

THE LANGUAGE OF DEMOCRACY BETWEEN ARISTOTLE AND MACHIAVELLI

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Abstract: What was it like to speak of and think about democracy in Machiavelli's time? This paper first reconstructs the pre-modern language of democracy in late Medieval and humanist political thought (from the translation of Aristotle's *Politics* in the thirteenth century to Machiavelli's context) discussing its conceptual implications. Second, it analyses Machiavelli's ideas on pre-modern democracy *vis-à-vis* books 3 and 4 of Aristotle's *Politics* and book 6 of Polybius' *Histories*. Situating Machiavelli into earlier reflections on democracy shows that while Machiavelli's thought provides crucial conceptual innovations, his debt to the classical sources on democracy is much deeper than a simple and unqualified rejection of the latter's languages.

Keywords: Machiavelli, Aristotle, Democracy, Polybius, Leonardo Bruni, Republicanism, McCormick, Popular Republics, Radical Republicanism

Introduction

While the republican Machiavelli has come under increasing scrutiny by scholars who interpret the Florentine as a democrat or a radical republican,²

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² Classical republican studies are especially: Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1978), Vol. I; M. Viroli, *Republicanism* (New York, 2002). An excellent historical critical deconstruction of the republican thesis is in J. Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 2019) and, from a different perspective, Straussian studies such as P. Rahe, 'Situating Machiavelli', in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, ed. J. Hankins (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 270–308; H. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago, 1998); C. Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago, 2017). For the democratic or radical republican literature on Machiavelli see: J. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge, 2011); F. Raimondi, *Constituting Freedom: Machiavelli and Florence* (Oxford, 2018); M. Breaugh, *The Plebeian Experience* (New York, 2013); F. Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza* (London, 2009); F. Del Lucchese, 'Machiavelli and Constituent Power: The Revolutionary Foundation of Modern Political Thought', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 16 (1) (2017), pp. 3–23; G. Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult: The Discourses on Livy and the Origins of Political Conflictualism* (Cambridge, 2018); M. Gaille, *Machiavelli on Freedom and Civil Conflict* (Leiden, 2018); J. Barthas, *L'argent n'est pas le nerf de la guerre: essai sur une prétendue erreur de Machiavel* (Rome, 2011); M. Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (Berlin, 2000); Y. Winter, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (Cambridge, 2018); C. Holman, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation* (Toronto, 2018). The same approach is behind all the chapters of *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy, and Language*, ed. F. Del Lucchese, F. Frosini and V. Morfino (Leiden, 2015). On the relationship between republicanism and democracy see also

far less attention has been devoted to positioning Machiavelli's ideas within the history of democratic thought before modernity. Analysing a similar topic, i.e. Hobbes and democracy, Sophie Smith claims that there are two different ways in which historians of political theory can study democracy before modernity. One is by reflecting on democracy as a 'purely historical phenomenon' which was the object of an active — mostly negative — discussion before modernity, whereas the other looks at 'hints and springs of modern democratic theory' in pre-modern authors.³ One could argue that, so far, the democratic or radical republican interpreters of Machiavelli have mostly focused on the latter whereas much remains to be written on the former.

For those scholars who interpret Machiavelli as a democrat or a radical republican, the latter's ideas on popular government comprehensively challenge any attempt to include him within such an oligarchic tradition as humanist republicanism.⁴ Two aspects characterize these views. First, much importance is attached to Machiavelli's social or institutional-political innovations against those of classical and humanist republicanism. Second, these studies usually highlight a rupture between Machiavelli's thought and the perspective of classical authors, especially Aristotle, Cicero and the humanists, on popular government.

This paper tests these interpretations of Machiavelli by complementing the first claim and questioning the second. By contextualizing the democratic interpretations of Machiavelli within the history of late Medieval and Renaissance political thought,⁵ this paper first reconstructs the pre-modern language of democracy in late Medieval and humanist political thought and discusses its conceptual implications. Second, it analyses Machiavelli's original ideas on popular government and democracy *vis-à-vis* two main texts that were among his sources: book 3 of Aristotle's *Politics* and book 6 of Polybius' *Histories*.

To fully reconstruct Machiavelli's position in the history of pre-modern democratic thought, this contribution combines the literature from political theory on Machiavelli as a democrat with two different debates in history of political thought. The first is concerned with the history of popular govern-

N. Urbinati, 'Competing for Liberty: The Republican Critique of Democracy', *The American Political Science Review*, 106 (2012), pp. 607–21.

³ S. Smith, 'Democracy and the Body Politic from Aristotle to Hobbes', *Political Theory*, 46 (2) (2018), pp. 167–96, p. 167.

⁴ J. McCormick, 'Machiavelli against Republicanism: On the Cambridge School's "Guicciardinian Moments"', *Political Theory*, 31 (5) (2003), pp. 615–43.

⁵ Of course, it is important not to mistake pre-modern democracy in Machiavelli's political and historical context with modern participatory democracy, J. Coleman, *A History of Political Thought: From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance* (Oxford, 2000), p. 240.

ment before modernity, a field which includes important classical studies⁶ and that has more recently been reframed by James Hankins' and others' studies on Renaissance political thought.⁷

The second is the literature on the complex relationship between Machiavelli, and Aristotle and Polybius. Usually when Machiavelli is compared to Aristotle and Polybius within the history of popular government, this is meant to oppose the former to the latter. If, with their theories of the mixed regime, Aristotle and Polybius are quintessential representatives of the oligarchic twist on classical republicanism, Machiavelli would break away from these ideas.⁸ Of course, there is some truth to this view. However, contextualizing Machiavelli's thought on democracy into earlier reflections on this topic also shows that Machiavelli's linguistic and conceptual debt to Aristotle's and Polybius' reflections on democracy is much deeper than a simple and unqualified rejection of the latter's ideas.

⁶ Especially: J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (Princeton, 2018); M.H. Hansen, *The Tradition of Ancient Greek Democracy and its Importance for Modern Democracy*, Vol. 9 (Copenhagen, 2005); F. Millar, *The Roman Republic in Political Thought* (Lebanon NH, 2002); P. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern, New Modes and Orders in Early Modern Political Thought*, Vol. II (Chapel Hill, 2017); D. Musti, *Demokratia: origini di un'idea* (Rome and Bari, 2013); G. Cambiano, *Polis: Un modello per la cultura europea* (Rome and Bari, 2000); D. Ragazzoni, 'Democratic Crises, revolutions, and Civil Resistance' in *A Cultural History of Democracy*, ed. E. Biagini, Vol. III (London and New York, 2021), pp. 159–81. There is an extensive debate on the role of pre-modern democracy in Hobbes, see the essays of R. Tuck, 'Hobbes and Democracy', and K. Hoekstra, 'A Lion in the House: Hobbes and Democracy', in *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, ed. A. Brett, J. Tully and H. Hamilton-Bleakley (Cambridge, 2006), respectively pp. 171–90 and 191–218.

