11. The Italian republics and the oligarchical representative government

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From the mediaeval communes to the oligarchical republics

The rise of the Italian republics at the end of the Middle Ages is directly related to the progressive decline of the feudal system and the rupture of the balance between the papacy and the Empire (see Carol Symes's entry «Mediaeval forms of political representation» in Part I). Between the 11th and 13th centuries, a significant number of old communes in the north of Italy and in Tuscany broke free from the two major political forces of the time and formed political units that claimed possession of their territory, the creation of their own government, a constitution and administrative structures that aimed at making the rising regimes stable. Internally, a significant increase in the population of the communes resulted in both social and political changes (Najemy, 1982, p.5). According to Martines (1988, p.18), the communes were 'a sworn association of free men collectively holding some public authority'.

The most marked feature of Italian history in the 13th and 14th centuries was the appearance of the popular element in the political scene of cities like Florence, Siena and others. The word *popolo* (people) acquired diverse meanings during the Renaissance. In general, it referred to a part of the population that was opposed to the nobility and, from the 14th century on, also to the oligarchies and the nobility, who had dominated life in the cities for many centuries. The popular element was made up of notaries, merchants, rural estate holders and manufacturing owners who would normally be organised under guilds, the essential structures of social and political life in the cities. Besides the nobility, the oligarchy and the *popolo*, there was also the *popolino* or *popolo minuto* made up of daily or wage workers and members of lesser guilds. The power of the popular element derived from the strength of the number of its members in the legislative councils and assemblies, as well as from its militias, which allowed it to fight the nobles' forces in the 13th century (Martines, 1988, p.52). Martines (1979, p.47) states that: 'first among the *popolo*'s demands was the call for direct representation in the commune's political councils'. Over the centuries, the composition of the *popolo* varied, but it never included citizens from all sectors of society (Jones, 2010, p.7). Guilds, neighbourhood associations, interest groups and neighbour groups, factions like *guelfi and ghibellini* (guelfs and ghibellines), otherwise separated, were very often united for a claim (Martines, 1988, p.67). The struggle for power between the various components of the regime continued over time and often resulted in violent conflicts between parts of the commune.

In each of the communes where the republican regime prevailed at some point during the Renaissance – Florence, Venice, Lucca, Siena, Genoa, Bologna, Perugia – a complex power system developed. In many of them, particularly in Florence and Venice, a large council of elected members, which might have up to 400 members, ensured the participation to an important part of the eligible citizens, which was hardly ever more than 1,000 citizens. In the late 15th century, the constitution of the *consiglio maggiore* (great council) served as a reference to classify the regime. A *governo largo* (broad government) admitted a greater number of citizens into its decision-making ranks. The extended participation of the eligible citizens in the public arena indicated the existence of a regime with a more popular character. Opposed to it was the *governo stretto* (narrow government), of an oligarchical character, that sought to reduce the participation of less favoured social strata in the political life of the cities. At the centre of the communes' decision-making was generally an organisation with about ten members elected for short tenures who effectively governed the cities. In Siena, between 1287 and 1355, the *concistoro* (consistory) was made up of nine members who stayed in power for two months (Martines, 1988, p.153). In the circles of the regime situated within the decision-making centre, which might be guided by a *Gonfaloniere* of Justice, or a *Doge* and the great councils, there were small council groups that dealt with fiscal and judicial problems, with war and with the regulation of maritime trade. As summarised by Martines (1988, p.149): 'small powerful councils were the most enduring and characteristic institution of the republican system of oligarchy'.

In this context, Najemy (1982, p.3) points out: 'The election of officeholders in Italian communes of the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance was one of the central and defining moments of the complex evolution of the small but politically creative communities'. Full citizenship was a title for the few and usually required long-term residence in the city, affiliation to an important guild, and having contributed to the public treasury for a few years (Martines, 1988, p.67). In Venice, for example, around 1350, about forty families or clans occupied the main positions in the republic. Regarding the restrictive character of power in the Italian republics in the Renaissance, the mechanisms of representation and participation in public life underwent a noticeable development, exerting influence from the implementation of complex ballot mechanisms to the government institutions, which made up the 'art of governing' as it was understood at that time (Senellart, 1995). The process of formation and the growth of the republics was initially marked by much experimentation and fierce fights between the *popolo* and the nobility and between the *popolo* and the new oligarchy that gradually took the place of the nobility in the Italian cities.

Florence

The history of Florence between the 13th and 16th centuries illustrates perfectly the various stages ranging from the rise of independent communes in the 12th century to the consolidation of the principality as the dominant regime in Italy in the first half of the 16th century. In 1293, Florence proclaimed the 'Ordinances of Justice'. Among other measures, the nobles or the wealthy were banned from public life. Century-long disputes and violent conflicts started between the parties that sought power in a climate of permanent instability. In Florence, the participation of the *popolo* grew on some occasions. Bologna and Perugia watched a steady oscillation between a republican and a lordship or signorial regime over decades.

