

Machiavelli, Guicciardini and the “Governo Largo”

CESARE PINELLI

Abstract. Niccolò Machiavelli’s support for what he calls *governo largo*, or popular government, is usually contrasted with the diffidence towards it of Francesco Guicciardini, the Florentine aristocrat. The article argues that both these authors grounded their vision on Polybius’ theory of “mixed government,” though adapting it in different directions. In examining this difference, the article reaches the conclusion that it concerns far less the degree of popular participation in political decision-making and government than the value that Machiavelli and Guicciardini respectively ascribe to it in comparison with that of safety-liberty (or legal certainty). In this respect, their theories may be viewed as anticipating the tensions between democracy and the rule of law, the co-presence of which provides the essential foundation of the structure of present-day constitutional democracies.

1.

After the Medici family were first thrown out of Florence in 1494, a Great Council was established. Comprising approximately 3,000 representatives of the aristocracy and the middle classes, the Great Council rapidly became the emblem of a “*governo largo*,” i.e., a “broad” or a “popular” government. It was fiercely contested by the aristocracy, or “*ottimati*,” who championed the return of a “*governo stretto*” (or “narrow government”) under their control (Gilbert 1970, 60). Florence had more than 100,000 inhabitants, so we should not project onto the Great Council the idea of political egalitarianism that we associate with the concept of democracy (Gilbert 1977, 73). Rather, the “broad/narrow” dichotomy signified the inclusion or exclusion from the city government of what was referred to at the time as “the people.”

This fact is confirmed by the distinction current at the time between two ways of consulting citizens about decisions. “*Pratiche larghe*” (broad-based consultative meetings) were attended by between 100 and 500 citizens representing every district of Florence in equal measure, whereas “*pratiche strette*” (“narrow” meetings) convened between 10 and 20 members and were reserved for representatives of the richest and most powerful families. Those in favour of the 1494 Constitution soon clashed with the aristocracy over this as well (Gilbert 1977, 72).

The contrast between “*governo largo*” and “*governo stretto*” was also used to refer to the choice between drawing lots and elections for the purposes of conferring government appointments. The nobles, who had been able to manipulate the

drawing of lots in the past, feared that the decision to have recourse to elections to the Great Council would put them at a disadvantage. This was until they realised that drawing lots allowed members of the middle classes to gain access to office by means of a wider field of candidates, whereas elections resulted in the appointment of well-known names, generally aristocrats (Gilbert 1970, 55). At this point drawing lots came to be systematically associated with a *governo largo* and elections with a *governo stretto* (Manin 2010, 69).

The preference for popular government of Niccolò Machiavelli (who was then Chancellery Secretary) has from time immemorial been contrasted with the diffidence towards it by Francesco Guicciardini, who "had the family pride of a Florentine aristocrat" (Gilbert 1970, 236). However, if we shift the comparative focus onto the different interpretations of "*governo largo*" just indicated and, above all, attempt such a comparison from a constitutionalist perspective, I believe there are grounds for revisiting this contrast.

A useful starting point is to be found in an examination of the two authors' approaches to the subject of forms of government. This is in order to identify the lowest common denominator that might make the comparison plausible. I will then consider the instances when the two writers use the term "*governo largo*" and the nature of the arguments supporting their respective theses, according to whether it was the Roman republic or the Florence of the time that was the issue under discussion. On this basis, I propose to show how their positions on the concept of *governo largo* may correspond to competing visions of a constitutional order and, albeit in embryonic form, represent some of the structural dilemmas facing contemporary constitutionalism. The intention is to rule out an over-simplistic exploitation of the classical authors, and Machiavelli in particular, that is still found in contemporary debates.

2.

In the wealth of literature dedicated to Machiavelli and Guicciardini, the question of forms of government is one of the subjects attracting the greatest attention. It is also one of the most controversial, given the historical and theoretical aspects discernible in the two authors' most important works. This is only of interest to us here for the purpose of ascertaining whether their positions regarding a *governo largo* stem from premises that are sufficiently similar to permit a subsequent comparison. This condition is both necessary and sufficient for comparative purposes and, in searching for it, I will allow the two authors to speak for themselves by citing well-known, fundamental passages. Thus, after declaring his desire "to represent things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined," Machiavelli warns that:

[m]any have dreamed up republics and principalities which have never in truth been known to exist; the gulf between how one should live and how one does live is so wide that a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done learns the way to self-destruction rather than self-preservation. The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. (Machiavelli 1984, 59)

The allusion to the humanist rhetoricians who dreamed up republics and principalities "never known to exist" confirms, by counterpoint, that the writer is looking

at politics as it is, and not as it ought to be. Machiavelli confirms this in another famous passage:

those who condemn the disturbances between the nobles and the plebeians condemn those very things that were the primary cause of Roman liberty, and [...] they give more consideration to the noises and cries arising from such disturbances than to the good effects they produced; nor do they consider that in every republic there are two different tendencies, that of the people and that of the upper class, and that all of the laws which are passed in favour of liberty are born from the rift between the two, as can easily be seen from what happened in Rome. (Machiavelli 2008, 30)

For his part, Guicciardini has Bernardo del Nero say (and it is widely acknowledged that Bernardo expresses the author's point of view):

we should not look for an imaginary government that is more likely to appear in books than in practice, perhaps like Plato's republic. Instead, after considering the nature, the quality, the conditions, the inclinations—in a word, the humours—of the city and its citizens, we must look for a government that we are reasonably confident could be introduced by persuasion, and once introduced, could be tolerated and preserved according to our own tastes. (Guicciardini 1994, 96)

Moreover, the whole of Bernardo's discourse is based on the premise that “if we want to judge between different governments” or judge between the three forms of government in Aristotle's scheme, “we should consider not so much what type they are, but their effects, calling better or less bad the government which has the better or less bad effects” (Guicciardini 1994, 14). Both authors are guided in their study of forms of government by the effect on the polity that each form is reputed to be capable of producing, without relying on “books” or, in any event, on abstract theoretical distinctions. The second chapter of *Discourses*, a paraphrasing (if not, at times, a translation) of the sixth book of Polybius' *Histories* (Bobbio 1976, 76), conflicts only at first sight with Machiavelli's “anti-academic” spirit and extraordinarily concise vigour (Sasso 1980, 443).