⁷ See especially J. Hankins, 'Exclusivist Republicanism and the Non-Monarchical Republic', *Political Theory*, 38 (4) (2010), pp. 452–82; J.M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200–1575* (Hoboken NJ, 2008); R. Fubini, *Italia quattrocentesca: politica e diplomazia nell'età di Lorenzo il Magnifico* (Rome, 1994); W. Connell, 'The Republican Idea', in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, ed. J. Hankins (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 14–29; M. Jurdjevic, 'Machiavelli's Hybrid Republicanism', *The English Historical Review*, 122 (2007), pp. 1228–57; Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult*; M.T. Clarke, *Machiavelli's Florentine Republic* (Cambridge, 2018).

⁸ It is clearly so in J. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge, 2011) and J. McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics* (Princeton, 2018). In the same vein are Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude* and Vatter, *Between Form and Event*. For a different perspective, see P. Rahe, 'In the Shadow of Lucretius: The Epicurean Foundations of Machiavelli's Political Thought', *History of Political Thought*, 28 (1) (2007), pp. 30–55.

I

Aristotle and Polybius

Aristotle and Polybius differ in their judgments about democracy, but they agree that there must be a distinction between democracy and a virtuous mixed constitution, which includes a democratic element.

Aristotle treats democracy in three main works that were known by Medieval and early modern authors: they are the *Rhetoric*, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*.⁹ In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle lists four different regimes — democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy and monarchy — but unlike in the *Politics*, he does not rank them in good and corrupt constitutions.¹⁰ In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between three good and three corrupt constitutions depending on the number of rulers.¹¹ The good ones are monarchy, aristocracy and timocracy, whereas the bad ones are tyranny, oligarchy and democracy. In timocracy, which he describes as the worst among the good constitutions, there is majority rule and all are equal based on a property qualification. Anticipating what he will write in the *Politics*, Aristotle says that timocracy is sometimes also called *politeia*. It can degenerate into democracy because the two are both based on majority rule. Aristotle does not say much about democracy in the *Nicomachean Ethics* but claims that it is the least bad among all the corrupt regimes.

Of course, Aristotle's most complete treatment of democracy can be found in the *Politics*. Here, his ideas on democracy are scattered throughout different books. Aristotle considers democracy to be a degeneration of the *politeia*, the mixed constitution that corresponds to the virtuous rule of the many. As is well known, in his famous six-fold constitutional scheme in book 3,¹² he distinguishes between six different constitutions, three (monarchy, aristocracy and *politeia*) in which the rulers govern for the common good and three (tyranny, oligarchy and democracy) that degenerate from the former and in which the rulers govern just for their own personal advantage.

The word Aristotle uses to define this constitution, *politeia*, is ambiguous because, as James Hankins points out, for Aristotle, this word has both a generic meaning that refers to any constitution, and a specific one which refers to the mixed constitution.¹³ For Aristotle, the *politeia* as a mixed constitution combines oligarchic and democratic elements and strikes a balance between the virtues of two otherwise corrupt regimes. One could think that the *politeia* is Aristotle's attempt to save a form of the popular constitution

⁹ Aristotle's reflection on democracy can also be found in his *Constitution of the Athenians*. However, as is well known, this text was only discovered at the end of the nineteenth century so it had no influence on late Medieval and early modern commentators.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1.8.1365b.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.10.1160a–b.

¹² Aristotle, *Politics*, I278b 6.

¹³ Hankins, 'Exclusivist Republicanism', p. 456.

from the discredit that democracy had among many Greek political writers, such as Thucydides, Plato and Xenophon.

As in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle also says that democracy is the least corrupted of all the corrupt constitutions and he does not provide a univocal definition of this constitution. For example, in book 4 of the *Politics*, he integrates the constitutional classification of book 3, suggesting that there are only actually two main political constitutions, oligarchy and democracy, that have at least five more specific typologies, all of which he analyses in depth. In so doing, Aristotle inverts the relationship between *politeia* and democracy by claiming that the *politeia* is actually one possible form that democracy can take.

Polybius' view of democracy is more positive than Aristotle's. In book 6 of his *Histories*, Polybius draws on Plato to claim that there are six different simple constitutions, three of which are good and three of which are corrupt.¹⁴ The three good constitutions are monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, whereas the three bad ones are tyranny, oligarchy and ochlocracy. For Polybius, all constitutions form a circle in which each degenerates into others. The law of nature that, according to Polybius, rules this continuous degeneration is that of *anacyclosis*, i.e. a natural cycle of degenerations and renewals. The only way out of this *anacyclosis* is, for Polybius, the mixed regime that, unlike Aristotle's *politeia*, is a mix of monarchical, aristocratic and democratic elements. For him, Rome is the quintessential model of this mixed regime.

Polybius' reflection on democracy is different from Aristotle's. First, for the former we saw that democracy is not a corrupt regime. This probably reflects the different perception enjoyed by the Greek idea of democracy in Polybius' Hellenistic period, during which the ideological characterization of the classical Athenian democracy had softened.¹⁵ Polybius' positive assessment of democracy is unlike Plato's and Aristotle's but more like fourth-century orator Demosthenes. For Polybius, there are good and bad democracies. Good democracy, which he names *democracy*, 'sets a high value on equality and freedom of speech'.¹⁶ Bad democracy, *ochlocracy*, means mob rule without any control or limit. The latter, then, refers to the bad rule of the people.

Second, it is important to understand Polybius' view of democracy in light of his idea of *anacyclosis*. Since the mixed regime is the only way to escape the strict law of nature of *anacyclosis*, it is fair to say that for Polybius, all simple regimes are bad in themselves, regardless of whether they are good or corrupt, because eventually they will all be subject to the same logic of cyclical degeneration. This means that even if Polybius, unlike Aristotle, has a more

¹⁴ Polybius, *Histories*, VI. 4.7.

¹⁵ F.W. Walbank, *Polybius, Rome and the Hellenistic World: Essays and Reflections* (Cambridge, 2002); and Musti, *Demokratia*, pp. 304–10.