During the 14th century, the Italian communes were the stages for numerous popular revolts: Lucca in 1369, Siena in 1371, Perugia in 1370–1371 and 1375, to mention just a few. The most famous one was that of Florence in 1378, which became known as the *Ciompi* Revolt. For six weeks, from 22nd July to 31st August, the workers from lesser guilds, daily workers and other members of the *popolo minuto* participated directly in the government. Their main aim was not to bring down the regime but to expand those eligible for the *Signoria* (the government central institution), the councils and the special commissions, established from time to time to deal with specific issues (Brucker, 1981, p.51). It was not a workers' regime, as some historians claimed, but a movement for opening up the government to the poorer levels of the population. The executive authority was conferred on a *balia* (special commission) with 130 members from strata that, until then, had had little participation in public life. The *Ciompi* regime did not last, but it gave rise to the *regime of arts* between 1378 and 1382. New citizens recruited from the new guilds participated in it, as well as members of the dominant classes, who at one time aligned with the *popolo* and at another acted to defend their more immediate interests.

The most democratic period of Florence's communal life came to an end in January 1382. Members of the most powerful guilds, in association with international traders and members of the lesser arts, totalling five thousand candidates, chose eighty citizens to head the government. Until 1387, craftsmen still had some power in the government structure, but they gradually lost it. The change towards the consolidation of the oligarchical republic had already happened and marked the following century of the Italian republic regimes. However, until 1411, the structure of the Florentine Republic did not change significantly. The councils, the ballot and legislative processes remained identical to those in place in 1382, but the effective participation of the members of the lesser arts and of craftsmen was inexorably reduced. Of the almost 5,000 eligible citizens, most never occupied a powerful position, despite the short duration of tenures. The regime that appeared in Florence in the late 14th century was definitely oligarchical (Brucker, 1981, pp.294–296). The old families dominated political life. Sometimes they aligned with the *popolo* citizens in their disputes with other families, but the power circle was restricted to the extent that after 1434, when the Medici family became dominant in the public scene of the city, it pointed to a principality regime that would only be fully consolidated in the next century. The Florentine oligarchy, like those of other Italian cities at the time, stood out for holding

the largest number of political and administrative positions, for being consulted on the gravest affairs and for dominating the *balie*, which decided the measures the city should take when wars broke out. The 15th century was the era of the oligarchical republics.

The political thought of the Italian Humanists and the representation issue

The publication of works by Hans Baron (1966) and Eugenio Garin (1986) contributed to attracting attention to a number of texts that dealt with the transformation of Italian political thought regarding the participation and representation issue. Baron defended the thesis that the fight between Florence and Milan in the early 15th century was decisive for the birth of a republican ideal founded at the same time on the rescuing of the Roman republican values (see Heather Duncan's entry «Roman forms of political representation» in Part I) and on the understanding of the new conditions that determined the political life of the new times. Among other themes, the value given to an active life in contrast to the model of the contemplative life defended by mediaeval authors was essential for raising awareness of the importance of participating in public life and of the mechanisms of representation of the various political and administrative institutions of the Renaissance republics. Garin (1986, p.36) showed that the Humanists' writings aimed to form an integral man to whom community life and political life were essential.

The works by the authors mentioned above authors gave rise to a rich investigation of political culture in the 15th century. Over the years, interpretations that diverged, especially from Baron's thesis (Hankins, 2000), appeared. Some scholars showed that the idea that Civic Humanism was born from the crises resulting from the wars between Florence and Milan excludes other equally important crises in the history of Florence, which weakens the thesis of the birth of a new set of republican ideas in the early years of the 15th century (Brucker, 1981). The existence of a rich political and judicial thought in the previous centuries in Italy, which is at the origin of Humanism in the 15th century, has also been pointed out (Skinner, 1978). In another direction, some authors also stated that the Humanists' appeal to civic values had a markedly moral and rhetorical character rather than being fundamentally political, as Baron claimed (Hankins, 2019). As a result of the intense debates between scholars of the Renaissance, we presently have a vast knowledge of this period. This allows for understanding the complexity of the most important intellectual movement of that time and the impact it had on the lives of the oligarchical republics in the 15th century.