After outlining the doctrine of *anacyclosis* or the necessary alternation of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy with their respective degenerative forms (tyranny, oligarchy and ochlocracy), Polybius adds that:

it is only by seeing distinctly how each of them is produced that a distinct view can also be obtained of its growth, zenith, and decadence, and the time, circumstance and place in which each of these may be expected to recur. This method I have assumed to be especially applicable to the Roman constitution, because its origin and growth have from the first followed natural causes. (Polybius 2002, 351)

Although speaking of “a cycle through which all states that have governed themselves or that now govern themselves pass,” Machiavelli emphasises that “rarely do they return to the same forms of government, because almost no republic can be so full of life that it may pass through these mutations many times and remain standing” and that, in passing from one form of government to another, “a republic ever lacking in counsel and strength becomes subject to a nearby state that is better organized.” Furthermore, having deemed the first six forms “defective, because of the brief duration of the three good ones, and because of the evil nature of the three bad ones,” he observes that “since those men who were prudent

in establishing laws recognized this defect, they avoided each of these forms by itself alone and chose a form of government that combined them all" (Machiavelli 2008, 24).

Machiavelli attenuates and historicises Polybius' naturalism and assigns to the prudent legislator the merit of choosing that mixed government that Polybius himself had—but contradictorily—deemed the perfect form of government, rescued as it was from the inevitable corruption of the simple forms (Sasso 1980, 444). Machiavelli distances himself from Polybius by admitting to the enquiry an artificial element such as virtue, which will vary according to the forms of government, and all the more so because it is always influenced by fortune. Republics should not only be judged on the basis of their origins, since it is necessary to look at their effects and the "real truth" of the varying combinations of virtue and fortune.

3.

A not inconsiderable debt is owed to Polybius nonetheless. Machiavelli's popular government is not a simple form of government, but a kind of mixed government and for this reason falls within Polybius' scheme of classification. After all, the great Greek historian classified the constitutions of Sparta, Carthage and Rome as mixed constitutions, and then distinguished between them on the basis of one social group's supremacy over another and their capacity for hegemony abroad. If, leaving his admiration for Lycurgus's constitution to one side, Sparta had appeared to him to be quite unable to maintain its hegemony over Greece, the comparison between Carthage and Rome concerned two military powers fighting each other, and thus an examination of their respective political systems became decisive. His conclusion was that:

In Carthage [...] the influence of the people in the policy of the state had already risen to be supreme, while at Rome the Senate was at the height of its power: and so, as in the one measures were deliberated upon by the many, in the other by the best men, the policy of the Romans in all public undertakings proved to be stronger; on which account, though they met with capital disasters, by force of prudent counsels they finally conquered the Carthaginians in the war. (Polybius 2002, 382)

In contrast to that of Polybius, Machiavelli's comparison of mixed constitutions does not include Carthage, but it does include Venice, for obvious historical reasons, and is based on the following criterion:

[a]mong the most necessary things established by those who have founded a republic in a prudent fashion is a safeguard for liberty, and according to whether it is well established or not, that free way of life is more or less enduring. Because in every republic there are men of prominence and men of the people, some doubt has arisen over whose hands into which this guardianship would best be placed. Among the Spartans and, in our own times, among the Venetians, it was placed in the hands of the nobles, but among the Romans it was placed in the hands of the plebeians. (Machiavelli 2008, 32)

He concedes that, should one have to take duration into consideration, the most obvious choice would be to entrust the safeguarding of liberty to the nobles, "since the liberty of Sparta and Venice endured longer than that of Rome" (*ibid.*, 33). However, the choice of Rome seems better to him, for two complementary reasons.

First, whereas the aim of the nobles is to dominate, the aim of the people is not to be dominated (Machiavelli 2008, 33; 1984, 37): “Since the common people are set up as guardians of this liberty, it is reasonable to think that they will take better care of it, and, being incapable of appropriating it for themselves, they will not permit others to do so” (Machiavelli 2008, 33). Further on, he argues that, “in all republics, no matter how they are organized, no more than forty or fifty citizens ever reach the ranks of command,” whereas “all the others, who are countless, desire liberty in order to live in safety” and “can easily be satisfied by establishing institutions and passing laws which provide for both the prince’s personal power and the public safety” (*ibid.*, 85). But why is there this difference in attitude and what effect does it have? Riots “in most cases [...] are caused by those who possess something” and precisely the nobles, “who possess a great deal, can with greater power and speed bring about change and still more, their improper and ambitious conduct kindles in the breasts of those who possess nothing the desire to possess something, either in order to gain revenge upon the rich by despoiling them, or in order to be able themselves to come into that wealth and those offices that they see so badly used by others” (*ibid.*, 35). In a *governo largo*, it is the nobles who threaten to overthrow the government, and it is their wealth that leads the people into corruption. These are powerful forces that the Roman constitution of the time managed to channel and, for that very reason, to contain.

Machiavelli’s second reason for preferring to discuss Rome is that “either you discuss a republic that wishes to create an empire, like Rome, or you discuss one that is satisfied to maintain itself. In the first case, it is necessary to do everything as Rome did; in the second case, it is possible to imitate Venice or Sparta” (Machiavelli 2008, 34). Thus the desire for hegemony enters the arena as in Polybius’ *Histories*. However, and as we have seen, Polybius associated it with the primacy of the “best men” over the people in the Roman institutions during the period of the Punic Wars. Machiavelli ignores this association, as he is fully absorbed with the dilemma facing republics with a mixed government:

if you wish to create a numerous and well-armed people, in order to build a great empire, you create it with such qualities that you cannot then manage it as you wish, and if you keep it either small or disarmed in order to manage it, once you acquire territory you cannot hold it, or you become so helpless that you are easy prey to anyone who attacks you. Thus, in all our deliberations, we must consider where the fewest drawbacks lie and take that as the best alternative, because an option that is completely clear and completely without uncertainty cannot ever be found. (Machiavelli 2008, 40)

As a result, the people enter the public sphere insofar as they are armed and aspiring to a “great empire”: And once they have entered it, no attempt to govern them from above will be possible any more and all the more so for the fact that they do not wish to dominate but only not to be dominated. The “drawback” lies in the “disturbances between the nobles and the plebeians” the “good effects” of which (rather than the “noises and cries arising from such disturbances”) must be considered, as we have seen. *Libertas et imperium* thus appear to be inexorably linked.