¹⁶ Polybius, *Histories*, VI. 4.7.

positive idea of democracy as a constitution, for him, democracy is not a good regime in absolute terms. The best is the mixed constitution. All simple regimes are imperfect because they will degenerate.¹⁷

Polybius was a Greek writer who wrote on Rome. Greek writers other than Polybius, for example Arrian, Dionysios of Alicarnasse and Plutarch, call the Roman republic a democracy, but when they do so, they assume that the word *demokratia* has the same meaning as *respublica*, which is the word that Latin writers would normally use for the Roman polity. The word democracy was never naturalized in Latin in the Roman world.¹⁸ Indeed, the Romans, like the Greek writers who wrote on Rome, were hostile to Greek democracy as a regime and never accepted it to describe the institutional and political arrangements of their republic. Roman hostility towards Greek democracy can find a typical representative in Cicero who, despite being influenced by Polybius, has a far more negative idea of democracy than the latter.¹⁹

II

The Language of Democracy before Machiavelli

Aristotle's constitutional schemes in the *Rhetoric* and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* had some influence in the Late Middle Ages, especially because these works were translated into Latin before the *Politics*. Such different authors as Brunetto Latini, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas (in some of his works) and James Buridan relied on the former texts.²⁰ However, the *Politics* had the strongest impact on late Medieval and early modern political thought since Polybius' reflection on democracy was unknown until the fifteenth century.

There were two main translations of Aristotle's *Politics* into Latin after the rediscovery of this text in Western Europe before Machiavelli: William of Moerbeke's in the 1260s²¹ and Leonardo Bruni's in the 1430s. In the former

¹⁷ On the difference between Polybius' and Dionysius of Halicarnassus' perspectives on how degenerate simple regimes are, see Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult*, pp. 181–219.

¹⁸ J. Hankins, 'Europe's First Democrat? Cyriac of Ancona and book 6 of Polybius', in *For the Sake of Learning: Essays in Honor of Anthony Grafton*, ed. A. Blair and A. Goeing (Leiden-Boston, 2016), pp. 692–710, p. 698; J.W. Atkins, *Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 20–1; F. Millar, *The Roman Republic in Political Thought* (Hannover and London, 2002), p. 51; Urbinati, 'Competing for Liberty'.

¹⁹ Atkins, *Roman Political Thought*, p. 21.

²⁰ Hankins, *Virtue Politics*, p. 79.

²¹ There were two translations into Latin of the *Politics*, besides Nicole Oresme's translation into French in the fourteenth century. See C. Flüeler, *Rezeption und Interpretation der aristotelischen Politica im späten Mittelalter* (Amsterdam, 1992). On the nature of political Aristotelianism in the Middle Ages see especially C. Nederman, 'The Meaning of Aristotelianism in Medieval Moral and Political Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 57 (4) (1996), pp. 563–85; G. Briguglia, *Il pensiero politico medievale*

translation, William of Moerbeke transliterated many Greek terms of Aristotle's text directly into Latin and rendered the Greek *politeia* and *demokratia* with, respectively, *politia* and *democracia*.²²

Several Medieval and scholastic scholars of Aristotle keep Moerbeke's linguistic distinction between the two models of popular government with some slight changes in their terminology. Most thinkers refer to Aristotle's *politeia* by using the word *politia*.²³ As for Aristotle's democracy, most authors follow Moerbeke in translating this word with the Latinized *democracia* or *democratia*. This is the case for Albert the Great (*demokratia*),²⁴ John of Paris (*democratia*), Marsilius of Padua (*democratia*), Peter of Auvergne (*democratia*),²⁵ Ptolemy of Lucca (*democraticus principatus*),²⁶ John of Jandun (*democratia*),²⁷ Bartolus of Saxoferrato (*democratia* or *populus perversus*),²⁸ Nicole Oresme (*democracie*).²⁹ Giles of Rome, who is probably the source for Bartolus, uses the phrase *perversio populi*,³⁰ whereas Thomas Aquinas changes the words that he uses for democracy in different works. In his commentary on the *Politics*, he sometimes confusingly uses *democratia* both for Aristotle's good and bad popular regimes or he uses the phrase of *popularis status*, which will be adopted later by Bruni. In his commentary on the *Ethics*, he refers to democracy as a *principatus multitudinis*³¹ whereas in his *De regimine principum* he calls democracy a *potentatus populi*.³²

Leonardo Bruni's translation of the *Politics* was hugely influential for Renaissance thinkers and is more relevant for Machiavelli. In this translation, (Turin, 2018), pp. 91–6. A comprehensive study on the nature of political Aristotelianism in the early modern period is still missing.

²² Hankins, *Virtue Politics*, p. 79. Blythe warns against exaggerating the differences between these two translations. See J. Blythe, *The Worldview of Ptolemy of Lucca* (Turnhout, 2009), p. 239.

²³ Hankins, 'Exclusivist Republicanism', p. 461; J. Blythe, *Ideal Government and the Mixed Constitution in the Middle Ages* (Princeton NJ, 2014).

²⁴ A. Black, *Guild and State: European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present* (London, 2017), p. 83.

²⁵ For John and Peter see Blythe, *Ideal Government*, pp. 146, 89 respectively. Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of Peace*, trans. A. Brett (Cambridge, 2006), p. 41.

²⁶ Blythe, *Ideal Government*, p. 112.

²⁷ R. Lambertini, 'Jandun's Question-Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*', in *A Companion to the Latin Medieval Commentaries on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, ed. F. Amerini and G. Galluzzo (Leiden–Boston, 2013), pp. 385–411, p. 392.

²⁸ Bartolus de Saxoferrato, *Tractatus de regimine civitatis*, in *Politica e diritto nel trecento italiano, il de tyranno di Bartolo da Sassoferrato*, ed. D. Quagliani (Florence, 1983), p. 150.

²⁹ Both in Blythe, *Ideal Government*, p. 212.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³¹ In his commentary on the *Ethics* (in *librum 8, lectio 10*), Aquinas gives the more correct translation *principatus multitudinis*. In Hankins, *Virtue Politics*, p. 599, footnote 17.

³² Hankins, *Virtue Politics*, p. 308.

the humanist was openly polemical towards William of Moerbeke's version due to what he saw as bad Latin and a lack of precision with Aristotle's technical terms.³³ Against Moerbeke, Bruni translated the Greek word *politeia* into *respublica* and, as Hankins brilliantly shows, was among the first to use this word in an exclusive way, only applying it to non-monarchical regimes.³⁴ Bruni also translates Aristotle's democracy as popular state (*popularis status*). In his work entitled *On Correct Translation*, Bruni provides an explanation for this choice. He criticizes William of Moerbeke for rendering the Greek word *demokratia* with the Latinized word *democracia* and writes that this is bad because the term for democracy in Latin is *popularis status*.³⁵ We saw that before Bruni, only Aquinas had used this phrase to refer to Aristotle's democracy.

