borgia

the opportunity of creating a new territorial state in central Italy at the expense of local rulers. At the same time, conquests were liable to be short-lived: Cesare Borgia's dominion collapsed after the death in 1503 of his father, Pope Alexander VI; the French lost Milan in 1512, by which year the Venetians had recovered many of their mainland territories. In Florence, Piero de' Medici's opposition to the French expedition against the king of Naples, an ally of Florence, had led to his expulsion in November 1494 and to the establishment of a new republican regime. Eighteen years later, the withdrawal of the French, Florence's only ally, from northern Italy after the battle of Ravenna resulted in the fall of that regime and the return of the Medici; and the restored Medici supremacy was greatly enhanced, in 1513, by the election of Lorenzo's son Giovanni to the papal throne as Leo X.

These events form the background to a new epoch in the history of Italian political thought, whose dominant figure was Niccolò Machiavelli. His two great political works, *Il Principe* and the *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* grew out of his humanist knowledge of ancient history, blended with his experiences of Florentine and Italian politics during a period when the Florentines were desperately trying to safeguard their dominions and, above all, to recover Pisa. Elected in 1498, after the execution of Savonarola, as second chancellor of Florence and then as secretary of the Ten, the magistracy responsible for the conduct of foreign and military affairs, he was employed in many diplomatic missions in Italy as well as in missions to the French king and the king of the Romans. Machiavelli thus acquired an extensive and diverse knowledge of diplomacy and war and of the problems of territorial administration in the rapidly changing world of Italian politics at the beginning of the sixteenth century. A passionate critic of mercenary warfare, he strenuously agitated for the creation, and was intimately involved with the organisation, of a Florentine militia recruited from the *contado* (Bayley 1961, pp. 247ff; Ridolfi 1972, pp. 126ff, 137ff, 154ff). His earliest political writings mirror these concerns. Their predominant themes relate to the security and to the recovery of the city's territories at a time when, in the midst of a war against Pisa which had rebelled against her rule in 1494, Florence was being confronted with other such rebellions in the wake of the advance of Cesare Borgia. They also raise questions and present answers which foreshadow his major works (Marchand 1975, pp. 371ff). Foremost among these is the question of the role of force in politics: it is central for his advice, written in the year after the loss and recovery of Arezzo, on how to deal with rebellious subjects of the Valdichiana, where he recommends the solution

adopted by the Romans ‘that rebellious populations must be either benefited or squashed (*o beneficiare o spegnere*), and that any other method is highly dangerous’:¹⁶ the ‘middle path’ (*via di mezzo*) has to be avoided at all costs;¹⁷ it was another matter of whether the use of force or of love, *o la forza o l’amore*, were preferable.¹⁸ The question of the proper use of force also underlies his writings on the Florentine militia, and involves that of civic education: introduced in the *contado* only, the militia would, he was hoping, be extended to the city itself and thus help to generate civic virtue.¹⁹ These are themes which reappear, in a much more systematic and penetrating form, in *Il Principe* and in the *Discorsi*, together with others which are first formulated or adumbrated in his earliest writings – such as the role of fortune in man’s actions, the lessons which history can offer them (‘I have heard it said that history is the teacher of our actions’).²⁰ Closely related to this question is his advice, although ‘it is not customary to refer’ to them,²¹ ‘to imitate those who had been the rulers of the world’.²² There are also passages which almost literally anticipate *The Prince*, as when he states, in 1506, that in certain circumstances ‘to a new ruler, cruelty, perfidy, and irreligion are useful in order to achieve reputation’ (Machiavelli 1961a, p. 231: ‘Ghiribizzi’).

It was in keeping with the nature of Machiavelli’s employment by the republic that, in contrast to his concern with territorial and military policies, the discussion of domestic affairs is all but missing from his earliest writings; only after the fall of the republic in 1512 does the political and social structure of the state become a dominant theme of his political thought. In December 1513 Machiavelli, who had lost his post in the chancery in the preceding year in the wake of the restoration of the Medici (he had even been imprisoned under suspicion of having participated in a conspiracy against them), completed a short work which he first called *De principatibus* and which he sent to his friend Francesco Vettori in Rome, in the hope of finding employment with the Medici.²³ In one of its opening sentences, he states that, having written on republics, he will now deal with

16. *Del modo di trattare i popoli di Valdichiana ribellati*, in Machiavelli 1961b, pp. 73–4. On the date (1503) see Ridolfi 1972, p. 450; Marchand 1975, pp. 102–4.

17. Machiavelli 1961b, p. 72; see Whitfield 1969, pp. 37ff.

18. *Discorso fatto al magistrato dei dieci sopra le cose di Pisa*, in Machiavelli 1961b, p. 13.

19. *Discorso dell’ordinare lo stato di Firenze alle armi*, in Machiavelli 1961b, p. 100.

20. *Del modo di trattare*, in Machiavelli 1961b, p. 73.

21. Letter to Giovan Battista Soderini (‘Ghiribizzi’), in Machiavelli 1961a, pp. 229–30. On the date (1506) of this letter, which had previously been dated 1512, see Ridolfi and Ghiglieri 1970; Martelli 1969.

22. *Del modo di trattare*, in Machiavelli 1961b, p. 73.

23. Letter to Vettori of 10 December 1513, in Machiavelli 1961a, pp. 301–6.

principalities (II). It seems probable that by that time he had written part of what was to become the first book, which deals primarily with republican institutions, of the *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, and that he interrupted his work on republics to write *Il Principe*.²⁴

The central figure of *Il Principe* is the new prince: Machiavelli asks by what means he can establish and maintain his power, and what role *virtù* and fortune play in this process. Machiavelli starts from the premise that to want to acquire power is entirely natural to man (III), and the lesson he is teaching the new prince is how to do so first at home and then abroad. In this context, his belief in the superiority of native over mercenary armies acquires fresh importance; arguments in favour of the former are now marshalled for the prince instead of the republic (XII–XIV). Similarly, the chapter on ‘mixed principalities’ (III), which discusses the problems of holding newly acquired territories, recalls his experiences with the problems Florence had to face in her dominions. Loosely following the model of *Mirrors of Princes* (Gilbert 1938, pp. 9, 23 ff), he firmly rejects the method of the many authors – one of them was Patrizi – ‘who have imagined republics and principalities which have never been seen or are known to exist’. His purpose was to write something useful to those who understand, and so he preferred to examine matters as they are in reality, the ‘verità effettuale della cosa’, rather than in imagination (XV). Accordingly, the famous chapters (XV–XVII) on the qualities required for a ruler who wants to preserve his power invert the moral teachings of the medieval and humanist advice books for rulers by proposing an alternative code of political conduct. This prescribes, wherever necessary, the use of cruelty and deceit as inevitable means, owing to the innate wickedness of men, to achieve the desired end. ‘It is necessary for a prince who wants to maintain himself to learn how not to be good, and to use or not to use this knowledge according to necessity’; for ‘one who wants to make a profession of goodness in all things will be ruined among so many who are not good’ (XV). While avoiding hatred and contempt (XVII, XIX), he ‘must not mind the infamous reputation of cruelty, to keep his subjects united and loyal’ (XVII), as long as his cruelties are committed ‘all at once for the