The alternative of a “*governo stretto*,” on the other hand, lends itself to a far more dangerous contingency than riots. The choice not to “acquire territory” cannot be sustained for long, either because “necessity” could force those republics to “expand” (by having to defend themselves) or because “if heaven were so kind that

[they] never had to wage war, it might happen that idleness would make [them] either weak or divided, and these two things together, or each one in itself, would be the cause of [their] ruin" (Machiavelli 2008, 41). The dilemma is resolved at this point:

I believe it is necessary to follow the political organization of Rome and not that of other republics because I cannot believe it is possible to find a middle way between the one alternative and the other, and it is necessary to tolerate those enmities that arose between the people and the senate, taking them as a disadvantage necessary to attain Roman greatness. (Machiavelli 2008, 41)

The idea that entrusting the people with the safeguarding of their own liberty is the only way to contain conflict in a republic also holds true for the domestic order. Once the public order has been assigned to "the people or to some magistrate or council," citizens "do not engage in attempts upon the government, and if they do make such attempts, they are immediately suppressed without respect for who they are" (*ibid.*, 41) and, at the same time, this provides

a release for those humours that arise within cities in one way or another against certain citizens, for when these humours have no legal form of release, they resort to illegal means that bring about the ruin of the whole republic. (*ibid.*, 41)

This was demonstrated by the episode involving Coriolanus, against whom the plebeians' indignation was so great that "they would have murdered him in a riot at the exit of the senate if the tribunes had not summoned him to appear and plead his case." Had Coriolanus been killed, "this would have given rise to a case of individuals harming individuals, the kind of injury that generates fear; fear seeks protection, for which partisans are procured; out of partisans factions are born in cities, from which arises their destruction" (Machiavelli 2008, 46). Whilst the riots between the people and the nobles are political struggles that are inevitable and at the same time an expression of freedom, those between factions or between private citizens must be regulated "by ordinary means," namely, by law, the "enforcement" of which

is not accomplished with private or foreign forces which are the ones that ruin free societies, but [...] is done with public forces and institutions which have their specific limits, nor do they go far beyond them to anything that would ruin the republic. (Machiavelli 2008, 47)

We have seen how the first threat to "overthrow" the free society that lies at the heart of a *governo largo* comes from the nobles. It does not come solely from the nobles, however, and it may come from them with the aid of unforeseeable circumstances. The creation of the decemvirate in Rome is presented as a case of the people establishing an absolute power. Whereas dictators were elected only temporarily and without eliminating the other institutions,

the exact opposite occurred in the creation of the decemvirs, because the consuls and tribunes were annulled, and the decemvirs given authority to create laws and to act in every way as if they were the Roman people. Thus, finding themselves alone, without consuls, without tribunes, without appeals to the people, and as a consequence, having no one to watch over them, during their second year they were able, moved by the ambition of Appius, to become insolent. For this reason, it should be noted that when it is said that an authority conferred by free elections never injures a republic, it is presumed that a people can never be led to

confer it except under proper circumstances and for proper periods of time. (Machiavelli 2008, 134)

Furthermore,

[n]or is it of any advantage in such a case to have material that is not corrupt, for an absolute authority corrupts the material in the shortest time and creates friends and partisans. Nor is it any disadvantage to be poor or to lack family ties, for wealth and every other favour quickly pursue authority. (Machiavelli 2008, 134)

Corruption is thus not the only reason for the downfall of a *governo largo*. This, it must be remembered, is a form of mixed government, the balance of which is upset by the advent of an absolute form of authority, even when elected by the people. Machiavelli perceives this clearly, even though the republican institutions had dealt with the crisis caused by the election of the decemvirate.

In his opinion, what actually destroyed them was the conflict over the agrarian law, which prohibited an individual citizen from owning more than a certain portion of land and required the lands confiscated from the enemy to be redistributed among the Romans. The law had been passed in 486 BC but remained unenforced until the Gracchi (the plebeian tribunes as of 133 BC) tried to implement it. “Their intentions were more praiseworthy than their prudence,” says Machiavelli, because the dispute over the law unleashed “such hatred between the plebeians and the senate that it led to armed conflict and bloodshed beyond every civil usage and practice,” to the point of a disintegration into civil war between Marius and Silla and then between Pompey and Caesar, who “was the first tyrant of Rome, after which the city was never again free” (Machiavelli 2008, 140).

Machiavelli’s assessment of the matter is multifaceted. First of all, his criticism of the law is significant: “Because well-organized republics have to keep the public treasury rich but their citizens poor.” Nor are the plebeians themselves spared this time, “because it was not enough for the Roman plebeians, who were driven to this desire by necessity, to secure themselves against the nobles by creating the tribunes; immediately after having obtained the creation of the tribunes, they began to quarrel with the nobles out of ambition and the desire to share with them honours and possessions, as the things most prized by men” (Machiavelli 2008, 140). Aware that this assessment might contradict his evaluation of the riots that kept Rome free, Machiavelli clarifies that

if the controversy over the agrarian law caused conflict for 300 years before enslaving Rome, the city would certainly have been much more quickly reduced to servitude if the plebeians had not constantly checked the ambitions of the nobility with this law and other expressions of its desires. It is also clear from this that men value their property more than honours, for the Roman nobility always gave way to the plebeians without extraordinary strife in matters concerning honours, but when it came to property, their stubbornness in defending it was so great that in order to satisfy their own desires, the plebeians had recourse to those extraordinary methods that have been discussed above. (Machiavelli 2008, 141)

