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Journal

California Italian Studies, 4(2)

Author

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Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/C342015903

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**“Vox Populi”:
Machiavelli, *Opinione*, and the *Popolo*, from *Il Principe* to the *Istorie
Fiorentine*”***

Albert Russell Ascoli

Ma quanto alla prudenzia ed alla stabilità, dico, come un popolo è più prudente, più stabile e di migliore giudizio che un principe. E non senza cagione si assomiglia la voce d'un popolo a quella di Dio: perché si vede una opinione universale fare effetti maravigliosi ne' pronostichi suoi; talché pare che per occulta virtù ei prevegga il suo male ed il suo bene. (*Discorsi* I.58)¹

In a famous passage from the dedicatory letter to the *Principe*, which we will analyze in detail shortly, Machiavelli paradoxically authorizes himself as an expert concerning the high and the mighty by claiming to speak with “the voice of the people.” On the face of it the *Principe* contains one lesson after another in how a “virtuous” leader can manipulate and control the populace to his own ends. On the other hand, from shortly after the composition of the treatise, readers have asserted that Machiavelli is secretly, ironically, allegorically, expressing opinions that place him on the side of the “popolo” against the repressive regimes of such as Cesare Borgia and Julius II. Rather than taking sides in this still unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, debate, I will argue here that the *Principe*, in the letter to Lorenzo and throughout, delineates the problematic nature of Machiavelli’s relationship to the “people”—and with it the unstable contours of his “subject position” as opinionated commentator on politics and history—posing questions which will continue to haunt his writings from the near contemporary *Discorsi* to his final masterpiece, the *Istorie Fiorentine*.

This essay brings together four crucial strands of Machiavelli criticism—the literary-rhetorical analysis of Machiavelli’s discursive strategies,² and particularly his implicit and explicit dramatizations of his own stance in relation to his supposed audiences (whether the Medici family “princes”;³ personal interlocutors such as Francesco Vettori or Francesco Guicciardini;⁴ the tendentially anti-Medicean elite that frequented the Orti Oricellari;⁵ or “the people” more broadly

* This essay was first delivered as a talk at a conference organized by Judith Froemmer and Angela Oester at the Center for Advanced Studies of Ludwig-Maximilians Universität in Munich on the topic “Textures of Power: 500 years of *Il Principe*,” April 14-16, 2011. It will also appear in German translation in a volume edited by Professors Froemmer and Oester. For helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this essay, I thank Gene Brucker, Judith Froemmer, Timothy Hampton, Kinch Hoekstra, Victoria Kahn, John Najemy, Manuel Rota, Brenda Schildgen, Randolph Starn, Hannah Wojciehowski, and Gianfrancesco Zanetti.

¹ This and all following quotations from the works of Machiavelli are taken from Machiavelli 1971.

² See, for instance, Raimondi 1972; Bàrberi Squarotti 1987; Rebhorn 1988 and 2010; Harriman 1989; Hampton 1990; Struvever 1992: ch. 6; Najemy 1993a, 1993b, and 1995; Ascoli and Kahn 1993; Marchand ed. 1996; Cox 1997 and 2010; Sullivan 2000; Quint 2003; Hörnqvist 2005; Ascoli and Capodivacca 2010.

³ As is explicitly the case in *Il Principe* and the *Istorie Fiorentine*, at least according to their dedications.

⁴ See, notably, Najemy 1993a on the epistolary dialogue with Vettori as the catalyst for the writing of *Il Principe*.

⁵ In which the dedicatees of the *Discorsi* participated. On Machiavelli and the Orti Oricellari of the Rucellai family, see F. Gilbert 1949; Dionisotti 1971, 137-153; Martinez 2000, esp. 103-105.

construed⁶); the philological analysis of Machiavelli's technical vocabulary (in this case, particularly, the words "popolo" and "opinione");⁷ the ideological analysis of his political investments (ranging, in critical interpretations, from tyranny to democracy);⁸ and, finally, in some sense gathering together all of the preceding, the question of Machiavelli's relationship to "the modern."⁹

Specifically, I will examine the different and evolving ways in which Machiavelli deploys the concepts of the "people" and of "opinion" in the sequence of works leading from *Il Principe* to the *Discorsi* to the *Istorie Fiorentine*. I do this, however, not in order to refine our already wide-ranging (not to say mutually contradictory) understandings of what exactly Machiavelli means when he speaks of the "people," or to add "opinion" to the lengthening list of key concepts through which we attempt to assign him a specific significance and value in the history of political thought in the West (although I will note that his use of the latter word at times bears a suggestive resemblance with a difference to the Habermasian notion of emergent "public opinion"). Rather, I look to these words and especially to certain key passages in which they are deployed as a means of interpreting the complexities of the various rhetorical stances adopted by Machiavelli in these three works. In particular, I will focus on his self-staging as opinionated political subject, one who at times advocates the manipulation of the masses through fear of violence, or religious belief, and at others celebrates the people's capacity for thoughtful political deliberation, exceeding the wisdom of the Prince himself.

I will argue that Machiavelli's much vaunted "modernity" may be as easily understood, perhaps even more so, in terms of his discursive stance and implied self-definition as reflective "political subject" than in those of definite content or coherent ideological preference, be it princely pragmatics or "popularizing" Republican *virtù*.¹⁰ Indeed, this stance leads him time and again to a double and conflicted identification both with the masterful, "virtuosic" individuality of the Prince and with the anonymous aspirations and wisdom of "the people," yearning to be free, while learning under the oppression of the "grandi." In the end I will claim that Machiavelli is the

⁶ This position, patently anachronistic though it may be, is intrinsic to the line of thought which sees *Il Principe* as written to instruct the people in the ways and wiles of princes (see n. 15). This claim is not really compatible with the associated explanation that such instructions are delivered cryptically, requiring sophisticated interpretive techniques, typical of an intellectual elite, much less with the history of the treatise's circulation, exclusively in unpublished form, during Machiavelli's lifetime (on that circulation, see Richardson 1995; it is, of course, true that in 1522 Agostino Nifo published a Latin work, *De Regnandi Peritia*, which included translations of much of *Il Principe* into Latin, without attribution to M.).

⁷ Important examples of this type of analysis are to be found in Chiappelli 1952; Chabod 1967; Whitfield 1969: ch. 8 (on "ordini"); Ferroni 1972 (on "mutazione" and "riscontro"); Viroli 1990 (on "politico"); Najemy 1978 and 1995; several of the essays collected in Fontana 2004; not to mention the innumerable discussions of such individual key words as "virtù" and "fortuna." "Popolo," as Najemy observes, is one of the most common words in Machiavelli's political vocabulary (2010, 101). As we will see, "opinione," though considerably less common, and less conceptually central, makes a number of crucial appearances (see also nn. 22 and 62). As will be seen, "popolo" has been treated by various scholars, though to different ends than mine, while, as far as I can tell, "opinione" has not.

⁸ On Machiavelli and tyranny see Strauss 1958, Mansfield 1966 and 1979; On Machiavelli and Republicanism see Pocock 1975 and 2010; Skinner 1978, vol. 1, esp. ch. 6, and 1981; Bock, Skinner and Viroli 1990; Najemy, e.g., 1996 and 2010; on Machiavelli and democracy, Hulliung 1983 and, more radically, McCormick 2011.

⁹ It would be folly to attempt to list the many, many versions of Machiavelli's modernity which have been advanced: as historian, as political "scientist," as secular thinker, as "republican," as proto-fascist. I will content myself with referring to three particularly influential versions, namely those of Strauss (1958), Arendt (1968, esp. 136-141), and Pocock (1975).

¹⁰ My emphasis on process as against the specification of ideological content is similar to that of Struever (1992) and Kahn (1994, esp. chs. 1-2). See also Harriman 1989.

“subject of his own discourse,” in the sense that, like Montaigne,¹¹ he intermittently suspends the relation of his language to any externalizable and objectified truth, and focuses attention instead on the contingencies, both the limitations and the special powers, of his individual experience and understanding.