24. Unless, as has been argued by Baron, according to whom no part of the *Discorsi* was written in 1513, the sentence in *Il Principe*, II, is a later interpolation (see below). The chronology of the composition of the *Discorsi*, and in particular the question whether part of Book I was composed or drafted before *Il Principe*, is controversial: see Gilbert 1933; Hexter 1956; Sasso 1957, 1958; Bertelli, in Machiavelli 1960, pp. 109ff; Baron 1961; Bausi 1985. On the composition of *Il Principe*, see Chabod 1927. All references to the two works are to the edition in Machiavelli 1960.

necessity of security, and afterwards not persisted in' (viii). He 'ought not to keep faith, when by doing so he acts against his own interest' (xviii). Briefly, 'a prince, and particularly a new prince, cannot observe all those things on whose grounds men are considered good', and 'must often, in order to maintain his power, act against faith, against charity, against humanity, against religion', while at the same time feigning to have all these qualities. 'Let the prince aim at conquering and maintaining power (*lo stato*); the means will always be judged honourable and praised by everyone, for the crowd (*il vulgo*) is always taken in by appearances' (xviii). At the same time, these teachings are qualified by the role fortune plays in the prince's actions, and the interaction of fortune and *virtù*, an ambivalent term which, derived from the Latin *virtus*, may broadly be defined as that quality of energy, vitality, and courage which enables man to achieve greatness and power in the face of the impersonal force of fortune (see Price 1973; Diesner 1985). The interaction of fortune and *virtù*, which had preoccupied him since the years he spent in the Florentine chancery, is one of the key questions of *The Prince*, and central to his account of the rise and fall of Cesare Borgia, whom he had set up as a model for the new prince (vii). His answer is not free of ambiguities: he adopts classical and humanist notions in stressing the capacity of *virtù* to curb or defeat fortune, but concedes, in chapter xxv, that fortune controls one half of our actions. What ultimately matters is whether men's nature is in agreement with fortune or not; yet even so he insists, in the concluding sentences of that chapter, that 'it is better to be impetuous than cautious', for fortune, 'as a woman, is a friend of the young, for they are less cautious, fiercer, and command her with greater audacity'. It is a theme which Machiavelli takes up in the *Discorsi* in the context of reflections on the role of the individual in the process of historical change (ii, 29).

Il Principe ends with a passionate appeal to the Medici to take the lead in liberating Italy from foreign domination (xxvi). A Medici was pope, and there were unequalled opportunities 'for a new prince' to take up arms against the 'barbarians'. There were, in fact, plans, in 1513, to create a territorial state for Leo X's brother Giuliano, to whom, in December of that year, Machiavelli intended to dedicate the *De principatibus*, and it has been argued that he had these plans in mind when composing it.²⁵ He dedicated the work, in 1515 or 1516 (Ridolfi 1972, pp. 257, 525–7), to Leo's nephew Lorenzo, who then acted as the pope's lieutenant in Florence,

25. Machiavelli 1961a, p. 267; Clough 1967, pp. 61ff. But see Sasso 1967, pp. 84ff.

and there were those in the city who believed Machiavelli was teaching Lorenzo how to become her absolute ruler: 'to the rich it seemed that his *Prince* had been a lesson to teach the Duke to deprive them of all their properties, to the poor, of all their liberty' (Busini 1860, p. 84: letter of 23 January 1549). But if *Il Principe* contained a specific message to the Florentines, it has rather to be sought in chapter IX on the 'civil principality' ('principato civile'), where Machiavelli advises the 'private citizen' who 'with the support of the other citizens becomes prince of his fatherland', his *patria*, to found his power on the people rather than on the nobility, the *grandi*, because such a power base would give him greater security (cf. xx; see Sasso 1967, pp. 96ff, 1980, pp. 346ff). To gain popular favour, he could use a variety of methods, *molti modi*, which Machiavelli refrains, no doubt prudently, from spelling out; but the traditional use, derived from Aristotle, of the term *politicus* or *civile* to describe constitutional government based on popular consent can hardly have been absent from Machiavelli's mind when he was writing that chapter (see Rubinstein 1987, pp. 44ff). 'These principalities decline', he says at its end, 'when they change from the *ordine civile* to the absolute one' (cf. *Discorsi* I, 25, 26); and in the *Discorsi* he writes (I, 16; cf. I, 58, III, 1) that the king of France, whose rule conformed to the requirements of the *vivere politico* or *civile*, had 'pledged themselves to obey an infinite number of laws, which encompass the security of all their peoples' (see below, p. 54).

The *Discorsi* are also designed to demonstrate that, although the government of monarchies as well as of republics can conform to the *vivere civile*, it is in the republics that it finds its fullest expression. Republicans took it for granted that the *vita civile* was characteristic of republics; Savonarola had described it as natural to the Florentines (see above, pp. 40–1); Machiavelli saw it realised to perfection in ancient Rome. In order to discover the reasons for Rome's success in creating 'a perfect republic' (I, 2), he takes as his text the first ten books, or decade, of Livy's *History of Rome*, which cover the history of the city from the origins to 293 BC, but he also draws on later books of that work. In the opening sentence of the proem of the first book of the *Discorsi*, he proudly affirms that he has chosen to 'enter a new path . . . not yet trodden by anyone'. Considering, he says, that antiquity is so greatly revered that, to cite only one of innumerable examples, sculptors are made to imitate fragments of ancient statues acquired at great cost, it is a matter of surprise and sadness that the examples of virtuous actions provided by ancient history are 'admired rather than imitated'. 'Infinite numbers of those who read it enjoy hearing of the

various incidents contained in it, without any thought of imitating it, since they believe this to be not only difficult but impossible'. To remedy this 'error', he proposes to write a commentary on Livy's *History* (in fact, he says, on all its extant books), so as to learn from that work the kind of lessons 'which one should seek to acquire through the knowledge of history'. The premise for this enterprise is the fundamental identity of human nature from antiquity to the present time, 'the world' having 'always been the same' ('sempre essere stato ad uno medesimo modo'), only what is good or bad in it shifting from region to region (II, proem).

By taking as the text for his political theory an historical rather than, like his scholastic and humanist predecessors, a philosophical work, Livy's *Ab urbe condita* rather than Aristotle's *Politics*, Machiavelli endowed his enquiry from the start with an historical dimension. His generalisations and his rules for political action (see Machiavelli 1950, I, pp. 93ff; Butterfield 1940, pp. 37ff, 71ff) are, as a result, derived from his study of Roman history as well as from his own experience. At the same time, by writing the *Discorsi* in the form of a commentary, he renders a systematic analysis of that theory often singularly difficult, at times artificially contrived. Yet, despite occasional inconsistencies and even contradictions, a coherent scheme of political ideas does emerge from a reading of the *Discorsi*; and this is helped by the fact that the first eighteen chapters disregard the chronological sequence of Livy's *History* and discuss, in a fairly systematic fashion, fundamental concepts and problems which are subsequently presupposed and partly treated at greater length.²⁶

Machiavelli's historical and empirical method of political enquiry underlines, and largely explains, his apparent lack of interest in some of the basic questions of classical and scholastic political philosophy – such as the role of justice in the state, the nature of law, the limits of political obligation, and the relationship between the temporal and the spiritual power (Plamenatz 1963, I, p. 16). In the proem of the *Discorsi*, he enumerates, in his turn, the questions to which a correct reading of ancient history can provide answers: they concern the institutions (*ordini*) of republics and of kingdoms, the preservation of political regimes, military organisation and judicial administration, and territorial aggrandisement. In the *Discorsi*, these questions are encompassed in the basic theme presented to Machiavelli by Livy's *History*: why and in what ways Rome became a

26. Gilbert 1953, p. 150 (repr. 1977, p. 127) suggests that these chapters constituted the draft of a separate treatise on republics on which Machiavelli was working in 1513 and which he later used in the final version of the *Discorsi*.