The Italian Humanists dedicated themselves to various disciplines and contributed to the diffusion of a new culture through *studia humanitatis* (studies of humanity), made up of the study of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and morals. Many of them were clerks in the republics. Others worked for the Church, princes and even monarchs, such as Aurelio Lippo Brandolini (1454–1497) (Hankins, 2019, p.374). Politics had a central place in the writings of men like Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), who was Florence's chancellor between 1375 and 1406, or his disciple, Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444), even though we still find a variety of themes in their writings, among which moral and behavioural issues stand out. Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) was an example of a life lived mostly at the papal court. His best known treatise is *De Avaritia* (On Avarice) (Bracciolini, 1976. It criticised the corruption in the Church and demonstrated the compatibility of Christian ethics and the world of mundane businesses (Garin, pp.54–57). With this, the Humanists provided new perspectives to reconcile the Roman and Christian heritage with an emerging world based on international trade, manufacture and the circulation of capital.

A paradigmatic text of the Renaissance republican thought is *Laudatio florentinae urbis* (Panegyric to the City of Florence) by Leonardo Bruni ([1403] 1978). Faced with the concerns of the typical problems of mediaeval philosophy, Bruni felt free to offer a broad view of life in his city, according to the model suggested by the masters of Antiquity. Bruni's work also agreed with a series of 'eulogies' written during the Middle Ages, such as *De magnalibus urbis mediolani* (Of the Nobles of the City of Milan) by Bonvesino della Riva, written in 1288 to pay homage to Milan. However, his text reaches further. In mediaeval *laudes civitatum* (praises of cities), the authors limited themselves to listing names, dates and facts, which served to present readers with the main characteristics of

a given city. With the Italian authors of the Renaissance, Bruni in particular, this literary genre acquired a decisive political and historical significance. Inspired in part by examples from ancient Greece, Italian thinkers described in rhetorical tones an ideal and idealised city, which served to emphasise the links between the city and its citizens at the same time that it recovered its most important historical moments and created the political identity of the city.

For our purposes, Bruni's last part is the most important, particularly if we take into account that it was preceded by the conceptual transformations we have mentioned. Bruni ([1403] 1978, p.169) starts by talking about the harmony that dominated the city as a whole which elicited pleasure in those who admired it. However, for him, it is the centrality of liberty and justice that is the true core of the institutions. Remembering the two principles as fundamental to the republican regime is not novel. In the 14th century, masters in the *Ars Dictaminis*, specialists in writing public letters, already considered liberty as an organising principle of independent communes (Skinner, 1978, pp.28–32). The independence defended by Bruni, however, is different in nature from that desired by the communes in the 13th century. It does not admit the protection of principles and agents foreign to the city itself. Not being bound to the empire, the city is fully responsible for its institutions, since injustices that may come into being cannot be amended by an agent higher than the city institutions.

Bruni shows how the harmony of the city manifests itself in well-balanced institutions. His description of the institutional mechanisms of Florence is a perfect summary of how the republic should be organised. According to Bruni ([1403] 1978, p.169):

> First of all, the chief magistracy that is commonly viewed as possessing the sovereignty of the state is controlled by a system of checks and balances. Hence, there are nine magistrates instead of one, and their term is for two months, not for one year. This method of governing has been devised so that the Florentine state may be well governed, since a majority will correct any errors in judgement, and the short terms of office will curb any possible insolence. Moreover, the city is divided into four quarters so that each section can never lack its own representative, and from each quarter, two men are elected. And these men are not chosen by chance, but they have had the approval of the citizens for a long time and are judged worthy of such a great honour.

Bruni's text synthesises the heritage of the previous centuries regarding the structures of representation and government at the same time that it innovates by incorporating themes and ideas developed by the Humanists. Writings such as those by Bruni, by Matteo Palmieri (1406–1475) – *Della vita civile* (Of Civil Life) (1431–1438) – or by Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) – *Della famiglia* (Of the Family) (1433–1438) – are idealisations that did not always correspond to the reality lived by republican citizens. Bruni shows in a text written in Greek in 1439 – *Costituzione fiorentina* (Florentine Constitution) – that he understands that the oligarchical regime had lost its most democratic features, as the Medici dominated public life from 1434 onwards and that it was headed towards a lordship regime. Hankins (2019, p.98) is right to assert that: 'Civic Humanism was inevitably an expression of political ideals, not a description of practice'. However, it is necessary to observe that the writings of the Humanists, with their idealist character, served as a tool to critique important aspects of the reality of their time for the participants of the public scene. At the same time that they proposed ideal models, the writings of the Humanists were an essential element of the constitution of Renaissance political language (Gilbert, 1965).