Even if Bruni's translation of democracy with *popularis status* had a big influence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the very phrase *popularis status* is not consistently used as a synonym for Aristotle's democracy in the fifteenth century where there still are thinkers who, for different reasons, prefer either Moerbeke's transliterated words as *democracia* or *democratia* or alternative phrases. Just to give some examples, Lauro Quirini translates Aristotle's democracy as *democratia*³⁶ as does Cyriac of Ancona. Aurelio Lippo Brandolini uses *plebeius principatus*,³⁷ whereas Scala refers to *multitudinis plebiscitea*.³⁸

Of course, there were also some humanists who abandoned Moerbeke's translation of Aristotle's democracy as *democratia* or *democracia* and who instead followed Bruni's translation of Aristotle's democracy with *popularis status* or similar phrases such as *popularis societas* or *popularis respublica*. For example, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Politics* (1472), Donato Acciaiuoli refers to Aristotle's democracy as *popularis status* and talks about the *respublica* as degenerating into a *status popularis*.³⁹ In his later commen-

³³ See L. Bruni, 'Epistula super translationem Politicorum Aristotelis', in *Leonardo Bruni Aretino: Humanistisch-Philosophische Schriften mit Einer Chronologie Seiner Werke und Briefe*, ed. H. Baron (Leipzig, 1928), pp. 70–4, esp. pp. 73–4.

³⁴ Hankins, 'Exclusivist Republicanism', esp. pp. 463–6.

³⁵ L. Bruni, *Sulla perfetta traduzione*, ed. Paolo Viti (Naples, 2004), p. 121. However please note that this is only partly true because, among others, Cicero uses the phrase *civitas popularis* to refer to Greek democracy, see F. Millar, *The Roman Republic*, p. 51.

³⁶ Lauro Quirini, *De re publica*, in *Lauro Quirini Umanista*, ed. B. Vittore and K. Krautter (Florence, 1977), p. 131.

³⁷ Aurelio Lippo Brandolini, *Republics and Kingdoms Compared*, ed. and trans. J. Hankins (Cambridge MA, 2009), p. 240. For Cyriac, see the discussion later.

³⁸ Bartolomeo Scala, *Against Detractors*, in Bartolomeo Scala, *Essays and Dialogues*, trans. Rene Watkins (Cambridge MA, 2008), pp. 232–79, 254–6.

³⁹ D. Acciaiuoli, *In Aristotelis libros octo Politicorum commentarii* (Venice, 1566), p. 202.

tary to Aristotle's *Politics* (1576), Pietro Vettori translates democracy by the phrase *status populi*⁴⁰ and, more rarely, *respublica popularis*.

In another text that was widespread in Machiavelli's context, *De institutione reipublicae*, Francesco Patrizi uses the phrase *respublica popularis* to refer exclusively to popular regimes as distinguished from aristocracies or oligarchies.⁴¹ Patrizi echoes Herodotus' discussion of democracy and argues that the *respublica popularis* is a synonym for *isonomia*, which is the word that Otane uses in book 3 of the *Histories* to refer to democracy.⁴² However, for Patrizi, the *respublica popularis* is not Aristotle's democracy but Aristotle's specific sense of the *politeia*. Likewise, in his later work, *De regno et regis institutione*, Patrizi refers to *politeia* by using the phrase, *societas popularis* or *isonomia*. Even if he says that these phrases are synonyms for the Greek word *demokratia*, he also criticizes Aristotle for saying that democracy is the rule of the poor, instead claiming that democracy is rule by the people and not by the plebs. He then rejects Aristotle's democracy because it is a synonym of the rule of the poor. Interestingly, Patrizi also states that the *populus* of the popular republic must be different from the *plebs*, or the poor.

III

Leonardo Bruni and the Problem of Democracy in Renaissance Florence

As the negative rendering of democracy, as exhibited through the language of perversion in some Medievals suggests, almost none of these authors refer to democracy in a positive manner or apply the idea of democracy to the Italian self-governed city-states.⁴³ In fact, most of them criticize democracy, reinstating Aristotle's idea that it is a corrupt regime because the poor hold power

⁴⁰ P. Vettori, *In VIII libros Aristotelis de optimo statu civitatis* (Florence, 1576), pp. 218–19.

⁴¹ Hankins, *Virtue Politics*, p. 370.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Dunn, *Setting the People*, p. 36. For two partial exceptions see Ptolemy of Lucca and Albert the Great. In 4.1.2 of his continuation of Thomas Aquinas' *de regimine principum*, Ptolemy says that the republican government that 'once thrived in Athens' can be seen in some parts of Italy, see Ptolemy of Lucca, *On the Government of the Rulers: De Regimine Principum*, trans. James Blythe (Philadelphia, 1997), p. 216. Albert's positive view of democracy in some parts of his commentary to the *Politics* is due to interchange of words between democracy and *politia*, see Marco Toste, 'Tantum pauper quantum diues, tantum ydiota quantum studiosus: How Medieval Authors Made Sense of Democracy', in *Von Natur und Herrschaft. 'Natura' und 'Dominium' in der politischen Theories des 13. Und 14. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Delphine Carron et al, pp. 281–351, esp. Pp. 316–18.

against the wealthy.⁴⁴ However, Bruni's translation of Aristotle's term for democracy as *popularis status* poses new conceptual problems because of the complex historical-political situation in Florence in the fifteenth century and because Bruni occasionally calls Florence *popularis status*. It is crucial to reconstruct this context in order to understand Machiavelli's position within the history of pre-modern democracy.

To characterize the history of Florence in the fifteenth century we can oppose an oligarchic republicanism, which was represented by the traditional aristocratic families of the city, to what Najemy calls gilded-popular republicanism, which was represented by merchants, traders and the middle class of the city.⁴⁵ On paper, aristocratic republicans tended to favour a more restricted notion of the people and defended the aristocratic prerogatives of republicanism against mob rule. They championed *governi stretti* with smaller assemblies, strict criteria based on income for determining citizenship and tended to favour the wealthy elites who lived in Italian city-states. Conversely, popular republicans supported *governi larghi*, endorsed larger public assemblies and institutions and favoured broader citizenship rules and policies that would favour the lower classes in the city-state.

In 1434, Cosimo de' Medici assumed power and was able to defeat the opposition of the Florentine oligarchic families to then become the actual ruler of Florence. During the fifteenth century, there were several failed attempts to overturn the Medici. Some, like the Congiura de' Pazzi, aimed to replace them with the older oligarchic regime. Others, like the attempt to oust Piero de' Medici, were made in the name of popular republicanism.⁴⁶ The popular republican faction achieved its goal of establishing a popular republic in Florence, first when Savonarola managed to have the Great Council reopen in Florence, and second when Soderini's popular republic, in which Machiavelli worked as a secretary of the second chancellery, was established.