'perfect republic'. The point of departure for Machiavelli's attempt to answer this question is Polybius' cyclic theory of constitutional change (I, 2), although he does not mention him by name. Polybius saw the mixture of constitutional forms as the only way by which the inexorable process of corruption, to which all simple constitutions are subject, and hence the cycle through which they pass, could be for a time arrested; the Roman republic owed its duration to its mixed constitution. By taking the sixth book of Polybius' *Histories* as his guide for his interpretation of the history of Rome, Machiavelli also follows Polybius' view that even Rome, despite the exemplary character of her constitution, was not exempt from the process of corruption.²⁷ In sharp contrast to the condemnation, traditional in Italian political thought since the thirteenth century, of civic division as destructive of republican regimes, including that of ancient Rome, he considers class conflicts the chief cause of the evolution of her constitution, and thus of her stability and greatness. Two legislators, Romulus and Numa, had laid the foundations of that constitution, just as Lycurgus had laid those of Sparta; but the laws and institutions they had established had been designed for a monarchy. Yet, though defective, they could, after the expulsion of Tarquinius, serve as the foundations for a *vivere civile e libero* (I, 2), that is, a republic. The role of the lawgiver is central to Machiavelli's political thought; in Rome, however, he provides, in contrast to Sparta, only the foundations on which later generations were to build, in the course of struggles between social classes, 'a perfect republic' (I, 2).²⁸

That all states are divided into two classes, the nobles and the people, the *grandi* and the *popolo*, whose 'humours', or desires, conflict with one another (I, 4), is one of the major premises of Machiavelli's political theory.²⁹ The *umori* form part of Machiavelli's notion of the state as a body politic in which, as in the human organism, contrasting humours can be contained or reconciled. In *Il Principe*, the new ruler is advised to make use of this division in his own interest by choosing the people as his chief supporter: 'who becomes a prince through the favour of the people, should preserve its friendship'; who does so 'against the people through the favour of the nobles, should above everything else seek to acquire that of the people' (IX). According to the *Discorsi*, the mixed constitution created in Rome a balance between these contrasting 'humours' by dividing power

27. See Sasso 1967, pp. 161–280 (revised Sasso 1987–8, I, pp. 3–118); Walbank 1972, pp. 131ff. On the eventual decline of the mixed constitution, Walbank 1972, pp. 145–6.

28. The basic concept is again Polybian: see *The Histories*, vi. 10. 12–14; the Romans achieved the same result as Lycurgus not 'by any process of reasoning, but by the discipline of many struggles and troubles' (trans. W.R. Paton, Loeb edn, III, p. 293).

29. ' . . . e' sono in ogni republica due umori diversi, quello del popolo e quello de' grandi'.

between those two classes. Machiavelli insists that, contrary to received opinion, in Rome class conflicts had a constructive effect by creating a constitution which made possible centuries of domestic stability (I, 4). He also maintains that, through the active share in political life assigned by it to the people, that constitution provided the foundation of Rome's military power and hence of its empire (I, 5); while the Venetian constitution, mixed in its turn, had, by making the nobility the ruling class of the state at the expense of the people, deprived the republic of the strength needed to preserve its conquests (I, 6). It was only when in Rome selfish economic interests came to prevail, in the class conflicts, over political ambitions (see Price 1982), that these conflicts took, at the end of the second century BC, a disastrous turn, leading first to the victory of the nobility over the people and finally to the overthrow of the republic itself by Caesar. The event which set this process in motion was the Gracchi's attempt to enforce the agrarian laws at the expense of the patricians, because it resulted in such 'hatred between the plebs and the senate, that it led to armed struggle and to bloodshed' (I, 37; see Cadoni 1978a), and thus to the breakdown of the political balance of the *vivere civile* which the same class conflicts had helped to bring about at the time of the early republic through perfecting its *ordini*.

Machiavelli distinguishes between *ordini* and *leggi* (see Whitfield 1955; repr. 1969); in Rome, the former were the political institutions created by the founders of the monarchy and then of the republic, the latter were laws that were introduced subsequently; they could supplement or enforce, but only rarely change, the *ordini*. He explains this distinction in *Discorsi*, I, 18: the constitutional arrangement of the Roman republic, with the division of power between consuls, senate, and tribunes, and with their methods of elections to office and of legislation 'changed little or not at all'; what changed were the laws that were designed to restrain, among other corrupt practices, the anti-social ambitions of the citizens. In view of the fact that Machiavelli often uses *ordini* and *leggi* as interchangeable terms, it is important to bear this distinction in mind. Legislators have to assume, he says at the beginning of the *Discorsi* (I, 3) 'that all men are evil' and that they 'never do good unless induced by necessity'. His concept of law, like that of Marsilius of Padua, is unreservedly positivist: the validity of human law depends in no way upon its conformity to a higher law. This son of a lawyer omits entirely, from his discussion of law, the term 'law of nature', crucial for medieval juristic theory;³⁰ perhaps it is not without an ironic

30. Canning 1988, pp. 454ff. Geerken 1987 argues that Machiavelli's use of the term *ordini* relates to Cicero's concept of natural law (pp. 40–1). For the generally accepted view on this question see *ibid.*, pp. 37–8.

twist that in Bartolomeo Scala's dialogue *De legibus et iudiciis*, Bernardo Machiavelli figures as representing, in Platonic terms, this tradition (Brown 1979, pp. 292–4). Good laws produce *buona educazione*, and 'good education' generates, in its turn, 'good examples' (I, 4), that is, of civic virtue. For Machiavelli, good laws are not concerned with individual rights, but with civic duties, with checking ambition and restraining or reconciling conflicting bids for power. They benefit the citizens insofar as they secure domestic peace, concern for the common interest, and security of life and property, with which the vast majority of citizens is anyway satisfied: only 'a small part of them want to be free in order to command'; in no republic does the ruling group exceed forty or fifty members (I, 16). Good laws also serve the citizens by providing the foundations of empire. Religion and military service make it possible for the laws to fulfil their creative functions, the former by instilling unquestioned loyalty to the state, the latter by complementing civic virtue with military prowess. Numa was the second founder of Rome, for the religious institutions which he introduced were 'among the prime reasons for the happiness of that city'; they 'caused good *ordini*, and good *ordini* produce good fortune', which in its turn was the cause of Rome's successful military exploits (I, 11). 'Where military service (*milizia*) is good, the *ordine* must needs be good', and it is rare that this is not accompanied by good fortune (I, 4). Indeed, Machiavelli goes so far as to maintain that 'the foundation of all states is the good *milizia*'; and where it does not exist, 'there cannot be either good laws or anything good' (III, 31). This reformulates his statement in *Il Principe* (XII) that 'the principal foundations of all states . . . are good laws and good arms', and that 'there cannot be good laws where there are not good arms, and where there are good arms there must be good laws'.³¹ The *milizia* is also essential for republics whose aim is territorial aggrandisement, and which should follow Rome's example in arming the people (I, 6). But good arms cannot be easily introduced, and when introduced preserved, without religion (I, 11).³² While reinforcing the case for the essential role religion plays in the state by generating civic virtue, Machiavelli's argument has also a bearing on his critique of Christian religion as being less capable than the pagan religion of ancient Rome of producing fortitude and love of liberty among the citizens: 'the ancient religion . . . beatified only men who were replete with worldly glory . . . Our religion has glorified humble and

31. See *Arte della guerra*, proem, in Machiavelli 1961b, pp. 325–7.

32. ' . . . dove è religione facilmente si possono introdurre l' armi; e dove sono l'armi e non religione, con difficoltà si può introdurre quella'.

contemplative men rather than men of action'; although he adds that this is caused by a false interpretation of our religion, which 'allows us to exalt and defend the fatherland' (II, 2).