I. Il principe

I begin with a very famous passage from the dedicatory letter in *Il Principe*, in which Machiavelli stakes his claim to the attention of the Medici family (Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino, in the first instance), in terms that at once set himself far below his lordly interlocutor and make the very lowliness of his status the “grounds” for perspective on principedom that the prince himself cannot possess:

Né voglio sia reputata presunzione, se uno uomo di basso et infimo stato ardisce discorrere e regolare e' governi de' principi; perché, così come coloro che disegnano e' paesi si pongono bassi nel piano a considerare la natura de' monti e de' luoghi alti, e per considerare quella de' bassi si pongono alti sopra e' monti, similmente, a conoscere bene la natura de' *populi*, bisogna essere principe, e a conoscere bene quella de' principi bisogna essere *populare*. (emphasis mine)

This passage is richly anticipatory of Machiavelli's complex representation and interpellation of the Prince, and especially of his own proposed relationship of privy counselor to the Medici,¹² and it lends itself to variety of interpretations. It anticipates, for instance, the systematic creation of complementary pairs (most notably, impetuosity and prudence, force and fraud, lion and fox), which are sometimes figured as conjoined in a single princely individual, and sometimes imply the need for a supplement, implicitly Machiavelli himself, to that ruler. It implies, furthermore, the risk Machiavelli runs in making himself a candidate for such a role, since, in particular, its apparently innocuous use of the metaphor of visual representation (“disegnano”) anticipates the description of the Prince's primary vocation in the “arte della guerra,” especially the following passage on the need for geographical knowledge:

Debbe, pertanto, mai levare el pensiero da questo esercizio della guerra, e nella pace vi si debbe più esercitare che nella guerra. . . .

¹¹ I refer of course to the famous address to the reader at the beginning of the *Essais*. On this specific point see Ascoli 2007, 445. For the comparability of Machiavelli and Montaigne in “speaking from their private perspectives” about public matters, see the brief remarks of Struever 1992, 145-146. Mansfield, following Leo Strauss, defines “Machiavelli as the principal character of his own thought” (1966, ix), but his claim is that Machiavelli casts himself as a prince or prophet conducting an all-out war upon classical ethics and Christian religion, a point very different from mine (see also n. 42).

¹² On Machiavelli as counselor in *Il Principe*, see Struever 1992, esp. 164-170; Ascoli 1993; cf. Raimondi 1972, 265-286.

E . . . debbe . . . imparare la natura de' siti, e conoscere come surgono e' monti, come imboccano le valle, come iacciono e' piani, ed intendere la natura de' fiumi e de' paduli, e in questo porre grandissima cura. La quale cognizione è utile . . . , [perché] si impara a conoscere el suo paese, e può meglio intendere le difese di esso; di poi, mediante la cognizione e pratica di quelli siti, con facilità comprendere ogni altro sito che di nuovo li sia necessario speculare. (Ch. 14)

More to the point of the present essay, the dedicatory letter here establishes a hierarchical relationship of opposition and complementarity between the Prince and the “popolo,” to which Machiavelli here claims to belong. The importance of that relationship will be thematized later on, when Machiavelli suggests that the Prince is far safer in allying himself with the “popolo” than with the “grandi,” the wealthy and powerful aristocrats who themselves have pretensions to active domination:

dico che si ascende a questo principato o con il favore del popolo o con quello de' grandi. Perché in ogni città si trovano questi dua umori diversi; e nasce da questo, che il popolo desidera non essere comandato né oppresso da' grandi, e li grandi desiderano comandare et opprimere il popolo . . .¹³

El principato è causato o dal popolo o da' grandi, secondo che l'una o l'altra di queste parti ne ha la occasione. Perché, vedendo e' grandi non potere resistere al popolo, cominciano a voltare la reputazione a uno di loro, e fannolo principe per potere, sotto la sua ombra, sfogare il loro appetito. El popolo ancora, vedendo non potere resistere a' grandi, volta la reputazione a uno, e lo fa principe, per essere con la autorità sua difeso. Colui che viene al principato con lo aiuto de' grandi, si mantiene con più difficoltà che quello che diventa con lo aiuto del popolo; perché si truova principe con di molti intorno che li paiano essere sua equali, e per questo non li può né comandare né maneggiare a suo modo. Ma colui che arriva al principato con il favore popolare, vi si trova solo, et ha intorno o nessuno o pochissimi che non sieno parati a obedire. Oltre a questo, non si può con onestà soddisfare a' grandi e senza iniuria d'altri, ma sì bene al popolo: perché quello del popolo è più onesto fine che quello de' grandi, volendo questi opprimere, e quello non essere oppresso. (Ch. 9)

In other words, Machiavelli explicitly argues for a natural alliance of convenience between Prince and “popolo,” which seems to confirm the initial relationship he proposes between himself and Lorenzo. On the other hand, it has been often argued that Machiavelli's identification with the “popolo” and his apparent preference for their desire “not to be oppressed” over the oppressive

¹³ Cf. *Discorsi* I.4: “E i desiderii de' popoli liberi rade volte sono perniziosi alla libertà, perché e' nascono, o da essere oppressi, o da suspizione di avere ad essere oppressi. E quando queste opinioni fossero false, e' vi è il rimedio delle concioni, che surga qualche uomo da bene, che, orando, dimostri loro come ei s'ingannano: e li popoli, come dice Tullio, benché siano ignoranti sono capaci della verità, e facilmente cedano, quando da uomo degno di fede è detto loro il vero.” A similar idea appears in the *Istorie Fiorentine*: “volendo il popolo vivere secondo le leggi, e i potenti comandare a quelle, non è possibile cappino insieme” (bk. II, ch. 12).

“grandi” reveals his republican preferences,¹⁴ and may even betray a subversive desire to unveil the mechanisms of power so that the “popolo” can resist domination not only by the “grandi” but by “il principe” himself.¹⁵

One thing it would be hard to claim, however, is that Machiavelli ever gives, in *Il Principe* (or, for that matter, in the *Discorsi*), a particularly clear or precise definition of who or what the “popolo” really is.¹⁶ They are defined by their inevitable conflict with the “grandi,” by their lack of desire to oppress and their susceptibility to oppression, and, at times, by their credulity and fickleness.¹⁷ Although their conflict with the “grandi” could be seen as an incipient form of class warfare, no elaborate social or economic characterization backs up the use of the word. Never, after the dedicatory letter, are they assigned the attributes of perspectival insight that Machiavelli claims for himself, nor, on the whole does he ever again in the course of the treatise identify himself specifically with the “vox populi.” In fact, the dynamic unfolding of that treatise is governed to a considerable extent by Machiavelli’s staging of his attempt to bridge the distance between himself and the Medici, to enter, once again, as he had before his exclusion from politics in 1512, into the precincts of power as privileged dispenser of counsel.¹⁸

¹⁴ The relationship of the “popolo” to the “grandi,” in Rome as in Florence, is of course a key topic in Machiavelli studies generally. A succinct and powerful account, emphasizing the *Discorsi*, is in Najemy 2010, 102-109. See also n. 16. For an interesting modern historical perspective on the “crowd” or “populus” in ancient Rome, see Millar 1998.

¹⁵ For a succinct review of some of the key figures associated with this position from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, from Gentili to Rousseau, see Kahn 2010. In modern Italy the most influential versions of this argument are those of Alfieri, Foscolo and Gramsci. Mattingly (1958) stands at the head of a line of more recent scholars who favor reading the treatise in this way, while Strauss (1958, e.g. 47-48) offers a more sinister version of Machiavelli’s recourse to “covert” modes of signification. See again n. 6.

¹⁶ I would not go so far as Chabod (1964, 58-60) does in claiming that the “popolo” has no role at all in *Il Principe*, nor as do Benner (2009, 441-450) and, even more so, McCormick (2011, 22-24) in making the opposite case. On the complexities of the category of the “popolo” in Florentine politics and society, see Najemy 1991 and esp. 2006, 35-39 et passim. See also Brown 1992, on the evolving role, and successive redefinitions of the “popolo” in Florence. As will be seen, the nature of “popolo” is given much more specific and complexly differentiated definition in the *Istorie Fiorentine* (see Cabrini 1990; Bock 1990; cf. Mansfield 1972). On the complexity and even confusion in M’s account of the “popolo” in relation to other groupings throughout his work, see Pitkin 1984, 84-90. See also nn. 13, 14, 17, 27-29, 44, 55-56, 62.