Political language adapted to these complex political and social changes. Hankins rightly shows that the humanists gradually started to use *respublica* in an exclusivist, non-monarchical sense in the fifteenth century and also notes that his exclusivist usage of *respublica*, and the subsequent appropriation that many humanists made of this usage, allowed them to eliminate the difference between popular and oligarchic governments. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, *respublica* came to be applied to both the virtuous rule

⁴⁴ For Kalyvas, this very characterization of democracy as the rule of the poor in pre-modern political thought is the core ideology of democracy, see A. Kalyvas, 'Democracy and the Poor: Prolegomena to a Radical Theory of Democracy', *Constellations*, 26 (4) (2019), pp. 538–53.

⁴⁵ J. Najemy, 'Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics', in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, ed. J. Hankins (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 80–2.

⁴⁶ See G. Pampaloni, 'Fermenti di riforme democratiche nella Firenze medicea del Quattrocento', *Archivio storico italiano* (1961), pp. 11–62.

of the few and the virtuous rule of the many, overlapping with Aristotle's *politeia*, or good popular government.

In fact, writers who were supporters of *governi stretti* championed Aristotle's mixed regime or its Latin translation into *repubblica*, or they alternatively used the phrase *governo degli ottimati*, *governo dei pochi* or *oligarchie* to refer to their regimes. Very often, *politeia*, in its specific sense, overlapped with oligarchic regimes and Venice could be taken as an example of this combination of regimes. Of course, *repubblica* could also be used to refer to popular republics and could be qualified with adjectives accordingly. As some sided with oligarchic regimes and others with popular republics, to show their political allegiances they had to specify if they were referring to oligarchic or popular republics.⁴⁷ Such authors as Francesco Patrizi, Bartolomeo Platina⁴⁸ and Bartolomeo Scala,⁴⁹ among others, qualify the term *repubblica* by adding to it either *optimatum* or *popularis*.

How should Bruni's translation of Aristotle's term for democracy as *popularis status* be positioned in this context? As many scholars have shown, Bruni himself is not consistent in his usage of the phrase *popularis status*. In some works, and especially in some letters, in his famous *Laudatio* and in the oration to Nanni Strozzi, Bruni uses the phrase *popularis status* to refer to the Florentine republican regime of his time, therefore appearing to attach a positive meaning to this word.⁵⁰ Bruni also uses the phrase *popularis status* as a translation of the *timokratia* or *politeia* of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁵¹ This would seem to contrast with his rendering of Aristotle's *demokratia* as *popularis status* in his translation of the *Politics*. In his final years, in his treatise on the government of Florence, Bruni claims that Florence is a mixed constitution in the Aristotelian sense of combining democratic and oligarchic elements.⁵² The contradiction remains in which Bruni at first uses the phrase *popularis status* in a positive sense to refer to the Florentine republican constitution and then, after claiming that this phrase translates Aristotle's corrupt regime of democracy, switches to considering Florence a mixed regime that combines democratic and oligarchical elements.

Scholars have provided different explanations in order to account for these changes in Bruni's thought. Dees argues that Bruni did not consistently or tech-

⁴⁷ Hankins, *Virtue Politics*, p. 368.

⁴⁸ Bartholomaei Platinae, *De principe*, ed. Giacomo Ferrau (Messina, 1979), p. 56.

⁴⁹ Scala, *Detractors*, pp. 253–5.

⁵⁰ J. Hankins, 'Leonardo Bruni on the Legitimacy of Constitutions: (Oratio in funere Johannis Strozze 19–23)', in *Reading and Writing History from Bruni to Windschuttle: Essays in Honour of Gary Ianziti*, ed. C.T. Callisen (London, 2016), pp. 73–86.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² L. Bruni, 'Peri tēs politeias tōn Phlōrentinōn: Sulla costituzione fiorentina', in *Opere letterarie e politiche*, ed. Paolo Viti (Turin, 2013), pp. 507–17, p. 514.

nically use the phrase *popularis status* before his translation of the *Politics*.⁵³ Najemy claims that Bruni was not particularly concerned with defining different regimes precisely because of his allegiance to civil republicanism, which he sees as an apolitical ideology that praises obedience to rulers.⁵⁴ Hankins argues that Bruni was just a clever rhetorician and did not pay too much attention to the precision of constitutional schemes.⁵⁵ Two aspects are important to consider when attempting to make sense of Bruni's different uses of the phrase *popularis status* to refer to Florence's republican government and of the vocabulary of democracy in the fifteenth century.

The first is that, as Rubinstein notes, Bruni was applying Aristotle's constitutional ideas to investigate the nature of the Florentine Constitution.⁵⁶ It could be that in his attempt to use Aristotelian categories to explain the political-constitutional situation of Florence, Bruni changed his mind as to how to employ the Latin translations of the Aristotelian regimes. That would explain why he started to use the phrase *popularis status* in some early works and then dropped it in order to refer to Florence, given his deeper understanding of the subtle complications of Aristotle's constitutional scheme.

The second reason that could account for this change of meanings in Bruni's use of *popularis status* is that in using this phrase positively to refer to the Florentine republican scheme, Bruni was just following an ingrained habit in his own time by which Florence was alternatively referenced by the words *politia*, *respublica* or *popularis status* without any proper distinction. Before and during Bruni's time, people would normally label the Florentine government as a republican or popular government.⁵⁷ It is not that there was no difference between popular and oligarchic states in Florence before and in Bruni's time. The opposition between the two had been there even before the age of Dante. However, fourteenth-century Florentines regularly described their government as *stato popolare* or *stato di popolo*, sometimes for

⁵³ R. Dees, 'Bruni, Aristotle and the Mixed Regime in "On the Constitution of the Florentines"', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 15 (1987), pp. 1–23, esp. pp. 6–7.

⁵⁴ Najemy, 'Civic Humanism', p. 94.

⁵⁵ J. Hankins, 'The Civic Panegyrics of Leonardo Bruni', in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, ed. Hankins, pp. 169–76.

⁵⁶ N. Rubinstein, *Florentine Constitutionalism and Medici Ascendancy in the Fifteenth Century*, in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. N. Rubinstein (London, 1968), p. 448.