While institutions and laws promote civic virtue, they require, for being observed, in their turn 'good customs' ('buoni costumi'): 'just as good customs need good laws for being maintained, so laws need good customs for being observed' (I, 18) – an apparently circular argument, which reflects a fundamental premise of Machiavelli's political thought: the dependence of institutions for their proper functioning on social conditions. These are, in their turn, subject to change. As a result, good laws and institutions that were introduced at a time when social conditions were healthy cease to be so, indeed may be harmful, when they have become corrupt (I, 17, 18). Machiavelli's theory of the role of institutions and laws in political life is sociological as well as historical.

Polybius' theory of cyclic change relates, in Machiavelli's formulation, to 'variations of government' ('variazioni de' governi'), which follow 'the cycle passing through which all commonwealths have been and are governed' (I, 2).³³ According to Polybius, all simple constitutions had a built-in tendency to change into corrupt forms; even the mixed constitution was destined to decay and fall. In the first chapters of the *Discorsi*, Machiavelli had analysed the origins and progress of the 'perfect' mixed constitution of Rome. Three subsequent chapters (I, 16–18) are concerned with the decline of that constitution, and with corruption in general. The result is a general theory of political degeneration which is firmly based on social foundations.

'Since all human affairs are in a state of movement (*in moto*), and since they cannot stand still, they must either rise or decline' (I, 6); and Machiavelli recapitulates, at the beginning of book III: 'it is abundantly true that the life of all things in this world has its end'. The goodness, *bontà*, which republics and monarchies had at the time of their creation, 'degenerates in the course of time' unless they are renewed (III, 1; see below p. 52). This degeneration affects not only *ordini* but society at large. *Ozio*, idleness, is singled out as one of its immediate causes, since it threatens civic virtue (I, 1); it is a hallmark of the feudal society which Machiavelli considers to have been, in Italy, a primary cause of corruption (I, 55; see Waley 1970, p. 95). Another such cause is inequality, in contrast to the basic equality among citizens which should reign in republics, and which has

33. On the extent of the influence on Machiavelli of Polybius' cyclic theory, see Sasso 1967, pp. 166ff, 232ff, 1987–8, I, pp. 7ff, 75ff.

made it possible for the German towns to maintain an uncorrupted *vivere politico* (I, 55); yet another, the seizure by the government of absolute power, 'for absolute power (*una autorità assoluta*) corrupts the material (*la materia*), in the shortest of time' (I, 35).

What did Machiavelli mean by *materia*? 'Other *ordini* and regimes (*modi di vivere*) are required according to whether their subject is bad or good, nor can the same form exist where the *materia* is entirely contrary' to it, he states in I, 18. In other words, the *ordini* are the form, the *materia* the society to which they are applied; and the society can be virtuous like that of republican Rome, whose history bears witness to the 'goodness of its *materia*' (I, 18, III, 8), or it can be corrupt. Where the *materia* is good, as in Rome, class war and civil unrest, *i tumulti ed altri scandoli*, do not damage it; where it is corrupt, 'the well-ordered laws are of no avail', unless applied with extreme force (I, 17). This process of social degeneration is inevitable, it can only be arrested or reversed by one man using such 'extreme force' in imposing laws capable of restoring society to its pristine health: 'and I do not know whether this has ever occurred and whether it is possible that it should occur' (I, 17). As far as republics are concerned, to renew one in this way 'presupposes a good man, and to become through violence the ruler of a republic an evil one', and consequently it happens extremely rarely that a good man seizes power by evil means, though the end is good, or that an evil man, once he has become a prince, should use the authority he has thus acquired to a good end: it is therefore practically impossible 'to maintain or newly create a republic in corrupt cities' (I, 18). Elsewhere, Machiavelli is less pessimistic: states, like religious bodies (*sette*), which are equally subject to degeneration, can be renewed by taking them back to their origins (*principii*), and 'those are better ordered and have longer life, whose institutions (*ordini*) makes their frequent renewal possible' (III, 1). Reformers occupy, in his political theory, a place second only to that of founders. 'Truly, should a prince seek worldly glory, he should covet to possess a corrupt city, not in order to spoil it entirely as Caesar, but to re-order it as Romulus did' (I, 10): 'one ought to take it as a general rule, that it never or rarely happens that a republic or a kingdom is either well ordered at the beginning, or completely reformed apart from its ancient institutions, unless this is done by one person' (I, 9). Yet, such a reform was liable to be only temporary: once its architect was dead, the city would return to its former state (I, 17). The problem is compounded by the fact that, while absolute power is essential to effect the reform of a corrupt society, it is itself, as we have seen, a source of corruption.

Machiavelli's sociological analysis of corruption forms part of a general

theory of the suitability of political institutions to different societies at different points of their evolution. Institutions differ also according to whether a state is organised with a view to territorial aggrandisement or to security within its own borders. The former was the case of ancient Rome, the latter is that of modern Venice. A state which wants to expand should therefore follow, in fashioning its institutions, the example of Rome; to seek aggrandisement where the institutions, and in particular those concerning warfare, are not devised accordingly, means to court disaster, as the recent example of Venice's – in fact only temporary – loss of her mainland possessions shows (I, 6). As for the notion of the suitability of institutions to different societies, it derives ultimately from Aristotle;³⁴ Tolomeo of Lucca had applied it to Italy, Savonarola, following him, to Florence (see above, pp. 40–1); Machiavelli refines Savonarola's formulation by arguing that some nations require monarchies, others republics because of their different social structures; 'a republic should therefore be set up where there is . . . a great equality, and vice versa a principality where there is great inequality'; to ignore this political fact of life will nearly always lead to failure (I, 55). At the same time, Machiavelli considered republics to be superior to monarchies. 'As for prudence and stability, I say that a people is more prudent, more stable, and has better judgement than a prince' (I, 58); 'a republic has a longer life . . . than a principality' (III, 9); the 'common good is only observed in republics' (II, 2); they 'observe treaties far better than princes' (I, 59); they show more gratitude to their citizens than princes to their subjects (I, 29); Rome's rise to world power began after the expulsion of the kings and the establishment of the republic. In fact, 'cities have never increased their empire or wealth unless they were free', for is it 'the common good which makes cities great' (II, 2).