The “different humours” in “the people” and in “the great” that exist “in every republic” may thus compete with each other as much in the field of “honours” as in that of “property.” As far as the former is concerned, the example of Rome demonstrates the ability of a still uncorrupted people bearing arms to prevail. In

the perspective of a mixed government, this means not acquiring all political power but, rather, guaranteeing a balance between institutions that, insofar as it is never definitively achieved, ensures a "free society." In the field of "property," on the other hand, the example of Rome demonstrates that "the nobility" prevails: Not only because it is the domain in which it is strongest but also (and primarily) because men generally "value their property more than honours." For this reason, it is sufficient for a conflict to flare up over "property" for the plebeians to be corrupted and have recourse to "extraordinary methods," namely, a breach of the constitution. Machiavelli correspondingly identifies two "remedies" for the disorder existing in republics: "The first is to maintain the citizens in poverty, so that, lacking in exceptional ability, they cannot corrupt themselves or others with riches; the second is to be prepared for war, as the Romans were in their early days, so that it can always be waged and distinguished citizens will always be needed" (Machiavelli 2008, 434). The remedies are necessarily complementary. This could explain how it is that he can state that, until the advent of the Gracchi, plebeians so heavily engaged in war could desire "honours" rather than "property," despite the fact that he considered the opposite to be true for all men. And yet, at the peak of territorial expansion, neither of the two remedies would prove functional any more, with the result that *libertas* was irreparably separated from *imperium* and the republic drifted towards self-destruction (Pocock 2010, 150; Sasso 1980, 486).

4.

Guicciardini's *Considerations on Machiavelli's Discourses* are concerned both with the historical basis for Machiavelli's claims about the Roman republic and with the more general convictions that the author develops from them, without ever hiding his different position regarding a *governo largo*. In Rome, he objects, the safeguarding of liberty was not assigned to the people but, rather, to the consuls or the dictators, just as the public prosecution was not only entrusted to the plebeians' tribunes but also to other magistrates. Furthermore, contrary to the way Machiavelli presents it (or, rather, to how Guicciardini says he does), "the government of Rome was mixed, not plebeian" (Guicciardini 1983, 531; my translation). Up to this point, Guicciardini's criticisms concern issues of fact and ignore the point that Machiavelli shows that he was perfectly aware of the mixed nature of the Roman government. Guicciardini is certainly introducing his own value judgements when he adds that in a mixed government,

I prefer that the guarding of freedom against those who seek to oppress the republic belong to everybody, always avoiding as much as possible the distinction between Nobles and Plebs. A mixed government is of necessity so balanced that one class is a guard against the other in defence of freedom. (Guicciardini 1983, 531; my translation)

Furthermore, he thinks that should it ever be necessary to set up either a government purely of Nobles or of Plebeians in a city, it would be less of a mistake to make it a government of the Nobility:

Because, since they have more wisdom and more quality, one may have a greater expectation that they might put themselves into some reasonable form, whereas with the Plebeians, since they are full of ignorance, confusion and many bad qualities, one may only expect them to ruin and wreck everything. [...] This conclusion agrees with the opinion of all who have

written about republics, who prefer a government of the elite to one of the masses. (Guicciardini 1983, 531; my translation)

Machiavelli, in turn, does not fail to observe that “the people, deceived by a false image of good, desire their own ruin, and unless someone they trust can make them capable of distinguishing the good from the bad, this will bring endless danger and damage to republics” (Machiavelli 2008, 181). Only what counts for him are the aims of the two “humours” i.e., to dominate, in the case of the nobles, and not to be dominated, in the case of the people. These aims survive beyond the formation of a mixed government, giving rise to conflict in any event. Guicciardini, who on the other hand observes that “a mixed government is of necessity so balanced that one class is a guard against the other in defence of freedom,” objects that:

It was not the discord between the Plebeians and the Senate that made Rome free and powerful, because it would have been better had there not been any causes for discord. Nor were the rebellions useful, though they certainly did less harm than in other cities, and it would have been very useful for Rome’s greatness had the Patricians yielded sooner to the will of the Plebeians rather than thought up ways to avoid needing the Plebeians. But praising discord is like praising a sick man’s illness, because the remedy that has been used on him is the right one. (Guicciardini 1983, 528; my translation)

Nor does Guicciardini perceive the tragic dilemma afflicting republics in the *Discourses* and thus the connection between *libertas* and *imperium*. Quite simply, in Rome “military discipline was quite exceptional and its *virtù* compensated for the other flaws of government, which are less important in a city that endures through its armed might than in those that are governed by industry, evasive tactics and the arts of peace” (Guicciardini 1983, 529). In the *Dialogue*, Bernardo del Nero supports his claim that the success of the Roman army was independent of the republic’s institutional organisation (and that, on the contrary, it had been achieved despite the latter’s defects) with the argument that the military discipline was “no less striking in the time of the kings than later when the republic was free” (Guicciardini 1994, 66).

Historiographical objections are interwoven with those on the merits. This is for the purposes of closing the doors on his interlocutor’s more innovative (and, for that era, certainly scandalous) insights: Beginning with those conflicts between patricians and plebeians “the importance of which Machiavelli had, with real genius, understood, realising them to be the basis for ‘Roman greatness’ ” (Sasso 1980, 454). Conflicts that, for the first time, permit disorder to be seen as “the price to be paid if liberty is to be preserved” and a mixed government not only as an institutional mechanism but also “the political solution to a problem, namely that of the conflict arising in civil society between diametrically opposed parties” (Bobbio 1976, 84; my translation).

5.