¹⁷ The first two attributes are illustrated in the quotation given above. The last in the following passage from chapter 3: “Per queste cagioni Luigi XII re di Francia occupò subito Milano, e subito lo perdé; e bastò a torgnene, la prima volta, le forze proprie di Lodovico; perché quelli populi che gli aveano aperte le porte, trovandosi ingannati della opinione loro e di quello futuro bene che si avevano presupposto, non potevano sopportare e’ fastidii del nuovo principe”; and in this one from chapter 6: “la natura de’ populi è varia; ed è facile a persuadere loro una cosa, ma è difficile fermarli in quella persuasione; e però conviene essere ordinato in modo che, quando e’ non credono più, si possa fare loro credere per forza.”

¹⁸ On Machiavelli as “counselor” in *Il Principe*, see Struever 1992; 164-170; Ascoli 1993. Even if one believes that the treatise systematically inverts or subverts the advice offered to the Medici, or the “Prince” in the abstract, it can hardly be claimed that, at the letter, it is not either offering or pretending to offer such advice. On the treatise’s relationship to the genre of “Mirror for Princes,” see the classic essays of A. Gilbert (1938) and F. Gilbert (1939), and the interesting revisitation of the question in Harriman 1989.

II. I discorsi

Let us now turn to the *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio*, where, I believe, Machiavelli significantly develops and redefines not only the matter that he is studying and, perhaps, his political values, but also his “subject position” as historical, social, and political thinker, with, once more, the category of the “popolo” playing a key yet in some ways quite ambiguous role. As before, I begin with a look at the dedicatory letter to the work, which makes plain that there will be a shift away from the paradigm of “privy counsel” informing *Il Principe*. With this change in discursive modalities comes a significant alteration of Machiavelli’s “subject position” within the text. The dedication constitutes a virtual palinode of the corresponding letter introducing *Il Principe* (and thus represents a strong indicator that, whatever the exact times of composition, Machiavelli meant the *Discorsi* to be taken as the later and more mature version of his thought).¹⁹

In this Dedication Machiavelli explicitly renounces an intimate and proactive relationship to the prince, and with it the model of writing as direct political action:

[M]i pare essere uscito fuori dell’uso comune di coloro che scrivono, i quali sogliono sempre le loro opere a qualche principe indirizzare; e, accecati dall’ambizione e dall’avarizia, laudano quello di tutte le virtuose qualitatì, quando da ogni vituperevole parte dovrebbero biasimarlo.

Now the interlocutors are plural; they are his friends (“le cose degli amici”) not his masters; and rather than real princes they are “quelli che, per le infinite buone parti loro, meriterebbono di essere [principi].” Given our historical knowledge of the Orti Oricellari group to which Machiavelli and his young friends all belonged,²⁰ it is tempting to see the Dedication as representing the reflection of a conversation within an intellectual, and in part social, elite, a “conversazione civile” like that so often portrayed—accurately or not—in the humanistic dialogues of the Quattrocento.²¹ In any case, this Machiavelli is by no means the “popolare” of the Dedication to Lorenzo: whatever his own class affiliation might be, he is certainly at home with men who would fall into the class of “grandi” in a larger sense.

¹⁹ Ascoli 1993, 201-203; Najemy 2010, 96-102. On the issue of the relative dating of the works more specifically, see Baron 1956 and 1961 and Najemy 1996. See also F. Gilbert 1953; Sasso 1993a, esp. 349-364; Ridolfi 1969, 1.233-242 and 2.488-490; Larivaille 1982; Bausi 2005, chs. 5-6 passim. I find most of the more complex attempts to establish a chronology of composition unconvincing, and would add that the palinodic quality of the dedicatory letter does not necessarily imply real-time succession in writing.

²⁰ See again n. 5.

²¹ On the vexed question of Machiavelli and “civic humanism” see, for instance, Najemy’s exceptionally fine analysis of the difficulties that Machiavelli presented for the Baron thesis concerning Brunian republicanism (1956, 1961), particularly M.’s implicit and, in the Proemio to the *Istorie Fiorentine* explicit, critique of the elitism of Bruni and company and their complicity in the ascendance of the Medici (Najemy 1996). For Najemy it is in fact Machiavelli who represents the more clear-eyed and thorough-going Republicanism—and in this sense his position is compatible by the ongoing critique of the idealization of Bruni as civic humanist by Hankins (esp. 1995) and others. For a different view of the matter, see Brown 1992, for whom the Florence of Machiavelli and Guicciardini has left far behind its claim to a social order analogous to that of Republican Rome. See also Sasso 1993a, 488-492 et passim; F. Gilbert 1965; Skinner 1978, vol. 1, pp. 128-138; Hulliung 1983; Kahn 1990 and 1994; Najemy 1993b; Hankins 1996, 134-137; Cox 1997; and n. 23.

In fact, as against the opposition and symbiosis between “prince” and “people” with which *Il Principe* opens, here the principal contrast is between the “privato”—the world of private citizens in dialogue about public things—on the one hand—and on the other, the public world where governance really take place, usually in the wrong way. No wonder then that the treatise he now introduces has none of the explicit pretensions to immediate, transformative political action of *Il Principe*. What he offers instead is knowledge that is the fruit of “una lunga pratica e continua lezione,” which, he acknowledges, is also subject to the errors that the limited perspective of an individual inevitably brings (“sebbene io mi fussi ingannato in molte . . . circostanze”)—again a far cry from his claim to panoramic perspective in the first passage from *Il Principe* we considered. In other words, as he insists in the last sentence of the Dedication, what this text aims to present are “queste mie opinioni”:²² the specifically individual reflections of a “privato” (a private person without governmental office) on the world of politics.²³

That this definition of his own “subject position” as author of the *Discorsi* has a fundamental ideological weight and value for Machiavelli, one which will draw us back inevitably to the question of the “popolo,” becomes apparent not so very far into the body of the treatise. In chapter 10 of book I, Machiavelli contrasts the successes of the “good” emperors who exercised a temperate and legitimate rule as against the tyrannical successors of Julius Caesar around the topic “Quanto sono laudabili i fondatori d’una repubblica o d’uno regno, tanto quelli d’una tirannide sono vituperabili.” As the penultimate entry in a long list of positive attributes of good imperial rule, Machiavelli sings the praises of “i tempi aurei, dove ciascuno può tenere e difendere quella opinione che vuole.” The phrase has particular resonance for a number of reasons. First is the use of the topos of the “golden age,” traditionally linked to the imperial rule of Augustus,²⁴ but here associated with the freedom openly to hold opinions, and, even more important, publicly to defend them in exchanges with one’s intellectual peers. Second, the passage comes in close proximity and in obvious contrast to the famous attack on Julius Caesar, with its bitter analysis of the ways in which the writing of history is distorted by the oppressive exercise of tyrannical power:

Né sia alcuno che s’inganni, per la gloria di Cesare, sentendolo, massime, celebrare dagli scrittori: perché quegli che lo laudano, sono corrotti dalla fortuna sua, e spauriti dalla lunghezza dello imperio, il quale, reggendosi sotto quel nome, non permetteva che gli scrittori parlassono liberamente di lui. Ma chi vuole conoscere quello che gli scrittori liberi ne direbbono, vegga quello che dicono di Catilina.

²² The word “opinione” appears in the *Discorsi* eighty-seven times: of these, nine refer explicitly to Machiavelli’s own opinions, four to the opinions of Livy, and six focus specifically on the problem of expressing opinions. In I.58, the word appears a total of seven times. In the shorter *Principe* “opinione” appears only seventeen times, usually referring to the prince’s reputation in the world; two of the three times that Machiavelli specifically refers to his own opinions they are those concerning the need for the Prince to ally himself with the “popolo” (ch. 9, ch. 19 [the other example, in ch. 25, concerns the author’s adherence to the widespread opinion that fortune usually prevails over human prudence]), a point whose importance will become clearer shortly.