Machiavelli rejects the 'common opinion', according to which 'the people, when in power, is variable, fickle, and ungrateful, and distinguishes between the 'disorganised' ('sciolta') multitude and the one which is 'regulated by the laws'. It is the 'well-ordered people' 'which would be at least as stable, prudent, and grateful . . . as even a prince who is considered wise, while a prince who is unrestrained by the laws' would in these respects be worse than a people. At the same time, if one compared a prince and a people both bound by the laws, 'one would see more *virtù*' in the latter than in the former; if unrestrained by them, 'one would see less errors in the people than in the prince' (I, 58).

Despite the superiority of the republic, good government can also be

34. *Politics* III, 1288a, IV, 1296b, V, 1327b. See Butters 1986, p. 413.

provided by a monarchy, and not only at the foundation of states, or at their reform, where the untrammelled action by one man is essential. In a corrupt society, an absolute ruler can provide the only solution; for 'where the *materia* is so corrupt that the laws do not suffice to restrain it', what is needed to reform it is a monarchy 'which with absolute and excessive power restrains the excessive ambition and corruption of the powerful', as would be the case of most of Italy (I, 55). But also in societies in which corruption has not reached a stage where only an absolute ruler stands any chance at all of reforming them, monarchy can be a suitable form of government. The prime example of a good monarchy is, for Machiavelli, contemporary France. One of the reasons why he considered that country 'among the well-ordered and well-governed kingdoms' of his age was precisely because its king had succeeded, through the establishment of the *parlement*, in placing 'a bit in the mouth' of the great nobles and had thus checked their ambition and insolence (*Il Principe*, XIX); another, and more cogent reason, was that he had 'pledged himself to observe an infinite number of laws which encompass the security of all his peoples' (I, 16); with the result that the kingdom of France is 'more regulated by laws than any other of our time of which we have knowledge' (I, 58).

A monarchy bound by law was, like a republic, a *vivere politico*, and as such the opposite to tyranny. Since the early fourteenth century, Italian republicans had identified the *politeia* of Aristotle's *Politics*, as *vivere politico* or *civile*, with republican government; Machiavelli departs from this tradition by extending the term *politicus*, as Fortescue had done in England and Seyssel, recently, in France, to constitutional monarchies (Rubinstein 1987, pp. 44ff, 49ff). Machiavelli's eulogy of the kingdom of France, which is 'regulated by laws', serves to underline its distinction from a tyranny (see Matteucci 1972, pp. 215ff). His unreserved condemnation of tyranny relates to the classical and medieval notion of it as a corrupt form of monarchy, but also to Italian republican traditions: after the rise of despotic regimes in the Italian cities in the thirteenth century, tyranny was seen not only as a corruption of monarchy but above all as the antithesis to republican liberty. It is this republican tradition which prevails in the *Discorsi* where, after dealing with the heroic age of the Roman republic, he comments on the succession of crises which led to its destruction by Caesar was, for Machiavelli, a tyrant, like other citizens 'who had become tyrants of their fatherland' (I, 16). The new prince of *Il Principe* who comes to power as a private citizen, 'di privato . . . diventa principe' (VIII), is, by this definition, a tyrant as soon as he seizes absolute power (IX; cf. *Discorsi* I, 25,

26), although Machiavelli never uses the term in this work, even where he condemns princes for their criminal and cruel actions (VIII).

It is one of those points where *Il Principe* and the *Discorsi*, though dealing with the same subject, approach it from different viewpoints – a difference which was due to the different purposes of the two works, rather than to changes in Machiavelli’s political thinking. This forms part of the wider question of the relationship between the republican theory of the *Discorsi* and the advice offered in *The Prince* to the new ruler. The apparent conflict between the political teachings in these two works has been interpreted as due to the former belonging to an earlier phase in the development of Machiavelli’s thinking about politics,³⁵ but it can also be explained by the different situations in which they were written and by their different purposes. The two works have major themes in common. Thus the problem of *virtù* and fortune is again taken up in the *Discorsi*, but given a less voluntarist and more historically defined slant than in *The Prince*: the emphasis is now placed on men’s character conforming to the point in history at which their action takes place: ‘the cause of the bad or the good fortune of men depends on their behaviour happening to be in conformity with the times’ (III, 9). This is, incidentally, yet another reason why a republic is superior to a monarchy; for owing to the ‘diversity’ existing among its citizens, it is better equipped than a prince to ‘adapt itself to the diversity of the times’ and consequently enjoys life and good fortune over longer periods (III, 9).

Another theme, central for the teachings of *Il Principe*, is the rejection of Christian morality as the guide of political action. In *The Prince*, while considered objectionable in theory, this is justified in practice on the grounds of the innate wickedness of man; ‘for how one lives is so far removed from how one ought to live, that he who leaves what is done for what ought to be done will experience his ruin rather than his preservation’ (xv). Here the use of immoral methods is defended as essential for the success and the security of the prince, whereas in the *Discorsi* the end is also postulated as justifying the means as long as it serves the common good. Writing of Romulus’ murder of Remus, Machiavelli comments that it is to be accepted that, ‘although the fact accuses him, the effect excuses him’, it being a ‘general rule’ that a state can only be well ordered, or reformed, by one person, and that he who intends to do so not for his own sake or for that of his successors, but for the common good and the fatherland, ‘should seek

35. See Baron 1961, pp. 247ff, repr. 1988, pp. 193ff, and above, n. 24.

to be alone in authority' (I, 9). It is for the sake of preserving the republic that he justifies the execution by Brutus, the first consul, of his own sons for having plotted against it. However, much the same also applies to the founder of a tyranny: 'he who establishes a tyranny and does not kill Brutus, and who creates a republic (*uno stato libero*) and does not kill the sons of Brutus, lasts only a short time'; in both cases 'it is necessary to take exemplary (*memorabile*) action against the enemies' of the new regime (III, 3). The necessity to use extraordinary methods at their foundation applies to republics as well as to principalities: 'he who sets out to govern a multitude either in the form of a republic or of a principate, and does not secure himself against those who are hostile to the new order, creates a regime which will be short-lived' (I, 16). The chapter on fraud (III, 40), with its distinction between private and public morality, reads as if it were taken straight from *The Prince*: 'although to use fraud is detestable in any action, in the conduct of war it is nevertheless praiseworthy and glorious'. For the aim is the good of the community, in this case of the fatherland in its relation to other states; and, as he says in the following chapter (III, 41) – one of the last of the work: 'when one decides wholly on the safety of the fatherland (*patria*), there should be no consideration of what is just or unjust, kind or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious; rather, setting aside any other regard, one should entirely adopt that decision which saves its life and preserves its liberty'.