But could ancient Rome’s “popular government” serve as a model for adapting the institutional structure in the two authors’ own time? Guicciardini is in no doubt about this:

How misguided it is to quote the Romans at every turn! We’d need to have a city enjoying the same conditions as theirs and then govern it according to their example. It would be just

as incongruous for someone whose conditions were incongruous, as it would be to expect an ass to race like a horse. (Guicciardini 1994, 173)

This applies to military discipline, first of all:

Nor did the rulers of the city in those days have any trouble in persuading the people to undertake a new venture, either to avoid a danger or to increase their empire. For they were military men who did not know how to live without war. War was their trade, from which they drew riches, honours and reputation. So you cannot model yourself on these examples if your situation is different in kind and quality from theirs. (Guicciardini 1994, 66)

This hopeless scepticism allows us to see his criticisms of Machiavelli in a different light. If such criticisms are born of an aristocratic aversion, they feed on a vision of the “real truth” that is wholly directed at putting “the conditions and quality” of every type of polity in its proper context. As we shall see, Guicciardini’s various interpretations of “*governo largo*” are founded on this premise.

Machiavelli, on the other hand, states that he wishes to “extricate men” from the “error” committed by those who read histories “believ[ing] that [...] imitation is not only difficult but impossible, as if the sky, the sun, the elements, or human beings had changed in their motion, order, and power from what they were in antiquity” (Machiavelli 2008, 9). Since “the exceptional ability that prevailed then and the vice that prevails today” are clear if one compares ancient Roman times with his own, he writes:

I shall boldly proclaim in an open way what I understand of ancient times and of our own, so that the minds of the young men who will read these writings of mine can avoid the errors of the present and be prepared to imitate the past whenever fortune provides them with the proper occasion. (Machiavelli 2008, 213)

Except that, after demonstrating another example of “how much goodness and religion” there was in the Roman people, he observes:

And truly, where this goodness does not exist, nothing good can be hoped for, just as nothing can be hoped for in those provinces which in our own times are seen to be corrupt, as is the case in Italy above all others. Even France and Spain share to some degree in this corruption, and if in these provinces as many disorders cannot be seen as arise every day in Italy, this derives not so much from the goodness of their peoples, which in large measure has disappeared, as from their having a king who keeps them united, not only through his own exceptional skill, but also through the institutions of those kingdoms, which are not damaged beyond hope. It is quite evident that in the province of Germany this goodness and religion are still strong among the people; this causes many republics there to flourish in liberty and to obey their laws in such a fashion that no one outside or within these republics dares to occupy them. (Machiavelli 2008, 188)

The goodness of the German republics is attributed to the fact “that they have no extensive contacts with their neighbours, for their neighbours have not gone to visit them, nor have they themselves visited anyone else, because they are content with [their] goods—to live on the foods, and to dress themselves with the wools the country produces” (Machiavelli 2008, 189). This goodness therefore depends on the lack of foreign trade (which gives rise to corruption) but also on the fact that those republics

do not tolerate any of their citizens acting or behaving like noblemen: On the contrary, they maintain among themselves a clear equality; they are the mortal enemies of those lords and

noblemen who live in that province [...] And to explain more clearly what this title of nobleman means, I will say that men are called noble who, in a state of idleness, live luxuriously off the revenue from their properties without paying any attention whatsoever either to the cultivation of the land or to any other exertion necessary to make a living. Such men as these are pernicious in every republic and in every province, but the most pernicious are those who, besides the aforementioned fortunes, also have castles at their command and subjects who obey them. (Machiavelli 2008, 190)

With the exception of Tuscany and Venice, where merchants are without “any jurisdiction over men” and thus noblemen “more in name than in fact,” Machiavelli’s reference to the “feudal nobility” dominating in Italy involves both a break with the past and the hope of a “new prince.” Indeed,

in those provinces no republic or any body politic has ever arisen, for men of this kind are completely hostile to any form of civil life. And to try to introduce a republic into provinces organized in a similar way would not be possible, but to try to reorganize them, if there were anyone capable of serving as arbiter in such matters, would mean finding no other solution than to establish a kingdom there. The reason is this: that where there exists so much corrupt material that the laws are insufficient to restrain it, it is necessary to institute there, together with these laws, an even greater force, that is a royal hand that with absolute and excessive power may impose a restraint on the excessive ambition and corruption of the mighty. (Machiavelli 2008, 191)

The hopes for an “imitation” of the Roman popular government are therefore limited to Tuscany and primarily to Florence, where there is:

Such a state of equality that a prudent man with a knowledge of ancient civilizations could easily introduce a free form of government there. But Tuscany’s misfortune has been so great that until recently, it has not come upon any man who has been capable or knowledgeable enough to accomplish this. (Machiavelli 2008, 191)

Here the tone is detached, with the failure to establish a sufficiently stable government being imputed solely to a “misfortune” (i.e., to fortune?). Elsewhere, however, the tone and the judgement are much more severe. Machiavelli had already noted how in Florence,

although free and public elections have many times bestowed ample authority on a few citizens in order to reform Florence, they have, none the less, never organized the city for the common good but always according to the needs of their own faction; this has not brought order but greater disorder to that city. (Machiavelli 2008, 173)

Again, still referring to Florence,

If a republic governs it, there is no finer method of making your citizens wicked and causing divisions in your own city than to control a city that is divided, because each faction seeks to win favours and each creates friends through various corrupt means. Thus, two extremely great disadvantages arise from this: One is that you never make them your friends, for the reason that you cannot govern them well, since you must often vary the government, now with one humour, now with another; the other is that such concern with factions of necessity divides your republic. (Machiavelli 2008, 465)

If, then, in Florence the “material” is not so corrupt as to require a prince, the factional spirit is so strong that it is impossible to order “equality” in such a way as to satisfy the two “humours” at the same time. This conviction resurfaces in *Florentine Histories* where, in confirmation of the fact that Machiavelli’s *governo largo*

remains a kind of mixed government, the comparison with Rome is made in terms of “the different aims that motivated these two peoples; because the people of Rome wanted to enjoy the highest honours together with the nobles, whilst the people of Florence fought to have sole charge of the government, without the nobles’ political participation” and the reciprocal “animosities” ended in Rome with a law and in Florence “with the exile and death of many citizens” (Machiavelli 1962, 212; my translation).