A demonstration of this thesis is found in *Consulte e Pratiche della Repubblica Fiorentina* (Consultations and Practices of the Florentine Republic) (Fachard, 1993, pp.986–997). These were gatherings organised to assist the main government agencies in difficult times. In these gatherings, notable citizens or representatives of political or professional groups were summoned to give their opinion on urgent issues and participate in the decision-making process, which many times dealt with problems connected to the city's survival. Beside common places of the political culture of the time, they also reflected on the Humanist civic culture and forged a new political reflection. Taking as an example a practice carried out in Florence on 5 July, 1502, we come across speeches where the problem of the institutional ordinance and the workings of government were central to the discussions. On that day, the problem of how to best govern was the main agenda. Since the

expulsion of the Medici in 1494 and the return to the republic in the form of a *governo largo*, the discussion on the nature of the regime to be adopted was the ground on which the power struggle took place. Therefore, it is not surprising that on that day, Bernardo Rucellai, an important representative of the oligarchy, took the floor to defend the reformation of the republic and suggest the government of Venice as a model to be followed. Being a central figure of the social group that identified itself as the *ottimati* (optimates), he did not wish for the return of the rulers, the Medici, but saw in the Venetian form of government an effective way to return power to the oligarchs and at the same time preserve the republican form as a reference. In this debate on the form of government, Humanism provided the central operators and pointed to liberty and citizen participation as an axis of the whole republic. Breaking away from this conceptual paradigm meant refusing the republic and choosing a form of government that could only be tyrannical. This was the common ground of discussion from which not even the *ottimati* leaders departed. However, various interpretations of the republican principles fit within this mould. It was around them that the political struggle took place. Civic Humanism was not the only theoretical operator of the debates, but it is undeniable that it played an important role in choosing the best institutions to face a crisis that threatened the survival of the city (Fachard, 1993, pp.816–818).

The myth of Venice

The history of the Republic of Venice was rather peculiar. It served as an inspiration for many Italian republics. The geographic location of the city made it free from external influences before most of the Italian republics. Since 1297, the Great Council was restricted to the original citizens (*cittadini originari*), who belonged to a relatively large group of city inhabitants. As confirmed by Bouwsma (1968, p.61), 'its electoral responsibilities were carefully protected by a series of laws in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which intended to guarantee Venice against degeneration into a narrow oligarchy'. As all the members of the city elite older than 25 could participate in the weekly Council meetings, which corresponded to ten percent of the population, the city adopted various levels of decision-making. The Senate, made up of 300 members, handled foreign policy and citizen taxation and chose who participated in the various commissions that followed the example of the Council of Ten. This council dealt with urgent and extraordinary problems and acute crises and was not intended to be permanent. Its restricted character allowed it to overlap, in many cases, with the traditional bodies of the Republic of Venice. At the top of the constitutional pyramid was the *Doge*, who represented the sovereignty of the Venetians (Bouwsma, 1968, p.62). To foreign eyes, Venice's regime identified itself with the mixed constitution. The Great Council represented the popular element, the Senate and the councils and the aristocracy; the *Doge*, the monarchy.

During the 15th century, the new translations of Aristotle's works by Leonardo Bruni and Plato's *Laws* (1450) by George of Trebizond contributed to the discussion on the nature of the political regimes, particularly the mixed constitution, in various instances of Italian political life. The publication of the work by Pier Paolo Vergerio, *De Republica Veneta* (Of the Venetian Republic) (1400–1403), helped forge what Gaille-Nikodimov (2005, p.54) called the Venetian example-concept. In the acute crisis that hit the Italian republics, resorting to it in political and theoretical debate became stronger in the early 16th century. Machiavelli (1469–1527) was practically the only one person criticised the Venetian model for its oligarchical character, which was close to the Spartan one; he preferred the Roman example, which pointed to a popular regime that he preferred (Machiavelli, ([1516] 1996, pp.74–75). Authors like Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540) in Florence and Gasparo Contarini (1483–1542) in Venice strengthened the aristocratic aspect of the city's constitution as a foundation of its stability. Nevertheless, it was Donato Giannotti (1492–1573), in his work *Della repubblica de' Veneziani* (Of the Republic of the Venetians) (1526–1527), who contributed to spreading a deeper understanding of the Venetian institutions and their electoral and representation mechanisms (Gaille-Nikodimov, 2005, p.52). He pointed out that the Venetian example serves to show that the working of the Venetian institutional set, in which the aristocratic element predominates, stands out more for the fact that it is able to allow the expression of the desires of

the constituting parts of the city rather than for its mixed constitution (Giannotti, 1974, p.54). For him, internal peace and the balance of the parts depend fundamentally on the proper working of the institutions (Giannotti, 1974, p.52).

Conclusion

The 16th century marked the end of the era of the Italian oligarchical republics and their mechanisms of representation and participation (Albertini, 1970). Florence definitively succumbed in 1530 and became a principality. Before that, the cities of Lucca and Siena had suffered the effects of the new times. Venice and Genoa (from 1528 on) resisted as republics, but their political scenes became more similar to those of a principality. Modernity harvested the fruits of that period where liberty, representation and autonomy were at the heart of political life.

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