The term *patria* recurs, about ten years after he had completed the *Discorsi*, in a letter Machiavelli wrote, at a moment of supreme crisis, when the imperial army was advancing on Florence: 'I love my fatherland more than my soul' ('amo la patria mia più dell'anima').³⁶ What is the relevance of his *patria* to an understanding of that work? There are no explicit references to the internal politics of Florence in *Il Principe*, except to support his argument about the importance of arms for a prophet: Savonarola, a *profeta disarmato*, 'was ruined . . . when the multitude ceased to believe in him' (VI). Yet, if our interpretation is correct, there is a veiled lesson on Medicean rule in the chapter on the 'civil principality' (IX; see above, p. 46). The *Discorsi* were perhaps read by Machiavelli around 1516 to a select literary circle at Florence which met in the Rucellai garden.³⁷ To what extent has this political commentary on the history of the 'perfect' Roman republic to be understood in the context of Florentine politics, and

36. To Francesco Vettori, 16 April 1527, in Machiavelli 1961a, pp. 504–5.

37. Ridolfi 1972, pp. 265–6. According to Nerli 1859, II, p. 12, 'a loro istanza compose il Machiavello quel suo libro de' discorsi sopra Tito Livio'.

as providing, apart from ‘general rules’, special lessons for his compatriots? His observations on the city and on individual citizens, scattered through that work, are mostly critical; yet when he discusses the chances of reform in corrupt Italy, he distinguishes regions such as Lombardy, in which the *materia* had degenerated to an extent where only absolute power could restrain the excesses of the nobility, from the three Tuscan republics Florence, Siena, and Lucca, ‘where there exists so much equality that a prudent man who was familiar with the civic institutions (*civilità*) of antiquity could easily introduce a constitutional government (*uno vivere civile*)’ (1, 55).

Central to the problem of the role of Florence in the *Discorsi* is the question to what extent Machiavelli’s innovative view of the effects of internal division on the evolution of the Roman republic was relevant to his interpretation of Florentine history. It was only later, in his *Istorie fiorentine* (Machiavelli 1962), which he wrote between 1520 and 1525, that he tried to explain why civil conflict was beneficial in Rome but harmful in Florence; but it is probable that when he discussed the political and institutional equilibrium which the struggles between the nobility and plebs had brought about in ancient Rome, he was also thinking of the antagonism between *ottimati* and *popolani*, between aristocratic and democratic tendencies, which had reemerged in Florence after the creation of the great council in 1494 and which played a major role in the political life of the republic during Machiavelli’s years in its chancery. The preface to the third book of the *Istorie fiorentine* contrasts the political balance which class struggle had produced in Rome with the oppression of the nobility by the people after its victory in Florence; and in the preface to the seventh book he insists that factions, *sette*, are, unlike class division, always detrimental to the common good, and have always been harmful to Florence. In the *Discorsi*, most of the explicit references to his city are to her recent past (see Rubinstein 1972, pp. 23ff); but towards the end of the first book, Machiavelli attempts a comprehensive interpretation of her history. During the last two centuries, he writes, which are reliably documented – of which ‘si ha di vera memoria’ – she has never succeeded in establishing a regime ‘which allowed her to be truly called a republic’ (1, 49).

About two years after the completion of the *Discorsi*, he made this conclusion the starting point for an analysis of the constitutional development of Florence designed to provide the basis for a proposal to reform the ruling Medicean regime. The *Discursus florentinarum rerum*, written after the death in 1519 of the virtual ruler of Florence, the younger Lorenzo de’

Medici (Machiavelli 1961b, pp. 261–77), forms part of a group of political pamphlets advising the Medici how to secure their power through reforms. Machiavelli's is the most radically republican of these writings: he advocates the restoration, with some substantial changes, by Leo X and Cardinal Giulio, the only surviving legitimate members of the main branch of the family, of the republican constitution the Medici had overthrown in 1512. He repeats, and expands, his critical interpretation, in the *Discorsi*, of his city's constitutional history: it had never been a true republic or a true principate. Her social structure, characterised by a 'very great equality', requires a republican constitution (pp. 261, 267). The Medici were, by reestablishing and reforming such a constitution, to act as the reformers Machiavelli had praised, in the *Discorsi*, as the saviours of their country: 'no one is as much extolled in any of his actions as those who through laws and institutions have reformed republics and kingdoms' (p. 275; cf. *Discorsi*, I, 10). This appeal, which joins that to the Medici, at the end of *Il Principe*, to liberate Italy from the barbarians, proved, in its turn, to be a complete failure. It contrasts with his observations, in the *Discorsi*, on the obstacles facing reform in an age of corruption (I, 17, 18), and thus reflects on the problem, fundamental for Machiavelli's theory of the lessons of history, of the validity of 'general rules'.

iii Florence and Venice: Guicciardini

Machiavelli's *Discursus florentinarium rerum* was, like other Florentine political writings such as those by Niccolò Guicciardini, Lodovico Alamanni, and Alessandro de' Pazzi (Albertini 1955, pp. 41ff, 85ff), concerned with practical questions regarding the reform or the consolidation of the restored Medici regime. The hopes of Machiavelli and of other republicans that the Medici would initiate a constitutional reform leading to a restoration of the republican constitution were dashed by the discovery, in 1522, of a conspiracy against them. Francesco Guicciardini's *Dialogo del reggimento di Firenze* (Guicciardini 1932, pp. 3–172), which he began before that event, during the pontificate of Leo X, and completed about four years later during that of the second Medici pope, Clement VII (pp. 296–7), proposes such a reform within the context of a wide-ranging analysis of Florentine government and politics under the early Medicean regime and under the republican regime established in 1494. Unlike Machiavelli, Guicciardini was a member of an old patrician family which had played a prominent role under Lorenzo de' Medici and had later supported the new republic; as the heir to a family tradition of active

participation in government, he was, again in contrast to Machiavelli, drawn to an aristocratic rather than to a democratic view of Florentine politics. At the same time, although holding high office in the administration of the States of the church under two Medici popes, he considered, when writing the *Dialogo*, a republican constitution more suitable to his city than Medicean rule. The purpose of the *Dialogo* explains why its republican theory is, unlike that of the *Discorsi*, strictly related to Florence; but just as the *Discorsi* have Florentine implications and undertones, so the political ideas expounded in the *Dialogo* often transcend their Florentine dimension and assume a general character, which comes fully into its own in the *Ricordi*, or maxims, which Guicciardini penned in the course of the manifold activities of his political life.

The central question of the *Dialogo* is whether the Medici regime or a republican constitution was more congenial to Florence. The work belongs, like the *Discorsi*, to the Italian debate on the respective merits of monarchies and republics. It is also, like Machiavelli's political writings, strictly related to empirical facts. Guicciardini resolutely rejects any evaluations of forms of government based on normative classifications of constitutions (p. 15). Similarly, he subjects traditional concepts of liberty and equality, basic for Florentine political thought and authoritatively formulated by Bruni, to a devastating critique: in most cases these terms serve, he believes, to conceal bids for power on the part of the underprivileged (p. 38). The only criterion he accepts for a comparative evaluation of constitutions concerns, pragmatically, their 'effects' ('effetti'). Those constitutions are the best, 'where the laws are most observed and justice is best administered, and where there is most consideration of the good of all, while at the same time social distinctions are respected' (p. 16). His rejection of classical constitutional theory as his guide does not prevent him from proposing the mixed constitution as the ideal form of government for the Florentine republic; but he does so with reference not to a classical author, as Machiavelli had done, but to contemporary Venice. It is Venice, not ancient Rome, which he holds up as a model republic, a view which goes hand in hand with a critique of Machiavelli's interpretation of Roman history³⁸ and altogether with a rejection of his axiomatic belief in the lessons of history (p. 68).³⁹

38. Guicciardini 1932, pp. 148ff. Cf. his *Considerazioni intorno ai Discorsi del Machiavelli sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, Guicciardini 1933, pp. 10ff, 43.