In order to overcome the republic’s “endless disorders,” in *Discursus florentinarum rerum* Machiavelli presents Pope Leo X with a proposal for reform thanks to which, he promises him, “your aims will not merely be achieved but surpassed and your friends will continue to be honoured and live in safety; and the masses will have most evident cause for content” (Machiavelli 2001, 633; my translation). Power would be shared not between the nobles and the people but between:

three different qualities of men that exist in all cities; that is to say, the first citizens, the middle classes and the rest. And although there exists in Florence that equality to which I have referred above, nevertheless there are some in that city who possess a more refined spirit and they appear to merit precedence over the others who must also necessarily be satisfied when organizing the republic, if for no other reason than that the failure to satisfy that humour has been the ruin of past governments. (Machiavelli 2001, 633; my translation)

This form of organisation should be particularly remembered for the role it accorded “the rest,” that is, the popular component. The people, meeting in the re-established Great Council, were able to elect the city’s magistrates (except those appointed by the Pope or by the other institutions). It was also from among their number that the “*preposti*” were drawn. They were called on to attend the deliberations conducted by the other governing boards and, if necessary, to prevent them proceeding without first submitting them to more broad-based (and thus more representative) bodies (Machiavelli 2001, 635).

But was the creation, in Florence, under that Pope’s aegis, of institutions analogous to the Roman tribunes or censors enough to guarantee the longed-for “imitation”? Leaving the intended use of the work to one side, that virtue on which Machiavelli had made the institutions’ good functioning depend would have been missing in any event (Gilbert 1970, 161).

6.

Although Machiavelli considers a *governo largo* to be a kind of mixed government no less than Guicciardini (Pocock 1975, 448), he always uses the term with the same meaning, and with the implications that we have noted. Guicciardini acts differently and his multifaceted recourse to the term appears to be an indispensable element when reconstructing his thinking.

Attention to this point may also be justified on the basis of Bernardo’s statement, regarding the Medici, that:

Whoever is head of a narrow regime has as his objective only his own personal greatness and he always does what seems to him best to preserve it, with no respect for God, for his country or for mankind. Because our military forces depended on them (the Medici), we do not know how often they have made us engage mercenary soldiers unnecessarily, having employed as captains men who, though inadequate, were their friends and confidants. In order to sustain

these excessive expenses and keep his friends in the courts and circles of princes, did not Lorenzo, who as a trader had practically gone bankrupt, lay his hands on communal funds and help himself by covert means, to large sums of money? (Guicciardini 1994, 29)

The fact is that:

[T]hose who enjoy leading positions in the city do not primarily seek liberty as their objective as much as increase of power and making themselves as superior and outstanding as possible. As long as possible, they strive to conceal their ambition with this pleasing title of liberty. This is because those in a city who fear being oppressed far outnumber those who hope to oppress, so the person who seems to be assuming the patronage of equality has far more supporters than someone who openly goes for superiority. Nevertheless, if successful, the outcome reveals the designs of such men, since it is through this deception that they generally use the multitude to make themselves great. (Guicciardini 1994, 36)

In opposing *that* “narrow regime,” Guicciardini is already implying that, for him, the “narrow/broad” dichotomy is less absolute than it is for Machiavelli. At the same time, he picks up Machiavelli’s argument that the people only desire not to be dominated, whereas the nobles wish to dominate and he takes it in another direction: From being an argument in support of the people’s superiority, as it had been in the lesson Machiavelli had drawn from the Romans, the argument becomes a way both of showing how easily the people can be deceived by a renaissance court’s machinations and of reasserting their lack of experience in comparison with the nobles.

The age-old leitmotiv of attributing to the nobles a competence or “experience” of government that the people could never achieve does, in fact, permeate Bernardo’s replies to his interlocutors right to the end. However, it is oversimplistic to see him as a supporter of “narrow” government or *governo stretto*:

In my view, it is everywhere very difficult for a government of this kind to be good, but this is specially so in Florence; for there is little to choose between one family and another, nor are they so outstanding as to be able to differentiate between them without using force. Equality is natural to us and it is totally alien to us to see so many chiefs—apart from the fact that rivalries and discords would arise between them for endless reasons, so it would be impossible to prevent them rapidly, and in disorder, collapsing into either a tyranny or popular licentiousness. (Guicciardini 1994, 95)

However, he also warns that:

It is not enough to have introduced a free regime, for it too can conceal many mistakes and disorders. It must be established in such a way that we can taste the fruits of liberty, otherwise it will be good and pleasing only in name, and in effect very often resemble a tyranny. For when a popular government intrudes on and dominates others, takes from those it should give to and gives to those it should take from, when it torments and persecutes without any cause someone who should enjoy security, allows itself to be carried away by suspicion and oversteps the bounds of justice: when a people does all these things and becomes too licentious, then in my view it is not and should not any longer call itself defender of one’s country but its enemy and destroyer. (Guicciardini 1994, 97)

Behind the institutional project that Bernardo expounds in Book II, there lie constraints that prevent an unequivocal solution to the “*stretto/largo*” (“narrow/broad”) dilemma. So much so that he considers it

difficult to find the right medicine, for it must manage to avoid hurting the head by treating the stomach—in other words, the provisions must avoid altering the substance of popular

government, which is liberty; and by removing important decisions from the hands of people who do not understand them, they must avoid the risk of falling into or approaching a kind of tyranny by giving too much authority to any single individual. (Guicciardini 1994, 98)

Bernardo finds almost the entire solution to his problem in Venice, whose government, having "flourished, united, for hundreds of years already, as everyone knows, shows this cannot be attributed to fortune or chance" (Guicciardini 1994, 102). Here he may be alluding to Machiavelli's attempt to explain that success (which, for Machiavelli, was embarrassing) by resorting to the concept of "fortune" (Gilbert 1977, 324).