⁵⁷ Scholars disagree on whether this definition should be seen in contrast to princely and monarchical regimes. On this see J. Coleman, *A History of Political Thought*, pp. 199–276; Hankins, *Virtue Politics*; and G. Pedullà, 'Humanist Republicanism: Towards a New Paradigm', *History of Political Thought*, 41 (1) (2020), pp. 43–95. These studies provide an alternative view to the republican interpretation of late medieval and early modern political thought that can be found in Hans Baron, John Pocock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli.

rhetorical purposes, to refer to the ideal of self-government that legitimized the government of the city.⁵⁸

This means that when fourteenth-century Florentines use the phrase *popularis status* to refer to the Florentine government, they do not mean to identify it with Aristotle's *demokratia*, but just with a generic form of popular self-government. Therefore, Bruni was just following a rooted habit in his own time by using the phrase *popularis status* in some of his works. If we add to this that the oligarchical government of Florence before 1434 readopted the rhetoric of fourteenth-century Florentine popular government, it is clear that there was an intentional lack of clear distinctions between oligarchic and popular governments in Bruni's time. Bruni's submissive language to the oligarchic republic's re-use of popular republican language is not different from that of many of Medici's supporters. When he achieved power, Cosimo de' Medici also defined the Florentine state as a *popularis status* to give the idea of continuity between his government and the two previous governments, the oligarchic and the fourteenth-century popular government. This strategy also explains why such different partisans of the Medici government as Donato Acciaiuoli and Platina used the phrase *popularis status* to refer to the rules of both Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici.⁵⁹

Clearly, we have to make a distinction between the aristocratic republicans of the old guard and the Medici. However, like the old oligarchs, the latter were building their power on the basis of broad popular consent. Therefore, for most popular republican supporters throughout the fifteenth century in Florence it made little difference whether the government of the city was in the hands of traditional oligarchs like Maso degli Albizzi before or the Medici family that, after 1434, took power in the city of Florence. In both cases, the oligarchs were using symbols and narratives of popular republics and openly rejecting the institution which was the symbol of popular republicanism in Florence, i.e. the Great Council.⁶⁰ Therefore, there was a great deal of confusion about the language and conceptualization of popular republics throughout the entire century. Yet this use of the phrases *popularis status* or *stato popolare* to describe their regimes will hardly be convincing for popular republicans.

⁵⁸ N. Rubinstein, *Studies in Italian History in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, I: Political Thought and the Language of Politics* (Rome, 2004), p. 155.

⁵⁹ N. Rubinstein, *The 'De Optimo Cive' and the 'De Principe' by Bartolomeo Platina*, in Rubinstein, *Studies in Italian History*, pp. 268–9.

⁶⁰ As Janet Coleman rightly claims: 'An aristocratic elite seems to have accepted a republican language with its normative notions of consent and representation as the foundation of legitimate republican government [. . .] Fictions to be sure, but it has been argued that they affected the political *style* of the elite.' Coleman, *A History*, p. 239.

IV

The Democratic Republic: Savonarola and Soderini

This became very clear when, with Charles VIII's descent into Italy, the Medici were exiled and the first actual popular republic of the fifteenth century which was established in Florence was initially supported by the sermons of Girolamo Savonarola and then under Piero Soderini. Scholars agree that this political change profoundly impacted the Italian, and especially Florentine, cultural constitutional and political debate.⁶¹ It led to new discussions, writings and theorizing that would carry on for two generations, until Machiavelli and beyond.

In this renewed context, the Medici exile and the gradual loss of power of the old Florentine aristocracy imposed a clearer conceptual distinction between oligarchic and popular republics. The more we approach the end of the fifteenth century, the more we observe that authors also tend to dissolve the difference between Aristotle's good and corrupt constitutions and increasingly draw on Aristotle's more generic division of constitutions based on whether power is exercised by one, few or many.⁶² Political writers start to use *respublica* without qualification as a polyarchic non-monarchical regime in which power is shared among the ruling group. However, at the same time, some feel the need to qualify the term *respublica* with the word *popular* and tend to erase the difference between good and corrupt popular republics.

It is not surprising that those political writers who favour Soderini's popular republic describe *respublicae populares* as 'true' republics.⁶³ For example, drawing on Cicero, *De re publica*, 1.39 in Augustine (*De civitate dei*, 2.21), Scala says that 'popular government [. . .] is properly called a republic'⁶⁴ and Salamonio argues that 'the popular republic is the true republic'. Moreover, interestingly, Savonarola and Scala, who both draw on Ptolemy of Lucca,⁶⁵ omit the latter's reinstatement of Aristotle's critique of democracy as the rule of the poor in their descriptions of popular government. As this is a classical argument against democracy, it could be that these authors perceived the reinstatement of Aristotle's critique of democracy as the rule of the poor to

⁶¹ F. Gilbert, 'Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricellari: A Study on the Origin of Modern Political Thought', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (1949), pp. 101–31, esp. p. 108; C. Dionisotti, *Machiavellerie: Storia e fortuna di Machiavelli* (Turin, 1980), pp. 138–42; R. Von Albertini, *Firenze dalla repubblica al principato: Storia e coscienza politica*, pp. 167–85; *Storiografia repubblicana fiorentina*, ed. J.J. Marchand and J.C. Zancarini (Florence, 1980), pp. 17–29.

⁶² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279a.

⁶³ On this see D. Wootton, 'The True Origins of Republicanism', in *Il Repubblicanesimo moderno: L'idea di repubblica nella riflessione storica di Franco Venturi*, ed. M. Albertone (Naples, 2006), pp. 292–5.

⁶⁴ Scala, *Against Destructors*, p. 255.

⁶⁵ Blythe, *The Worldview of Ptolemy*, p. 232.

be damaging to their attempts to legitimize the new Florentine popular republic as a democracy.

In order to understand how the reflection on democracy led to Machiavelli, we have to understand its evolution within this context. One distinctive feature of this reflection was the increasing use of Vernacular, especially in Florence, to refer to the new popular government. This pattern first starts with Savonarola. In his *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence*, drawing on a position that was common throughout the fifteenth century, Savonarola supports the reopening of the Great Council and indirectly identifies Medicean rule with tyrannical power.⁶⁶ When he characterizes Florence as a republic, Savonarola does not use the word *republic* (*repubblica*) but refers to Florence as a *civil government* (*regime civile*).⁶⁷ Savonarola's phrase *regime civile* translates Ptolemy of Lucca's Latin *regimen politicum*. For some scholars, the *regimen politicum* is a translation of Aristotle's constitutional polity, *politeia*, as *civilitas*.⁶⁸ However, two things strike an important distinction between Savonarola's and Ptolemy's ideas on this regime. First, unlike Ptolemy, in which the *regimen politicum* degenerates into democracy, Savonarola does not oppose any degenerate regime to his *regime civile*. Second, even if Ptolemy somehow characterizes his *regimen politicum* as a mixed constitution, Savonarola surely does not do so with his *regime civile*.