39. Cf. Guicciardini 1951, p. 121 (C110): 'Quanto si ingannano coloro che a ogni parola allegano e Romani! Bisognerebbe avere una città condizionata come era loro, e poi governarsi secondo quello essempla . . .'

At the same time, Guicciardini insists, like Machiavelli, on the importance of the suitability of constitutions to the societies for which they are devised; and like Savonarola, and like Machiavelli in the *Discorsi*, he accordingly considers republican liberty to be 'natural' for Florence (pp. 98–9). Again like Savonarola, he contrasts that liberty with the government of Florence under Lorenzo de' Medici; but he does so within the context of a detailed comparison of the Medicean regime before 1494 with that of the new republic. Savonarola had condemned the former as a tyranny, Guicciardini argues that it had respected republican institutions and traditions, and had preserved at least the image of liberty.⁴⁰ While preferring republican liberty as natural to Florence, he nevertheless rates the early Medicean regime higher than the republican one that had replaced it in 1494 on the grounds of its better 'effects' for the government of the city, because its errors were due to rational calculation, those of the people to ignorance; and ignorance, 'which has neither measure nor rules' (p. 51), is more damaging than errors due to malice (pp. 46, 50–1, 55).

As early as 1512, Guicciardini had, in a short discourse on the reform of the republican regime of 1494,⁴¹ singled out the guiding principle of the ideal republican constitution, which he expounds in the second book of the *Dialogo*, after having completed the comparison between the two regimes under which Florence had been governed in the recent past. That principle is a balance between the conflicting claims to power of the upper and lower classes, to be secured by a constitution in which an elite of wise and experienced citizens plays a decisive and moderating role and holds in check 'the ignorance of the multitude' (p. 227). This does not only apply to Florence: 'at all times, experience has always shown that it is the virtue of few citizens which has governed and which governs the republics' (p. 238). In the *Dialogo*, the senate, composed of 'the most virtuous and best qualified citizens', holds the balance between the potentially excessive authority of the head of the republic, the Gonfalonier of Justice, and the people assembled in the great council, by providing 'a moderating element between tyranny and popular licence' ('uno temperamento tra la tirannide e licenzia popolare') (p. 118). His model, as for other institutions of his ideal

40. '... non era venuto su come uno stato di uno principe assoluto, ma accompagnato co' modi della libertà e della civiltà, perché ogni cosa si governava sotto nome di repubblica ... la imagine era che el governo fussi libero' (p. 77). In his *Storie fiorentine*, composed in 1508–9, he had described Lorenzo as a benevolent despot (Guicciardini 1931, p. 80): '... bisogna conchiudere che sotto lui la città non fussi in libertà, nondimeno che sarebbe impossibile avessi avuto un tiranno migliore e più piacevole'.

41. *Del modo di ordinare il governo popolare* ('Discorso di Logrognò'), in Guicciardini 1932, pp. 218–59.

Florentine republic, is the Venetian senate. Venice, which, he says, ‘for so many centuries has preserved the same form of government without ever experiencing seditions or civil discord’ (p. 139), has ‘the best government not only of our own times, but perhaps the best that any city had ever possessed in ancient times, for it has a share of all forms of government, of one, of the few, and of the many, and has moderated them all in such a way as to derive from each of them most of its advantages and avoid most of its disadvantages’ (pp. 138–9). In a veiled critique of Machiavelli’s idealisation of ancient Rome as the ‘perfect republic’, Guicciardini, apparently oblivious of his earlier rejection of the standard classifications of constitutions, shares, in a far more subtle and comprehensive form, the admiration with which some Florentine patricians of the fifteenth century had regarded the mixed constitution of Venice – an admiration which re-emerged after the creation in 1494 of the great council, conceived by Savonarola in imitation of Venice, and which contributed to attempts by the aristocrats, the *ottimati*, first in 1502 and then during the last days of the republic in 1512, to reform the republican constitution by creating a senate (Gilbert 1968, pp. 475–6, 484, repr. 1977, pp. 190–1, 198). Yet Guicciardini, with all his insistence on the divisive role of a political elite – ‘in reality, the entire weight of government (*tutto ’l pondo del governo*) lies, in the end, on the shoulders of very few men, and this was always so in all republics in ancient as in modern times’ (Guicciardini 1932, p. 242) – does not want this elite to be exclusively formed of aristocrats. He condemns oligarchy as leading to oppression and discord (pp. 139–40): what he has in mind is a meritocracy of the wisest and the best citizens who, while not identical with the patricians, would be more likely be found in their ranks than in those of the people (pp. 118–19).

The detailed account of the constitutional arrangements that were to establish and to secure Guicciardini’s ‘well-ordered’ republic (p. 101) reflects a deep-rooted Florentine belief in the political efficacy of institutional reforms and manipulations. Guicciardini shared Machiavelli’s views on the creative force of *ordini*, but they were meant to create, rather than civic virtue and imperial power, good government and internal stability. He too believed that their suitability was historically conditioned: Florence, he writes, was by now an old city, ‘and rather declining than growing’ (*piú presto in declinazione che in augumento*), and hence less capable of being reformed (pp. 81–2, 145). When he began composing the *Dialogo*, at a time when constitutional reforms were being discussed in the city, he had not been without hope that his project of an ideal Florentine

constitution could contribute to republican reform before he reached old age.⁴² By the time he completed this work he seems to have abandoned that hope,⁴³ and a few years later, after the fall in 1530 of the last Florentine republic, under which he had suffered from political persecution, he gave his full and unreserved support to the nascent principate of the Medici.

The *Dialogo* is not only a blueprint for a republican reform of Florence. In his pragmatic insistence on political 'effects' rather than norms, Guicciardini breaks with the traditions of classical political philosophy even more incisively than Machiavelli. His critical analysis of the concepts of liberty and equality, while related to Florence, are meant to have general validity, and the same applies to his observations on the connection between power and violence: 'if one carefully considers their origins', he says of states, 'they are [all] violent, and with the exception of republics, and this only within their boundaries (*nella loro patria*), there is no power whatever which is legitimate' (p. 163). Like Machiavelli, he considers conquest a natural desire 'it is pleasant to make acquisitions' ('lo acquistare è cosa dolce': p. 160), in whose pursuit Christian virtues may not have any place. 'Who nowadays wants to keep dominions and states should, whenever possible, use compassion and goodness, and where this is not possible, it is necessary that he use cruelty and pay scant regard to his conscience.' For 'if one wants' to govern and rule 'in the way it is done today', it is impossible to do so 'according to the precepts of Christian law' (p. 162).⁴⁴

Guicciardini included the observation that power is nearly always founded on violence almost literally in his *Ricordi*. The *Ricordi*, which he collected between 1512 and 1530,⁴⁵ were designed by him to spell out, in the form of general maxims, the quintessence of his public and private experiences in Florence and abroad. Many of them recall the views expressed in the *Dialogo*, others range over a wider area. In a republic, 'only those should govern who are able to do so and deserve it' (C 109), for 'who speaks of a people really speaks of a mad animal which is crammed with a

42. 'E però potrebbe questa fatica mia non riuscire al tutto inutile e venire eziandio, innanzi che io invecchiassi, el tempo suo da publicarsi' (Guicciardini 1932, p. 299; first version of the proem of the *Dialogo*).

43. In the final version of the proem he writes that he had composed the *Dialogo* 'massime . . . per mio piacere e recreazione né con intenzione di publicarlo' (Guicciardini 1932, p. 5).