²³ In this stance, Machiavelli places himself in a genealogy of humanist writers, dating at least from Petrarch in the fourteenth century, who self-consciously occupy and negotiate a precarious boundary line between private reflection and public power. On this genealogy and the places of both Petrarch and Machiavelli in it, see Struever 1992. For the tensions between public and private in Petrarch, see also Ascoli 2011. See again n. 21, as well as n. 46.

²⁴ The *locus classicus* for the golden age is Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.89-112, but Machiavelli would have been thinking of the overtly political uses of the topos, notably in Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.791-795 and *Eclogues* 4.4-10.

Caesar is condemned precisely for successfully conspiring [a là Catiline] to bring the golden age of Republican Rome to an end and the passage clearly echoes the dedicatory letter's condemnation of those (including implicitly an earlier Machiavelli) who "accecati dall'ambizione e dall'avarizia" praise princes for virtues they do not have, reinforcing the already obvious pro-Republic orientation of the *Discorsi* as a whole.

Most importantly for present purposes, Machiavelli clearly thinks that the freedom to express personal opinions is a key socio-political value.²⁵ Both passages from chapter 10 bear comparison to Jürgen Habermas's notion of "public opinion" in the Enlightenment as "the critical reflections of a public competent to form its own judgments."²⁶ A few chapters later Machiavelli offers the following account of the role of opinionated public debate in the politics of Republican Rome:

Poteva uno tribuno e qualunque altro cittadino, preporre al Popolo una legge; sopra la quale ogni cittadino poteva parlare, o in favore o incontro, innanzi che la si deliberasse. Era questo ordine buono, quando i cittadini erano buoni; perché sempre fu bene che ciascuno che intende uno bene per il publico lo possa preporre; ed è bene che ciascuno sopra quello possa dire l'opinione sua, acciocché il popolo, inteso ciascuno, possa poi eleggere il meglio. (Bk. 1, ch. 18)

That is not to say, of course, that in the *Discorsi* Machiavelli systematically articulates and affirms anything like a fully-formed notion of a bourgeois and proto-democratic "public sphere." For one thing, in chapter 10 he does not specify *whose* opinions are supposed to be expressed—though given both the dedicatory letter and the historical period being considered, one suspects that it is the aristocratic and/or intellectual elite rather than the "popolo," "plebe," or "moltitudine." Even in the extraordinary passage just quoted, there is some uncertainty whether the "cittadini" who express their opinions are to be identified with the "popolo" or primarily with members of the elite who typically serve as Tribunes (see I.47 and n.29 below), much less with Habermas's *Bürger*, which would be an anachronistic imposition indeed. Moreover the larger context of the chapter is focused on the eventual failure of the Republic and on the fragility of this ideal form of opinionated debate. These "ordini," he says, in fact become "pessimi" when those who participate in it become more interested in increasing their own power than in promoting the public welfare: at which point fear silences the "popolo," and turns it into the agent of its own ruin. Machiavelli's conclusion

²⁵ The chapter, from its title onward, posits the compatibility of princely or imperial rule, under law and through succession by "adoption" rather than inheritance, with the open expression and debate of opinions, although, as we shall see, as the *Discorsi* progress it becomes clear that he associates these activities more closely with a republic rather than a principate.

²⁶ Habermas 1962, 90. I turn to Habermas induced partly by Victoria Kahn's elegant reading of the Machiavellian critique of '400 humanism as proleptically applicable to the German philosopher's positing of a critical discursive consensus, namely "public opinion," which is at once social and rational (Kahn 1990). At this point, there is no longer any doubt that most of Habermas's categories are open to qualification or refutation (as already in Kahn, Calhoun ed. 1996, and so on; see also n. 51). Whether in a larger sense he has it right or not his account of the historical evolution of "opinion" offers an uncannily apt heuristic filter through which to view Machiavelli's innovative treatment of "opinion" as a category of political epistemology in the *Discorsi*, especially I.58. Ironically, from this perspective, Habermas himself argued that the "secret practices first inaugurated by Machiavelli" are what the "principle of publicity" associated with his concept of public opinion is meant to counter (52). On the history of "opinion," and Habermas's approach, see n. 48.

then is that in such ruinous circumstances, which inevitably overtake the best of states: “sarebbe necessario ridur[re la repubblica] più verso lo stato regio, che verso lo stato popolare.”²⁷

If one considers more generally the role assigned to the “popolo” as Machiavelli’s description of the growth and maintenance of the Roman *res-publica* unfolds over the first book of the *Discorsi*, it is never again, after chapter 18, characterized as an informed, politically active, public, composed of opinionated individuals, even in those places, such as I.58, where he actively refutes traditionally negative views concerning the “vulgar herd.” The “popolo” of the *Discorsi* largely remains an undifferentiated multitude, if one capable of forming collective opinions and taking collective action.²⁸ And its voice is heard primarily through the Tribunes who represent its interests.²⁹ In other words, even as Machiavelli separates himself from the ruthless power games of the “grandi” and most princes, and in some sense, Tribune-like, actively takes up the cause of the “popolo,” his distance from that group is also quite pronounced. Nonetheless, despite all the qualifications that must be placed on any analogy with the Habermasian “public sphere,” one cannot and should not minimize the value Machiavelli places on the free and open expression of opinions about politics and “public men” by individuals who do not have a direct role in politics themselves: individuals like Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai, and, of course, like Machiavelli himself.³⁰

Throughout the whole of the first book, as is well known, we find ample evidence of Machiavelli’s opinionated preference for a particular form of republican liberty, one which balances the interests of the Roman “popolo” or plebs, represented by the Tribunes, with those of the nobility who speak through the Senate. As Kahn has shown, here Machiavelli specifically posits the value of “disunion” between competing “class” interests as the grounds at once of a stable social order and of an immanent critique of society.³¹ As we will now see, even as Machiavelli posits a radical distinction and conflict between the classes, he also places himself and his political discourse—what he repeatedly in this text calls his *opinions*—at the boundary line between public and private, nobles and plebs, prince and people. And, I believe, he does this in a way that anticipates a kind of “sovereign subjectivity” which would eventually—when generalized to an internally differentiated collectivity specifically composed of opinionated individuals—

²⁷ Contradictory interpretations of the chapter reflect a rapid passage from the celebration of the Roman Republic to a focus on its inevitable ruin, as well as a juxtaposition of opinionated debate among the people with the impossible need for a good man who will re-found the city using evil means. For Sasso it anticipates the “solution” of *Il Principe* (1993a, 358-64; cf. 1988, 396-423). For Najemy (2010, 101) it proposes then undoes that solution. Both readings are supported in some measure by the text.

²⁸ And then there are the chapters which seem to take an actively anti-popular stance or at least one that mirrors the traditional negative characterization of the vulgar herd: notably book 1, chapter 53 (“Il popolo molte volte desidera la rovina sua ingannato, da una falsa spezie di beni”), chapter 54 (“Quanta autorità abbi uno uomo grave a frenare una moltitudine concitata”), and 57 (“La Plebe insieme è gagliarda, di per sé è debole”).

²⁹ Machiavelli repeatedly insists that the Roman “popolo” seeks the guidance of strong (upper-class) leaders (I.3-6, 44, 54), typically choosing to elect Tribunes from the patriciate rather than from its own ranks, even when it could do otherwise (I.47). On this topic, see Brown 1992, 300.

³⁰ Perhaps less compatible with Habermas’s account is the fact that in chapter 10 Machiavelli makes it clear that what he and other opinionated writers do is an effect and an expression of the goodness of a state, rather than as the determining factor in making the state good. In this sense, curiously, the valuing of opinion is perfectly compatible with the down grading of “literati” at the beginning of the chapter (where they come fourth after founders of religion, founders of states, and leaders of armies). On this passage see also Najemy 1993b, 56-57.