More precisely, the Great Council will have an elective function (namely, that of distributing "all paid and honorary offices and dignities" save a few assigned to other authorities), as well as that of approving laws but not of deliberating them "since the making of new laws or correction of old ones must be deliberated by more restricted Councils" (Guicciardini 1994, 99). Indeed, "if the city could survive with a broadly-based regime, in which everyone participated equally in its affairs and its honours, the government would perhaps be unjust, in that it would not differentiate between men's abilities and qualities" and so it is necessary to "think of restricting important deliberations to fewer people" (*ibid.*, 100). Whence his proposal to establish, in addition to a life Gonfalonier borrowed from the Venetian Doge, a Senate composed of one hundred and fifty members, "a number not so limited that all those in the city who were qualified could not enter, nor so large that ignorant and bad types could enter" (*ibid.*, 112).

Although Guicciardini, unlike Machiavelli, makes continuous use of the *governo largo/governo stretto* dichotomy, he refuses to make a choice in this respect. For him, there is no dilemma requiring one or other of the two alternatives to be adopted in institutional terms. They are, rather, the opposite ends of a continuum along which the solution appropriate to each institution is to be found on each occasion, thus allowing the field of decision-makers gradually to be reduced as matters progress from election to deliberation.

This appears even more clearly in two brief works dedicated to the choice between the appointment of those responsible for government either by election or by drawing lots. Here Guicciardini reflects on the aims of "popular governments and the liberties enjoyed in republics." The first is that

they may be organized in such a way that every citizen is equally subject to the law and that no distinction is made between a rich man and a poor one, a powerful one and a powerless one, and in a form whereby everyone can be sure that their person, their property and their condition cannot be interfered with except in accordance with the laws and ordinances of the city, which is precisely the reason why the free republics were established. The second aim they have is that the republic's benefits, that is to say, its offices of honour, should be extended to as many men as possible and in such a way that all citizens participate politically as much as possible. (Guicciardini 1992, 200; my translation)

For the purposes of

ordering matters to the second end, care must be taken not to desire an excessive extension or to desire too greatly that everyone may participate, lest there follow some disorder or harm to public administration, the latter being more important than the good that could stem from

the extension. Because the city is one body that, just as much in domestic matters as in foreign affairs, in matters concerning the observance of justice and laws as in those concerning the preservation and expansion of territory, is founded on and governs in the spirit of the magistrates, whose capacity for good government is necessary if the city's affairs are to go well. Conversely, when such men are inadequate, the city is governed badly and everything becomes disorderly and falls into ruin. (Guicciardini 1992, 200; my translation)

Guicciardini argues that both aims are achieved when, on the one hand, “the Great Council distributes all the offices both in relation to domestic matters and foreign affairs” and, on the other, “when ordering the way in which offices are distributed, has consideration for the city's need to be well governed, by providing that candidates are chosen for office through the highest number of beans, and that the magistrates are the most select figures of all” (Guicciardini 1992, 201; my translation).

The two aims are matched by two different interpretations of liberty and equality, however. The first is a “safety-liberty” or legal certainty, whereby all men are treated equally. When Bernardo says that “the objective of the person who introduced these free republics was not to allow everyone to meddle in government but to safeguard the laws and the common good, which is achieved better under one man, when he governs well, than by other types of government” (Guicciardini 1994, 17), he was not referring to that liberty in the name of which the nobles “always seek to extend their power” but, rather, that form of liberty that seeks to ensure that “everyone can be sure that their person, their property and their condition cannot be interfered with except in accordance with the laws and ordinances of the city, which is precisely the reason why the free republics were established.” The long eulogy of “the observance of justice,” of a proper distribution of rewards and punishments and of a structuring of judicial power that can ensure impartiality in “criminal as well as civil justice” (*ibid.*, 55) is structured to the same end. Here liberty and equality are necessarily compatible and require an “impersonal legal order” to the extent that “the role of the ‘many’ was less to assert the will of the non-élite than to maximise the impersonality of government” (Pocock 1975, 255).

The second vision is that of “liberty-as-participation” in government, which requires participation not to be “extended” but, rather, restricted to those who are competent. In such cases, however, in addition to sacrificing equality, liberty by itself by no means guarantees the desired result. Among the few to whom this liberty is reserved, there are those who aspire to an oligarchy (i.e., an aristocratic regime that is based only on wealth and disregards merit and competence) and all those who are driven by a frenetic pursuit of profit, which Guicciardini condemns just as much as Machiavelli (Skinner 1989, 279).

However, those “most fit to govern” can only come from an inner circle of the few. In order to avert these risks when selecting such men, Bernardo is not content with the election system for “the principal offices.” He proposes that the appointment to these offices be ordered according to their importance:

I would like them to serve as rungs in the scale of honour. For in a free regime which has the task of trying to accustom men to set store by honours and regaling a lot of worthy people, it is very useful to have as many esteemed ranks as possible to act as steps, one leading to the next. For this reason the Venetians were wise not to send someone out to a minor office who had already enjoyed a major one. (Guicciardini 1994, 142)

Thus election and a “ladder” system of offices become tools for guaranteeing apprenticeship in the skill of government. Pocock has linked the two visions of liberty to the extent that “[m]eritocracy [...] necessitates a measure of democracy. The *libertà* of the few is to have their *virtù* recognised by the *res publica*; the *libertà* of the many is to ensure that this acknowledgement is truly public and the rule of *virtù* and *onore* a true one” (Pocock 1975, 253). The connection finds a parallel in Guicciardini’s conviction that:

If a man is worthy, he is subject to the judgement not of powerful individuals but of the citizen body, which has better judgement than anyone else, because it is the prince and is dispassionate [...] It knows each one of us better than we do ourselves and has no other aim than to distribute things to those it considers to be worthy. (Guicciardini 1992, 202; my translation)

If, however, the “prince” is such only in his judgement of people and decisions and not in self-government (Manin 2010, 71), the government will be *largo*, or open, insofar as it can guarantee openness to, with the rotation of members of the elite, rather than direct political participation on the part of the people. In this sense, the two liberties continue to refer to two matters that Guicciardini always tends to distinguish: safety (or legal certainty) and participation in political deliberations, not just their approval.