Throughout his works, Savonarola uses the phrase *regime civile* or *vivere civile* as synonyms for *vivere popolare*. Also, he distinguishes the regime based on the latter, the *civil government*, from the *government of the best* (*governo degli ottimati*),⁶⁹ exhibiting a clear preference for the former, at least in Florence. Likewise, in the lively and renovated political and constitutional debate that followed 1494 (from *governo largo* to experimental Medici rules to the democratic republic of 1526–31 before the final and definitive return of the Medici as absolute rulers), it is by now widely established among popular republicans that in Florence the *vivere civile* was achieved in popular republics or *governi larghi* and not in oligarchic republics or *governi stretti*. Previous humanists tended to blur the distinction between popular and oligarchic republics. If it is true that they would use the word *respublica* in a neutral way, it is equally true that for no humanist before, the *vivere civile* could be used exclusively as a synonym for the *vivere popolare* as opposed to tyranny and

⁶⁶ G. Savonarola, *Treatise on the Rule and Government of the City of Florence*, in D. Beebe, A. Borelli and M.P. Passaro, *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490–1498* (New Haven CT, 2013), pp. 176–206, p. 187.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 179, 183, 181–4.

⁶⁸ N. Rubinstein, 'Politics and Constitution in Florence at the End of the Fifteenth Century', in E.F. Jacob, *Italian Renaissance Studies: A Tribute to the Late Cecilia M. Ady* (London, 1960), pp. 148–83, p. 160.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

oligarchic government.⁷⁰ As *vivere civile* also included oligarchic republics, it could not be limited to *vivere popolare*, which only reflected the order and ideology of popular republics.

We have seen that the Vernacular phrases *Stato*, *governo* or *reggimento popolare* have their long-standing history in Florence but as we also saw, they became ambiguous phrases in Florentine political thought throughout the fifteenth century. Like their equivalent Latin words, starting from the end of the fifteenth century, it became standard to use these words to define popular governments against oligarchic ones without the ambiguity that they had before. Between the time in which Savonarola preached his popular republican ideas and the years in which Machiavelli started working on his political writings, most well-educated people were aware that these phrases were also used to refer to Aristotle's democracy because of Bruni's Latin translation of Aristotle's democracy as *popularis status*. The overlap between *stato popolare* and Aristotle's democracy became standard starting from the last decade of the fifteenth century and was part of a more general shift in political language that accompanied the new popular government. This shift was also well represented in the *Orti Oricellari*, where, as Gilbert shows, Vernacular became the main language of communication and people felt the need to find a new political vocabulary that was more appropriate to the moment and which broke with the political reflection of the Quattrocento.⁷¹

In fact, in his later Vernacular translation of Aristotle's *Politics*, Antonio Brucioli, who was one of the participants in the *Orti Oricellari* which Machiavelli attended repeatedly between 1515 and 1517, translates Aristotle's specific sense of *politeia* and *demokratia* as *repubblica* and *governo popolare*, respectively. Brucioli's translation opened a path that became standard for most subsequent political writers, for example Bernardo Segni and Bernardo Cavalcanti. In his translation of Aristotle's *Politics* into Vernacular Florentine at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Segni renders Aristotle's specific sense of the *politeia* or Bruni's *repubblica* into the Vernacular word *repubblica* and Aristotle's *demokratia*, and its corresponding Bruni translation, into *status popularis*, with *repubblica* and *stato popolare* respectively.⁷² Cavalcanti uses the phrase *repubblica popolare* in his *Trattato*.⁷³

By the end of Florence's popular republic in 1512, a clear dividing line between oligarchic and popular republics was the rule in Florence and many

⁷⁰ This point is also underlined in J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton NJ, 2016), p. 188.

⁷¹ F. Gilbert, 'Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricellari: a Study on the Origin of Modern Political Thought', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* (1949), pp. 101–31.

⁷² B. Segni, *Trattato dei governi* (Milan, 1927), III, p. 6.

⁷³ M.B. Cavalcanti, *Trattati sopra gli ottimi reggimenti delle repubbliche antiche e moderne* (Milan, 1805), pp. 60–3, 115.

debates among those two groups followed, especially in the years between this date and the next popular republican regime in Florence that was established between 1527 and 1531. In their political writings, both Francesco Guicciardini and Donato Giannotti refer to Aristotle's democracy as *stato*, *regime popolare* or simply as *popolare*.⁷⁴ They use these phrases for Aristotle's term for democracy to refer to Savonarola and Soderini's popular republican regimes in Florence, but from opposite perspectives as Guicciardini defends oligarchic governments whereas Giannotti supports popular republics.

Drawing on Aristotle, the former distinguishes a simple popular government from its degeneration, identifying the former as *popolare* and the second as *licenza*, which is reminiscent of Machiavelli's idea of *licentioso*. He then claims that the ideal regime should be a mixed regime and systematically criticizes the role that the people or mob rule can have in public decisions. The latter embraces the idea of the mixed regime, but anticipating Machiavelli and mixing ideas from Aristotle and Polybius, he clearly states that in the case of Florence, the mixed regime must lean towards the *popolarità* or the democratic regime. The new practice of referring to *regime civile* as *respublica popularis* or *reggimento popolare* confirms that towards the end of the fifteenth century, the Vernacular phrase of *stato popolare* gradually came to overlap with Aristotle's democracy through Bruni's translation of this Aristotelian notion as *popularis status*.

V

Machiavelli's Language of Democracy

Machiavelli's thought fully reflects the shift that we just described in the language of popular republicanism at the end of the fifteenth century. Given Machiavelli's acquaintance with Savonarola and Scala earlier and Brucioli, Giannotti and other participants to the *Orti Oricellari* later, it is not surprising that when he indicates his contingent preference for republican governments

⁷⁴ Already in his early work, *Discorso on Logrognò*, Guicciardini clearly outlines the difference between the *vivere popolare* and the corresponding *governì* or *stati popolari* from the government of the *ottimati*. Quite consistently in his own works, from the *Discourse on Logrognò* to the *Dialogue on the Reggimento Fiorentino*, Guicciardini repeatedly talks about *stati* or *governì popolari* and *vivere popolare* in opposition to the *governo degli ottimati*. On the political language of Guicciardini see J.L. Fournel and J.C. Zancarini, *La politique de l'expérience: Savonarole, Guicciardini et le républicanisme florentin* (Alessandria, 2002); and J.L. Fournel, *La Grammaire de la république: Langues de la politique chez Francesco Guicciardini* (Geneva, 2009). As for Giannotti, in his appropriation of Aristotle's constitutional scheme of book III in his own *The Republic of the Florentines*, he translates Aristotle's *politeia* as *repubblica* and Aristotle's *demokratia* as *popolarità*, see D. Giannotti, *Repubblica fiorentina*, ed. G. Silvano (Geneva, 1990), pp. 81–3. On Giannotti, see Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 272–330; and R. von Albertini, *Firenze dalla repubblica al principato* (Turin, 1970), pp. 145–54.