³¹ See especially book 1, chapters 2-4. In addition to Kahn 1994, ch. 2, see Lefort 1972, 488-531; Bock 1990, Del Lucchese 2004, ch. 2; Najemy 2010, 103-109; Pedullà 2012.

become characteristic of what is now frequently called the “public sphere” or “civil society.”³² At the same time, and in despite of his avowed preferences, he cannot be said to consistently or coherently express the republican or even democratic ideologies on which we now understand such polities to be founded.³³

The proleptic adoption of such a stance—the *opinionated* stance of the subject-citizen—is perhaps most evident in book I, chapter 58, which specifically dramatizes both Machiavelli’s commitment to re-valuing and re-defining the political role of the “popolo” and, in the process, his assertion that he is freely expressing an informed, individual opinion, in debate with other reflective individuals, including Titus Livy. Entitled “La moltitudine è più savia e più costante che uno principe,” the chapter has received surprisingly little commentary, given its provocative content, its length (the third longest in the first book), its strategic position (two chapters from the end of that book), and, most importantly, its summary relation to the dialectic between the roles of heroic individuals in founding (and refounding) the state, and that of Republican institutions and the will of the “popolo” in maintaining them that runs throughout the first book.³⁴

What commentary the chapter has received has been largely thematic: it, along with I.29, I.47, I.55, and II.2, is a mainstay of the claim that the *Discorsi* are informed by a populist and/or Republican ideology, constituting perhaps the most extensive assertion of that ideology,³⁵ while it is also a focal point for scholarly attacks on or qualifications of such a claim.³⁶ At the same time, a few critics *have* foregrounded Machiavelli’s discursive position in the chapter. Some call attention to it as a key moment in Machiavelli’s attempts to assert his autonomy from his *auctor*

³² For the “Public sphere” as the locus of reflection and debate of private individuals concerning public matters, see again Habermas 1962, as well as the discussions and critiques in Calhoun ed. 1996, especially those of Calhoun (1996), Fraser (1996), Baker (1996), and Kramer (1996). As Benhabib (1996) points out Arendt’s account of the public/private dyad (1958, ch. 4) is fundamental for understanding later 20th and 21st century discussions. The distinction of course has a long and complex history dating from classical times. For its late medieval, early modern instantiations see, for instance, Chittolini 1996, Zaret 1996, Ascoli 2011.

³³ Here the internal incoherence, and ultimate hopelessness, of chapter 18 is especially symptomatic. See again n. 27.

³⁴ Najemy 2010, 98-102 (see also 1978) offers a refutation of the common claim that the *Discorsi* affirm the need for an alternation in the life of Republics between the “ordinario” of law and civil rule and the “straordinario” of founding or refounding by a titanic individual, especially in his reading of I.18. See also Benner 2008, 367-373. And indeed, for the Machiavelli of the *Discorsi*, and specifically I.58, life under law and a government by the people is the ideal. Nonetheless I also believe that in the *Discorsi* the need to cope with extraordinary circumstances using extraordinary means—means more readily available to a charismatically “virtuous” individual than to the “popolo”—is inevitable and recurrent. Machiavelli, it seems to me, is one of the great theorists of the ineluctable problems caused by the necessary element of illegitimacy in the founding of any new political entity and the recurrent “state of exception” in which extraordinary circumstances exceed the capacity for resolution by “ordinary,” legal and customary means. That is not to say that, as his detractors have long argued, that Machiavelli advocates for a permanent “state of exception” conducted by perennially illegitimate means, rather, I would argue, much of the *Discorsi* are precisely concerned with how to acknowledge and anticipate these aspects of political life unfolding over time without surrendering the possibility of state governed under the rule of law during most periods of its existence. On “ordinario” and “straordinario” see also Whitfield 1969, ch. 8, esp. 146-147. In I.58 the symbiotic relationship of *principe* and *popolo* is acknowledged, although exclusively through a language of “ordine”: “se i principi sono superiori a’ popoli nello ordinare leggi, formare vite civili, ordinare statuti ed ordini nuovi, i popoli sono tanto superiore nel mantenere le cose ordinate . . .” However, it is perfectly clear from other chapters that the means used by princes to impose “ordini nuovi” are caused by extraordinary circumstances and effected by extraordinary means. For the possibility of “ordini” which allow for their own renewal, see III.1.

³⁵ E.g., Lefort 1972, 523-524; Bruscagli 1975, 49-50; Del Lucchese 2004, 328-332; Najemy 2010, 100; McCormick 2011, 74-77 et passim; Pedullà 2012, 207-208.

³⁶ See Strauss 1958, 126-130; Mansfield 1979, 168-175; Coby 1999, 254-258. Guicciardini in his *Considerazione* on I.58 already claims that Machiavelli’s argument is inconsistent (1971, 657).

Livy, by entering into an overt polemic with him.³⁷ Of similar interest is the closing attempt to explain the longstanding belief that a prince is wiser than the people:

[L]a opinione contro ai popoli nasce perché de' popoli ciascuno dice male senza paura e liberamente, ancora mentre che regnano; de' principi si parla sempre con mille paure e mille rispetti.

This latter passage has been seen as another indication of Machiavelli's anti-princely bias, but also specifically as a key, especially taken in conjunction with the remarks about Caesar quoted earlier, to why he might have felt compelled to adopt a "parlar chiuso" whose secrets have to be ferreted out by quasi-allegorical interpretation.³⁸

The significance of the passage for the present purposes should be obvious: as earlier in the dedicatory letter and in chapters 10 and 18 it offers up a distinct contrast between a situation in which opinions—even those highly critical of the powers that be—are expressed openly and freely and one where fear limits the expression of opinions to those that support the regime. Now, of course, this opposition is closely tied to a value-laden opposition between republican and princely rule (or, perhaps better, between the rule of law and rule by the powerful)—but it still seems to me important to distinguish between Machiavelli's opinion about differing types of regimes and his meta-opinion about the nature and expression of public opinion itself.³⁹

What makes this chapter most immediately apt to my purposes is the exceptional way that Machiavelli reflects on the process by which he came to form and express an opinion in such distinct contrast to that of "Tito Livio nostro, come tutti gli altri storici" on the inconstancy and ignorance of the multitude, which is capable, for example, of condemning Manlius Capitolinus to death and then of desiring his return when it is too late.⁴⁰ The opinion that the people make wiser and more consistent judgments than a prince, or any reflective individual, for that matter, is indeed unusual, if not entirely new, in the Western political tradition to this point⁴¹—and Machiavelli makes sure that we understand this:

³⁷ See, e.g., Sherberg 1991, 194-195.

³⁸ As observed earlier (n. 15), this claim is common to interpretations at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum.

³⁹ The topic of the superiority of the people's opinion to the Prince's is taken up again in III.34, although Machiavelli's own opinionated stance is not thematized. On the other hand, that chapter does explore in interesting ways the sources upon which opinion, and in particular the subcategory of individual reputation, is based.

⁴⁰ The episode Machiavelli refers to is recounted in *Ab Urbe Condita* 6.11-20 (Livy 1924); the comment explicitly condemning the multitude comes at a very different point in the text (24.25 [Livy 1940]). The topic of Machiavelli's relationship to Livy is too complex to be tackled here. A useful table of references to the *Ab Urbe Condita* in the *Discorsi* is in F. Gilbert 1953, 120-121. See also Ridley 1987, Martelli 1998, and Cabrini 1999.

⁴¹ He does have an exceptionally illustrious precursor in Aristotle, who says that "The principle that the multitude ought to be in power rather than the few best might sight seem . . . to contain . . . some truth. For the many, of whom each individual is not a good man, when they meet together may be better than the few good, if regarded not individually but collectively" though he goes on to qualify himself by saying "whether this principle can apply to all democracies, and to all bodies of men, is not clear." Shortly thereafter the argument takes another turn as he imagines allowing the "mass of freemen and citizens" to participate actively in governance: "their folly will lead them into error, and their dishonesty into crime" (*Politics* 3.11.1281a.40-1281b.27; cf. 3.15.1285b.35-1286a.40 [Aristotle 1984: 2.2033-2034, 2040-2041]). A less equivocal version, perhaps even stronger than Machiavelli's, is to be found in Marsilius of Padua's *Defensor Pacis* (I.12.3-8 [Marsilius 2001]), who explicit invokes *Politics* 3.11. On parallels of Machiavelli's thought with that in Aristotle's *Politics* more generally, see, e.g., Gaille 2007, 61-66 et passim. For the strong claim that Machiavelli's politics stands in opposition to Aristotle's, especially around the question of the

Io non so se io mi prenderò una provincia dura e piena di tanta difficoltà che mi convenga o abbandonarla con vergogna o seguirla con carico, volendo difendere una cosa, la quale, come ho detto, da tutti gli scrittori è accusata. Ma comunque si sia, io non giudico né giudicherò mai essere difetto difendere alcuna opinione con le ragioni, senza volervi usare o l'autorità o la forza.