44. Cf. also *Del modo di ordinare*, in Guicciardini 1932, p. 222: 'Non è altro lo stato e lo imperio che una violenza sopra e' sudditi.'

45. Guicciardini 1951, pp. ixff. The following references to the *Ricordi* are to this edition. Q refers to the collection of 1512, A to *Ricordi* written between 1512 and 1525, B to that of 1528 and C to the final one of 1530. See also Scarano 1980, pp. 89–178 ('Le redazioni dei "Ricordi"').

thousand errors and confusions, without taste, discernment, and stability' (C 140). 'Do not believe those who preach liberty so effectively, because . . . perhaps none of them has anything but his private interests in mind' (C 66). In fact, 'those men conduct their affairs well in this world, who always keep before their eyes their own interests' (C 218). What the 'liberty of republics' (*la libertà delle repubbliche*), according to a maxim written before 1525 (A 119), really means is that it is the 'servant of justice, for it has not been founded for any other purpose than to prevent anyone being oppressed by another'. If one could be certain that justice was observed under the rule of one or a few, 'there would be no reason to desire' that liberty. Indeed, together with republican liberty, princely rule is a major theme of the *Ricordi*, reflecting his experience of Italian politics. Princes do not always conform to the classical norm of being 'established not for their own interest but for the common good' (C 172); in the *Ricordi*, in fact, he calls them often tyrants – unlike Machiavelli in *Il Principe*, he does not avoid the term to describe absolute rulers. There are 'prudent' tyrants, as well as 'bestial and cruel' ones (C 98, 99, 101). Guicciardini is here concerned less with tyranny as such, which he condemns, in one of the earliest *Ricordi* (Q² 23), as being held together 'by the blood of the citizens', than with rules of behaviour to be adopted towards a tyrant. 'To save oneself from a bestial and cruel tyrant', the only effective rule is 'to flee from him as far and as quickly as possible' (C 101). Otherwise it is best to take as one's guide Tacitus, who tells one 'what are the thoughts of tyrants' (C 13) and who 'teaches very well . . . those who live under a tyrant how to live and conduct themselves prudently, just as he teaches tyrants the means of founding a tyranny' (C 18; see Schellhase 1976, pp. 94ff).

The years around 1530 formed a turning point in the history of Florentine political thought. Machiavelli died in 1527, shortly after the last restoration of the republican regime; after its fall in 1530, Guicciardini became a counsellor of Duke Alessandro de' Medici and, after his assassination in 1537, helped Cosimo I to succeed him as duke; he spent his last years writing his greatest work, the *Storia d'Italia*. But Guicciardini's hope of a republican reform, which he had expressed in his *Dialogo del reggimento di Firenze*, was not extinct among Florentine republicans. Shortly after the fall of the last republic, Donato Giannotti combined, in his *Della repubblica fiorentina* (1531–4), a painstaking survey of the evolution of the Florentine constitution with a critical analysis of the shortcomings of the last two republican regimes and with a detailed project of constitutional reform which would create one such regime that would be both stable and

lasting (see Albertini 1955, pp. 146ff). Giannotti began this work while he was confined to his villa near Florence because of his association with the last republic: he had held Machiavelli's former post in the chancery, to which he had been appointed in 1527. The year before, he had written, in Padua, a dialogue *Della repubblica de' Viniziani*, which has been described as representing 'the climax of Florentine political thinking on Venice in the Renaissance period'.⁴⁶ Giannotti may have been motivated by the publication, in 1526, of the *Della repubblica* by Antonio Brucioli, a member of the Orti Oricellari group who had fled from the city after the conspiracy of 1522.⁴⁷ Brucioli draws, in his dialogue, the picture of an ideal republic which is largely modelled on Plato and Aristotle, but intends to deal with those republics only 'which have existed or which could exist', refusing, as Machiavelli and Guicciardini had done, to discuss imaginary ones; some aspects of his scheme evidently refer to Florence, as for example the importance he ascribes to the militia (Brucioli 1982, pp. 101, 120ff; see Cantimori 1937, pp. 95ff). Giannotti, in analysing the Venetian constitution and describing its evolution, claims to be following the example of Aristotle who 'composed special books on all states existing in his time and known to him' (Giannotti 1850, pp. 3–4). Despite all his admiration for the laws and institutions of the Venetian republic and for the 'wise mixture' ('prudentissimo temperamento') of its constitution (p. 17),⁴⁸ he did not set up a model for Florence a city in which the members of the great council were descended from the nobles who, at the city's foundation, 'formed' its 'body' (p. 33). Like Guicciardini, he considers the mixed constitution the most suitable form of government for Florence (Giannotti 1990, I, 5);⁴⁹ but in a city in which there were few nobles (*grandi*) and a large middle class (pp. 98–9), the mixture of constitutional elements should be weighed in favour of the people, and should 'inclinare nel popolo' (III, 3). At the same time, the great council, 'the city's ruler' ('il signore della città') (p. 166), was to be composed of the '*grandi*, the *mediocri*, and the *popolari*', to the exclusion of the plebs (p. 166). Giannotti believed that his mixed constitution, his 'governo ottimamente temperato' (p. 102), was superior to that of Rome as described by Polybius (and, he might have added, by Machiavelli): had the government of Rome been weighted in favour of the

46. Gilbert 1968, p. 490 (repr. 1977, p. 204). On the date of composition see Ridolfi 1942, p. 77.

47. Brucioli 1982, dialogue VI; see Cantimori 1937, pp. 88ff; Albertini 1955, pp. 79–83.

48. For Giannotti's use of the word *temperare* see Giannotti 1990a, III, 2 ('Come si debbe temperare lo stato misto').

49. 'Che Firenze è subietto capacissimo del governo misto'. Cf. III, 4.

people or the senate, she would have avoided civic struggles (III, 2). He visualises his ideal Florentine constitution in the form of a pyramid, whose apex is formed by the Gonfalonier of Justice, its base by the great council, with the senate on the intermediate level (III, 4).⁵⁰ Following Machiavelli's views on military service, and drawing on his own experience during the siege of the city, he considers the civic militia an essential part of the reformed republic (IV, 1). Like Guicciardini, he intends, in his work, 'to deal exclusively with the government' of Florence, and with the 'kind of republic that is suitable' to her (I, 2); but, unlike Guicciardini, who composed his *Dialogo* before the short-lived republican restoration of 1527, he has the advantage, of which he makes ample and detailed use, to subject to critical analysis not only the republican regime of 1494, but also that of 1527, and to single out their defects and shortcomings – an analysis which then serves him as the foundation of his own programme of a well-ordered and stable republican constitution. That he could still hope that such a constitutional reform could be introduced at a time when Alessandro de' Medici was consolidating his absolute authority in Florence under the protection of the emperor contrasts with Guicciardini's diffident attitude towards the realisation of his own reform programme (Guicciardini 1932, pp. 5, 299–300; see above, pp. 61–2). Giannotti's treatise became, in its idealistic optimism, the major intellectual document of the republican exiles, whose hopes of a restoration of the city's ancient liberties and more recent reforms were definitively dashed in 1537 by Cosimo I's victory over them in the battle of Montemurlo.

50. He had used the same metaphor in his description of the Venetian constitution: Giannotti 1850, pp. 37–8.