Thus Guicciardini redeems the elitist paternalism with which he dismissed Machiavelli’s theory of political conflict: Not even the *virtù* in this theory can be taken for granted since it is, rather, a laborious and reversible achievement the recognition of which must be earned by “the best” from the people. On the other hand, when Machiavelli states that no more than forty or fifty citizens in any republic wish to be free in order to govern, whereas all the others desire liberty to live in safety (Machiavelli 2008, 88), his preference for a *governo largo* also suggests an unequal involvement of citizens, in the sense that those who are eligible constitute a decidedly differentiated group (Costa 1999, 58).

7.

In the end, the distance between Machiavelli and Guicciardini regarding a *governo largo* concerns far less the degree of popular participation in political decision-making and government than the value they respectively ascribe to it in comparison with that of safety-liberty or legal certainty.

The distance between them on the first point is lessened partly thanks to the open-mindedness and intellectual honesty with which the two authors expose the weak points in their own arguments, which thus become integral elements of the problems to be remedied. Machiavelli always subjects the people’s virtue to certain stringent conditions and he acknowledges that it can rapidly degenerate into corruption for reasons that cannot always be blamed on the nobles, just as Guicciardini’s “virtue of the best” must emerge from intense competition within the aristocracy that is never a foregone conclusion.

United by their aversion for tyrants and aware of the risks inherent in every form of absolute government, even if supported by the people, Machiavelli and Guicciardini do not even disagree about considering a *governo largo* to be a form of mixed government. In their vision of it, however, mixed government loses its

nature as the perfect form of government, discovered by Polybius to exist in republican Rome and handed down from then onwards as a model by virtue of the stability that it had ensured. How is it that, once the hierarchies of the medieval order collapsed, neither of the two authors takes refuge “in books”? Among the possible explanations, there is one of direct interest to us here that unites them once again. For them, the stability provided by different forms of government is, of itself, no longer a goal for which a “free society” is to be sacrificed. For this reason, it is necessary to examine their respective effects on that model of polity, in the awareness that, in an era so dominated by contingency, it will only be possible to seek the lesser evil. This can be perceived in *The Prince*:

No government should ever imagine that it can always adopt a safe course; rather, it should regard all possible courses of action as risky. This is the way things are: Whenever one tries to escape one danger one runs into another. Prudence consists in being able to assess the nature of a particular threat and in accepting the lesser evil. (Machiavelli 1984, 86)

In the *Dialogue*, Bernardo talks of Florence as a “now old” city, arguing that cities of this kind are “difficult to reform [...] and once they have been reformed, [...] soon lose their good set-up and always remember their original bad habits” (Guicciardini 1994, 79).

Nevertheless, the quest for the least harmful remedies against the dangers proceeds from a very different presentation of the values of a “free society.” The real distance between the two is about whether, of itself, participation-liberty should prevail over the safeguarding of individual liberties or vice versa. For Machiavelli, a *governo largo* is the result of a political conflict that began when the Roman people entered the public sphere insofar as they were armed, learning to defend what became their liberty up to the point of the empire’s maximum expansion, and at the same time to acquire “honours” that the patricians refused to grant, until they achieved an acceptable balance of power with them. For this reason, the conflictual origins of the *governo largo* will continue to direct the whole learning process regarding participation-liberty, that great civic virtue, until it is interrupted by corruption. Whereas liberty as the certainty provided by the rule of law is only the desire to be treated as equals, based on the assumption that respect for the law is a virtue that the people have already acquired thanks to the apprenticeship provided by participation-liberty. For the first time, there appears a theory on the conflicts that, insofar as they are directed at achieving participation in government for a group still excluded from it, are favourably compared (by virtue of their political nature) with those deriving from the desire to accumulate wealth or those seeking to annihilate existing adversaries so as to return to a simple form of government (Pizzorno 1993, 189).

Having reduced foreign and military policy to spheres of government competence, Guicciardini concentrates on a city that is used to living as a “free society” but with a structure of government and a political life rendered extremely unstable by conflicts between factions or private individuals: conflicts in which the people are a mass to be unscrupulously manoeuvred by princes and the *ottimati*. For him, safety-liberty prevails over participation-liberty, insofar as it was to this end that “the city’s laws and ordinances were established.”

However, precisely because it derives from a tradition that it will suffice to preserve, this liberty does not need to be one of his central concerns. Rather,

reforming a system of government reflecting a form of politics so infected with factional strife as to be self-destructive becomes the priority, so that public virtue can emerge. The instrument of institutional reform will also decide how to structure participation-liberty. A liberty that appears so limited: not only in relation to the people, who can express it in the Great Council only by approving laws and electing men to government office, but also (albeit for very different reasons) in relation to the nobles themselves, to whom access to government is granted through a "ladder of honours" that would seek to eliminate the greedy and the incompetent from the competition. In such conditions, participation-liberty ceases to acquire any independent value, whilst the vision of citizenship concentrates on the government's political dimension, on the one hand, and positions the individual in a "politically neutral area," on the other (Costa 1999, 65). This is the area of "safety-liberty," of government based on laws and of a depersonalization of power. So much so that Guicciardini's thinking has been considered to contain not so much the institutional as the ethical foundations of the principle of the separation of powers (Pocock 1975, 277).

8.

Much later, using different methods and to a different degree, constitutional democracies were to learn how to reconcile the participation-liberty/safety-liberty dilemma. They then learned how to channel, differentiate or (through institutional adjustments) absorb the corresponding tensions between democracy and civil rights protection, the co-presence of which provides the foundation for their innermost structure. But such a tried and tested ability continues to be challenged, as shown by the renewed conflicts between guardian governments and populism or between financial oligarchies and democratic governments.

If this is so, a comparison of Machiavelli with Guicciardini dashes the hopes of those who seek at all costs to show the relevance of the classical authors for the purposes of ennobling their own solutions or theses. Indeed, it invites all of us to learn a hard lesson: on how to live together in uncertainty without any comforting remedies and without using uncertainty as a pretext for not taking a stand or not seeking a remedy.

Sapienza University of Rome
Department of Legal Sciences
Piazzale A. Moro, 5
00185 Rome
Italy
E-mail: cesarepinelli@tiscali.it

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