The passage begins with typically Machiavellian imagery that links intellectual activity metaphorically to warfare and conquest. Like an imperialist general, he is marching into new territory, determined to take possession, though uncertain of the outcome. Language like this certainly furnishes a certain justification for those who want to argue that Machiavelli is in some sense the “Prince,” the sovereign ruler, of his own discourses.⁴² What is more striking, however, is the final turn away from the triumphalist metaphors of warfare, and back toward the domain of letters and intellectual debate that he literally inhabits. Surprisingly, he there both leaves open the possibility of defeat, and implies that the value of his defense is in the undertaking, not in the outcome.

Of course, what is most important here is the weight he places on the holding and defending of individual opinions, all the more so since this focus tends implicitly to run counter to the positive collective knowledge he is assigning to the “moltitudine” or “popolo.” And particularly noteworthy is the distinction that he makes between an opinion—his opinion—supported by reasons, and opinions (by implication those of Livy and others) sustained by recourse to either *authority* or *force*. By authority, of course, he is explicitly designating the traditional practice of argument by *auctoritas*, the voice of an “official culture” which represents itself as the bearer of a general accepted Truth.⁴³ At the same time, in juxtaposition with the alternative of “forza,” and with the immediately following discussion of legitimate and illegitimate forms of governance,⁴⁴ “authority” also implies the knowledge sanctioned and endorsed by a duly constituted governmental entity.⁴⁵ In other words, Machiavelli identifies a space for opinion that lies outside of any political or military structure, whether legal or “extraordinary,” whether Republican or princely, while taking as the object of its reflection precisely the realm from which it has removed itself.⁴⁶ Moreover, it is the opinion of an individual, which is articulated to and defended against other, presumably similar, individuals, and in this sense it tacitly assumes a “via di mezzo” between the two “knowing subjects,” the prince and the people, invoked in the title of the chapter.

Is this then Habermas’s rational-critical debate of the private bourgeois members of the “public sphere”? One could readily argue against such a claim that Machiavelli’s recourse to

necessary role of conflict in the republic (see again n. 31), as well as useful indications about the texts of Aristotle available to Machiavelli, see Pedullà 2012.

⁴² Notably Strauss (1958, 83-84 et passim), Mansfield (1966, ix-xii et passim), and Rebhorn (1988, 217-218).

⁴³ On the problem of *auctoritas*, see Ascoli 2008a, especially ch.1, sec. ii and ch. 2, sec. i-ii.

⁴⁴ “Dico, adunque, come di quello difetto di che accusano gli scrittori la moltitudine, se ne possono accusare tutti gli uomini particolarmente, e massime i principi; perché ciascuno, che non sia regolato dalle leggi, farebbe quelli medesimi errori che la moltitudine sciolta.”

⁴⁵ On the distinction between and convergence of intellectual and political *auctoritas*, see Ascoli 2008a: esp. 240-247.

⁴⁶ Petrarch’s “private politics” might be seen as comparable (see again Ascoli 2011 and n. 23), but Petrarch typically insists upon adopting a moral perspective which is superior to politics, while Machiavelli’s (as so many have observed, if not in this context) is a specifically political discourse, to which the ethical goodness of individuals, even when it is seen as a socially desirable trait, is consistently subordinated (*pace* Benner).

“reason” against “authority” (much less “force”) is simply a topos of a philosophical discourse that arrives to him from classical times. Arguments from authority had, even in the *auctoritas*-minded Middle Ages, been understood as subordinate to rational argument.⁴⁷ Moreover, from classical times a clear distinction had been made between two kinds of opinion: first, the unreasoning, ungrounded opinions of the many—effectively equivalent to many-faced *Fama* which reports truth and falsehood without distinction—but, then, opinion based on rational reflection and critical judgment.⁴⁸ The first point may be addressed by the observation that the plurality of Machiavelli’s individually articulated “ragioni” seems to distinguish them from the authority of philosophical Reason as the vehicle of a transcendent and impersonal Truth. In other words, he personalizes, and thus relativizes, classical reason, in a way not unrelated to the perspectivalism of the passage from the dedicatory letter to *Il Principe* with which we began.

The second, and in any case more substantive, issue is dealt with more readily. Machiavelli is undoubtedly thinking about the distinction between irrational and rational opinion: because it is precisely the traditional formulation of that opposition that he undertakes to refute in this chapter. The traditional and authoritative argument which ranks the wisdom of the ruler above that of the people is that the people, the multitude, the “vulgar herd,” are always understood to operate on the basis of “mere opinion”—opinion of the first type mentioned above, which is grounded in rumor and irrational belief.⁴⁹ By contrast, the ruler, at least in ideal form, operates on the basis of opinions

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q.1, art. 8, obj. 2 and resp. (Aquinas 1964). Aquinas goes on to subordinate human reason to divine authority.

⁴⁸ Opinion (Latin, “opinio”; Greek, “doxa”) “vale a significare un elemento conoscitivo non fondato su prove di certezza assoluta” (Bernabei 1973, 166). Loci classici in the Greek tradition include Parmenides, Plato and, most importantly, Aristotle. For the latter, “doxa” concern unstable and contingent matters which could be “otherwise” and may be either true or false, in distinction to “knowledge” of truths which are certain and necessary (*Posterior Analytics* 1.33.88b.30-89b.6; *Topics* 1.1.100a.20-101a.16, 8.10.162a.24-34; *On the Soul* 3.327b.7-428b.7 [Aristotle 1981: 1.146-147, 167-168, 273-274, 680-681]; *Ethics* 6.5.1140a.24-1140b.30, .9.1142b.5-15, 10.1142b.36-1143a.15 [Aristotle 1981: 2.1800-1801, 1804-1805.]) Originally opinions are linked to sensory knowledge only, and are thus likely to prove false, but already in Aristotle they may be the object of rational investigation. An excellent example of the distinction between false opinions grounded in sensual experience and true, or at least arguable opinions grounded in reason—the former linked to the vulgar multitude and the latter to an authoritative individual, namely Aristotle—is in Dante’s *Convivio* (IV.canzone 33, iii.4-10, vii.1-9; cf. I.iv.3-4, xi.3-9 [Alighieri 1988]). The example from *Convivio* IV is particularly apt, since it involves Dante “proving” that when Aristotle claims that whatever seems right to the many cannot be completely wrong, he is speaking of rationally-based opinion only (*Ethics* 7.14.1153b.27-28, cf. 1.8.1098b.25-29 [Aristotle 1981: 2. 1823, 1736]). It is noteworthy that in book 2, Machiavelli dedicates four chapters (19-22) to the formation and propagation of false opinions (held equally by princely individuals and “the people”), followed by three (23-25) dedicated to rational knowledge of causes (cf. Mansfield 1979, 247-260). McCormick (2011, 67-70, et passim) asserts that Machiavelli consistently distinguishes conceptually though not lexically between the “mere” opinions and the deliberative judgments of the people, while I would prefer to insist, sticking to Machiavelli’s vocabulary, on the ambiguous tension between two kinds of opinion. For Habermas’s account of the transformation of classical concepts of “opinion” into “public opinion” during the Enlightenment, see 1962, 89-102; for a different reading of the significance of Locke’s concept of “public opinion”, see Kosellek 1959. For a cogent critique of Habermas’s account, see Baker 1996 (cf. Kramer 1996, esp. 241-243). For a very different contemporary reflection on the status of doxa rooted in experience vis-à-vis “truth” as conceived in philosophical reflection, see Sasso 1999.

⁴⁹ On the classical views of the “many” in a specifically political context, see, e.g., McCormick 2011, 66-67. In his *Considerazione*, Guicciardini ridicules the claim of *Discorsi* I.58, forcefully reasserting the traditional view of the inconstancy of a multitude (Guicciardini 1971, 655-658). See also his anti-popular comments on *Discorsi* I.29 and 47.

formed through rational judgment, that is, the second type of opinion as it is classically understood and as, for instance, Machiavelli himself presents it in chapter 23 of *Il Principe*.⁵⁰

Machiavelli has thus deliberately placed himself and his opinions in a paradoxical position: he is a rational, opinionated individual (analogous both to historical authorities like Livy and to individual rulers who conquer new territories), who nonetheless sustains (as seen in the epigraph to this essay) that the “vox populi” is equivalent to the “Voice of God” in the wisdom of its opinions. At the same time, he is no Prince—his “conquest” is clearly metaphorical and he explicitly renounces both legitimate authority and extralegal force as means of enforcing his will—nor is he a “man of the people” (not at all the “popolare” he claims to be in the Dedication to Lorenzo)—his opinions are personal, not collective, they do not assert the truthful force of “the voice of God.” He is, instead, a “sovereign subject”: he occupies a subordinate position within a social and political order, but at the same time is the uncontested master of his own opinions concerning that order.

This complex and internally conflicted self-definition of his subject position, I maintain, makes Machiavelli the prefiguration of the “sovereign subject” whose entrance—with others—into unofficial, private debates of matters concerning the state eventually constitutes what Habermas calls the “public sphere.” If this is true, of course, it both lends a certain confirmation to Habermas’ focus on this particular type of opinionated debate, but also challenges the historical premises on which he grounds his theory (since it appears to arise long before the age of Enlightenment, traditionally defined),⁵¹ and, as Kahn has already argued,⁵² links it as closely to conflict and critique as to social consensus—in fact tying it to the most overt theorist of political violence that the Western tradition knows.⁵³

⁵⁰ “[U]no principe prudente debbe . . . [eleggere] nel suo stato uomini savi, e solo a quelli debbe dare libero arbitrio a parlargli la verità, e di quelle cose sole che lui domanda, e non d'altro. Ma debbe domandarli d'ogni cosa, e le opinioni loro udire . . .”

⁵¹ For a brief, cogent discussion with symptomatic bibliography, see De Vivo 2007, 13-14, 18-119. De Vivo’s own study of the circulation of “political communication” in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Venice, both pushes back the Habermasian idea historically and offers a substantive critique of it. Ironically, from the point of view of this study, De Vivo begins like Habermas with a contrast between Machiavellian advocacy of a politics of violence and a discursive politics he associates with Venice.

⁵² Kahn 1990.

⁵³ Three caveats. 1) As already suggested, Machiavelli is inconsistent both in his treatment of the “popolo” (see again nn. 27-28) and in his self-construction as opinionated political subject, from work to work and within the *Discorsi* themselves. 2) Neither my historiographical presuppositions, nor the limitations imposed by my training as a literary critic and historian, countenance the claim that Machiavelli is himself the unique origin of the stance here described. For instance, his exploration of personal political opinion can be closely tied to Florentine political culture, especially the institution of the “Pratiche,” or advisory fora recording the expressed opinions of citizens in public matters (F. Gilbert 1957, Brucker 1977, 284-302 et passim, and Najemy 2006, 147-148 et passim). Cox 1997, 1134-1136 links Machiavelli’s use of deliberative rhetoric to the Pratiche. Brown 1992, 290 (referring to Najemy 1982a) describes the gradual decline of the ethos of an opinionated and participatory Florentine citizenry in the latter 15th century, in terms not unlike those of *Discorsi* I.18, although this trend began to reverse itself after the expulsion of the Medici in 1494. Another avenue which might be explored is that of the private reflective habits of its mercantile elite, as expressed in personal diaries, such as that of Marco Parenti, or compilations of opinions for use by one’s heirs, like Guicciardini’s *Ricordi*. Of interest as well is the Venetian case as defined by De Vivo 2007 (see again n. 51). 3) It is critical to avoid confusing the ability to locate a particular set of ideas and rhetorical practices in one individual with the adoption of such ideas and practices as socio-political norms, norms which, in this case, apparently prevail on a mass scale only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

III. *Le istorie fiorentine*⁵⁴

As we have seen, while Machiavelli's opinions about the place of the "popolo" within a dynamic political framework are arguably proto-modern (class struggle; laws and institutions which ensure the responsible participation of the masses in their own governance), his account of what constitutes the "popolo" in *Il Principe* and, for the most part, the *Discorsi* is not. By contrast, the *Istorie Fiorentine*, commissioned by the Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, the future Clement VII, but often read as highly critical of their patron's family, both elaborate and significantly problematize the concept of the "popolo." They do so in a way that, on the one hand, reflects the specific complexities of the Florentine Republic (implicitly contrasted with the straightforward, and far more successful, model of the Roman alternative),⁵⁵ and, on the other, might even seem to anticipate modern sociological divisions of strife within and between specific sub-classes of the "popolo."

From the very outset we find that where in Rome the struggle between two classes was a source of stability and prosperity, in Florence divisions ran far deeper and to the opposite effect:

In Roma, come ciascuno sa, poi che i re ne furono cacciati, nacque la disunione intra i nobili e la plebe, e con quella infino alla rovina sua si mantenne; così fece Atene; così tutte le altre repubbliche che in quelli tempi fiorirono. Ma di Firenze in prima si divisono infra loro i nobili, dipoi i nobili e il popolo, e in ultimo il popolo e la plebe; e molte volte occorse che una di queste parti, rimasa superiore, si divise in due: dalle quali divisioni ne nacquero tante morti, tanti esili, tante destruzioni di famiglie, quante mai ne nascessero in alcuna città della quale si abbia memoria. (Proemio)⁵⁶

By the mid-fourteenth century the properly aristocratic "grandi" are virtually out of the picture (and with them any hope of Florence reviving former military glories, as David Quint has argued)⁵⁷, and instead the "popolo" itself is divided into at least three parts which are often at odds with one another:⁵⁸

⁵⁴ The *Istorie* remain less studied in the criticism than *Il Principe* or the *Discorsi*, notwithstanding their crucial place in the arc of Machiavelli's career as a writer. Among those whose work I have found useful in preparing this essay are F. Gilbert 1972; Mansfield 1972; Najemy 1978 and 1982b; Phillips 1979 and 1984; Anselmi 1979; Cabrini 1990 and 2010; Bock 1990; Sasso 1993b; Quint 2003 and 2009; Pedullà 2003; Marietti 2005.

⁵⁵ Brown 1992 gives a useful account of the limitations on the analogy, not only Machiavelli's, between the pleb/patrician opposition of the Roman Republic and the popolo/grandi dyad in Florence.

⁵⁶ On the complex vocabulary of "nobili", "popolo", and "plebe" in the *Istorie*, with special attention to the "class warfare" of book III, see Cabrini 1990, 7-13 et passim.

⁵⁷ Quint 2009; cf. Hulliung 1983, esp. 73-80. On the extinction of the Florentine warrior class, see especially *Istorie* 2.42 and 3.1. N.b., in this sense the *Istorie* can be read as a sort of "pre-quel" to *Il Principe*'s polemic on the substitution of mercenaries for "armi proprie" by the Italian states.

⁵⁸ The alteration in Machiavelli's treatment of the "popolo" from the *Discorsi* to the *Istorie* might be in part explained as determined by the move from a primary focus on the case of Livy's ancient Rome to that of his own, modern Florence, and an accompanying recourse to the (Villani) tradition of vernacular Florentine historiography (cf. Phillips 1979). The *Istorie*, nonetheless, clearly constitute a de facto deconstruction of the binary *popolo* / *grandi* opposition that subtends the politics of both *Il Principe* and the *Discorsi*. In a sense this supports Najemy's claim that the *Istorie*

Vinti i Grandi, riordinò il popolo lo stato; e perché gli era di tre sorte popolo, potente, mediocre e basso, si ordinò che i potenti avessero duoi Signori, tre i mediocri e tre i bassi; e il gonfaloniere fusse ora dell'una ora dell'altra sorte. Oltra di questo, tutti gli ordini della giustizia contro ai Grandi si riassunsono; e per fargli più deboli, molti di loro intra la popolare moltitudine mescolorono . . . (bk. 2, ch. 42)

We are thus presented with a tripartite distinction between the lowest classes, a proto-bourgeois middle class, and a wealth upper class of “popolani”—including the Medici themselves—who have begun to occupy the space once belonging to aristocratic “ottimati.” In this account, once the feudal aristocracy has been dispatched, there is nothing *but* “popolo” in Florence (at least from a terminological point of view), although the city is no less fractious on this account: if anything, more so.

As Machiavelli goes on to argue, it is precisely this divisiveness that opens the door to one would-be tyrant after another, and finally to the Medici themselves, emerging from the “popolo” to become at once the remedy to and the most ostentatious symptom of the disease that afflicts Florence.⁵⁹ There is no particular sign that, rhetorically, Machiavelli identifies with any one of the groups more than the others. One might infer on biographical grounds that he belongs to the “popolo mediocre.”⁶⁰

The world of *Istorie*, in fact, is one in which individual and collective opinions proliferate, and, as they do, conflicts—usually erroneous—multiply, and solutions seem more and more remote.⁶¹ And as the book unfolds it becomes more and more difficult to establish the precise nature of Machiavelli’s own opinion concerning the likelihood of (re-)establishing “popular”

turn from a traditional concept of history that foregrounds individual agency to a more modern notion of political history as produced by complex group dynamics (1982b). It could also be argued, however, that the visionary, globalizing history of the earlier works disappears under the pressure both of the specifically Florentine topic and the increasingly bitter and degrading experience of Machiavelli himself in the morass of a local factional politics whose defects had long since been identified by Dante, Compagni, and Villani, among others (cf. Bock 1990, 183).

⁵⁹ See Bock 1990 for a meticulous and judicious review of the (negative) treatment of social discord in the *Istorie*, beginning with the passage from *Proemio* cited above, and its complex relation to the largely positive treatment of it in the *Discorsi* (see n. 31). See also Najemy 1996, 287-288; Pedullà 2003; Cabrini 2010. In particular, Machiavelli explicitly distinguishes his version of the Florentine history from that of his humanist precursors, Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini, precisely on the basis of their not having treated the question of violent factionalism in Florence (*Proemio*). For the difference in M’s treatment of the “popolo” in his *Istorie* from Bruni’s, see Najemy 1978; Anselmi 1979, esp. 92-97; Benner 2010, 30-37. On Machiavelli’s critique of humanism more generally, see again n. 21.

⁶⁰ Even here it has been claimed that he does not quite fit. For instance, Guarini 1990 argues for Machiavelli’s betwixt and between position with respect to the major classifications of Florentine society: “[Machiavelli] never had full rights of citizenship. Although he was descended from a family which had risen to major office in the fourteenth century, even under the *governo largo* of 1494 to 1512 he was not among those who had full civil rights and who could hope to be elected to the civic magistracies. . . . He was not . . . of the aristocratic group, and furthermore he was not included in the *popolo*” (20).

⁶¹ Two compelling examples early in the work are episodes of the brief reign of Walter of Brienne (II.33-37) and the Ciompi revolt (III.9-21). It is worthy of note, given my discussion of the role of the “popolo” in the *Discorsi*, that on several occasions Machiavelli gives voice to the *plebe* through a representative speaker, one who belongs to the class as well as speaking for it. The most obvious example, of course, is the much discussed speech of the “anonimo plebeo” (III.13).

governance in his native city,⁶² beyond the fact that at one time or another he blames each of the various sub-groupings for some part of Florence's woes. One might almost conclude that in the *Istorie* an older and less confident Machiavelli dramatizes precisely the likely failure of the participatory, opinionated, politics which he seemed to have embodied in the *Discorsi*, even as the proliferation of opinions among the citizenry continues, and even as the society he describes seems much closer to the complexities of the emergent modernity of the West than does that of either of the earlier works.⁶³

Looking back over the three texts we have examined, each invites (and the invitation has been taken up time and again) reflection on the question of what Machiavelli's opinion about the relationship of the "popolo" to the Prince, and/or the tyrant, might be. *Il Principe* offers precepts in the art of domination, to the exclusion of any serious consideration of a Republican alternative, but proposes a symbiosis, on the one hand, between the "people" and the "Prince" in general (allied against their common enemy, the *grandi*), and, on the other, between Machiavelli himself as self-proclaimed "populare" and a specific Medici Prince (Lorenzo, or, rather, Leo), who will let himself be guided by his subject's opinions. In the *Discorsi* Machiavelli's opinions take on a distinctly pro-Republican, and even "populist" tenor, and yet he places himself in the position of a Tribune representing the interests of an inarticulate and often incoherent multitude unable to speak for itself, rendering the locution "vox populi" something of an oxymoron. Finally, in the *Istorie Fiorentine*, again directed toward a Medici patron, there is undoubtedly a fierce critique of that family's programmatic usurpation of power in Florence by Cosimo and the Lorenzo, implicitly extended into the present of writing, but what makes such usurpation possible is, first, the continual subversion of popular government from within and, then, the Medici's ability to manipulate the "popolo" to advance its own ends.

These summaries of Machiavelli's opinions about government "for and by" the people are no doubt reductive, even by the standards set in the discussion above. Nonetheless, they do point to a series of conflicts that haunt any attempt to define *the* ideology espoused by Machiavelli—conflicts between illegitimate means and legitimated ends, between political values and historical analysis, between "occasional," historically situated utterances and assertions that claim the status of enduring truth, and, of course, between his earlier texts and the later ones. In other words, while, as we have seen, Machiavelli's definition of his position as opinionated "sovereign subject" anticipates in some real sense the concept of political subjectivity that structures the "Atlantic Republics" and the values of liberty in private speech associated with them, nonetheless, the specific opinions he articulates from that subject position do not necessarily always agree with a "pure" ideal of Republicanism or even with themselves.

⁶² The word "opinione" appears forty-two times in the *Istorie*, but never with reference to Machiavelli's own opinion. Most typically it refers to the clash between competing points of view—of antagonistic groups rather than reflective individuals—and the generally erroneous character of all human opinion or judgment. One is tempted to associate the disappearance of personal "opinion" from Machiavelli's vocabulary here with the generic character of the *Istorie* as history, as against the political reflections of the *Discorsi*, as with the need not overtly to offend his Medici patrons, and thus to displace his own opinions into the speech of others, as Giannotti reported him to have averred in a famous letter (quoted in Cabrini 2010, 137-138). While both of these explanations have merit, they still seem insufficient to account for the radical nature of the shift between the earlier work and the later.

⁶³ On the underlying bleakness of the *Istorie*, see Quint 2003. For a similar interpretation of the late drama *Clizia*, roughly contemporaneous with the *Istorie*, as compared to the earlier *Mandragola*, see Martinez 1993. Cf. Ascoli 2008b.

Jacob Burckhardt built an interpretation of the Renaissance around the phenomenon of the identification of individual artists and authors with political tyrants.⁶⁴ My interpretation, especially as concerns one key chapter of the *Discorsi*, argues for a conflicted identification of Machiavelli with the prince, on this side, and the people, on the other. This space, which might be identified with the proto-bourgeois subject of the European Renaissance, may constitute a condition of possibility both for a set of political values and a form of political subjectivity to come—but it is also, in this early and “literalized” condition, drawn simultaneously toward both ends of the political spectrum. In the end, then, the subject of Machiavelli’s political thought (his opinions) may be no more important than Machiavelli as politicized subject (his understanding of what an opinion is, and what it means for him to express one).

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⁶⁴ Burckhardt in fact first explicitly presents Machiavelli among the “Opponents of Tyranny” (1869, I: 75-76), but his depiction of the violent world of illegitimate despots allied with parvenue artists clearly owes much to the “new prince” of *Il Principe* in particular, and especially to the depiction of the Borgias (e.g. I: 26-28).

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