over princely ones, Machiavelli does not use the word republic but the phrase *stato popolare*, which refers to one particular type of republic. In the *Discourses*, he says that if one had to choose which regime could be maintained in corrupt cities, it would be better to have popular and not kingly states, implicitly suggesting that popular republics are the true republics.⁷⁵ To fully evaluate Machiavelli's originality *vis-à-vis* this move and his position within the pre-modern democratic tradition, we have to analyse his possible dependence on Aristotelianism along with the importance of his main source on democracy: Polybius.⁷⁶

In *Discourses* II. 2, Machiavelli presents a six-fold classification of three good and three corrupt regimes and uses the word *popolare* to name what in Polybius' classification features as democracy. Like Polybius, Machiavelli treats democracy as a simple regime and he translates its corresponding degenerated simple regime, ochlocracy, as *licentioso*, licentious. As is well known, Machiavelli's classification in the *Discourses* draws on the scheme that Polybius presented in book 6 of his *Histories*, a text that was scarcely known in translation before Machiavelli, who appears to have been among the first to use it in the early modern period.⁷⁷

James Hankins has detected an earlier usage of this text in the political writer, Cyriac of Ancona who used *democratia* to refer to the popular republic of Ancona and also relied on Polybius' scheme in book 6. Hankins describes Cyriac as 'the one securely identifiable humanist of the fifteenth century [. . .] who used *democratia* as a legitimate Latin word, and in a positive sense'.⁷⁸ This certainly might be the case if we understand the Latin term *democratia* to be the only way to refer to democracy in the fifteenth century. However, if the hypothesis advanced in this paper is correct, there was also another way to translate democracy and, more specifically, Aristotle's democracy, which became crucial towards the end of the fifteenth century as *popularis status* or *stato popolare* based on Bruni's translation of Aristotle's *Politics*. Therefore, we could complement Hankins' claim by saying that there were other writers

⁷⁵ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.18 (51). I quote from the following English translation of Machiavelli's *Discorsi*: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago IL, 1996) (henceforth referred to as *Discourses*).

⁷⁶ On the usage of Polybius before Machiavelli see C.J. Nederman, 'Polybius as Monarchist? Receptions of Histories VI before Machiavelli, c.1490–c.1515', *History of Political Thought*, 37 (2016), pp. 461–79; and also C. Nederman and M.E. Sullivan, 'The Polybian Moment: The Transformation of Republican Thought from Ptolemy of Lucca to Machiavelli', *The European Legacy*, 17 (7) (2012), pp. 867–81.

⁷⁷ A. Momigliano, 'Polybius' Reappearance in Western Europe', in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, ed. F.W. Walbank (Middletown CT, 1977), pp. 79–98; Dionisotti, *Machiavellerie*, pp. 138–40. For the relationship between Machiavelli and Polybius, see 'Polibio e Machiavelli: costituzione, potenza, conquista', in G. Sasso, *Studi su Machiavelli* (Naples, 1967), pp. 223–80.

⁷⁸ Hankins, 'Europe's First Democrat?', p. 700.

in the fifteenth century (Scala, Savonarola) and others in the sixteenth century (Brucioli, Giannotti) who referred to democracy positively. Based on the common Polybian sources, what is *democratia* for Cyriac becomes *popolare* in Machiavelli.

Aside from the question of how Machiavelli uses Polybius' theory of *anacyclosis*, the former's conceptualization of democracy reflects Polybius' positive view of democracy. Unlike Aristotle and all the late Medieval and early modern Aristotelians up until Savonarola and Scala whose thought we have reconstructed in this article, Machiavelli unquestionably uses the term *popolare* for democracy and in a consistently positive sense. One could speculate that, as for Cyriac, because of his more positive view of democracy, Polybius could be a better ally than Aristotle for Machiavelli to ground his more positive idea of democracy.

However Machiavelli has two fundamental disagreements with Polybius' democratic theory. First, in Polybius, democracies or popular states are mainly of one kind: they are just Athens and Thebes. However, in Machiavelli, democracies or *stati popolari* are of different kinds. When the Florentine first introduces the term *popolare* in the *Discourses* and applies it to the restoration of the popular regime after Pisistratus' fall, he says that this regime was made according to Solon's orders. From Machiavelli's words, we understand that Solon's democratic order or *stato popolare* is only one among others. In Machiavelli's view Solon's Athens was an extreme *stato popolare* because it did not afford any space to aristocratic and monarchic components. In fact, unsurprisingly, Machiavelli also calls Soderini's regime a popular republic and one could argue that Rome as well, despite being identified as a mixed regime, actually fits the category of popular republics because it is a mixed regime in which, unlike in Sparta and in Venice, the guard of freedom lies in the people.⁷⁹ Moreover, in the *Florentine Histories*, he refers to the famous Florentine popular republic of the beginning of the thirteenth century as *governo popolare*.

The second fundamental disagreement with Polybius concerns Machiavelli's judgment of democracies or *stati popolari*. As we have already stated, Polybius has a more positive view towards democracy than does Aristotle. However it is clear that in his scheme, all simple regimes are bad because they are doomed to degenerate into their opposites. This is not the case for Machiavelli who recognizes the advantages that simple regimes, both oligarchic and popular republics, can have under specific circumstances. So, Machiavelli's preference for Rome *vis-à-vis* Venice does not lead him to consider the latter as a bad regime in absolute terms. For Machiavelli, if you are interested in having a republic that is stable but does not want to expand abroad, then

⁷⁹ Pedullà rightly claims that in Machiavelli there are two different families of mixed regimes, those led by the plebs and those led by the aristocrats, see Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult*, pp. 122, 147, 182.

Venice (and Sparta, although Machiavelli defines this as a mixed regime unlike Venice) are very good examples. Likewise, Athens, the quintessential model of a simple regime, is a popular republic. Machiavelli's treatment of Athens has puzzled scholars. As McCormick notes, Machiavelli rather curiously seldom mentions Athens.⁸⁰ His portrayal of democratic Athens would appear to be the classical Aristotelian or Polybian image of a pure and simple regime as opposed to the mixed regime. In *Discourses* I. 2, Machiavelli opposes the Spartan constitution of Lycurgus, which is the representation *par excellence* of the mixed constitution, to that of Athens. Machiavelli is sometimes critical of Athens. The chronic problem of the Athenian republic, i.e. its inner instability due to constitutions that did not mix with the aristocratic and the monarchical principle, always remained even though Athens only lasted for a short time.⁸¹

Yet when Machiavelli mentions Athens, he also says that 'it was one of the most prosperous republics in history'.⁸² In most other passages in which Machiavelli mentions Athens, he generally conveys a very positive image of this republic. For example, in *Discourses* I. 29, Machiavelli explains why the Romans were less ungrateful than the Athenians towards their citizens. Machiavelli's explanation is that in Athens, freedom was 'taken away from it by Pisistratus in its most flourishing time and under a deception of goodness',⁸³ something which after the end of Pisistratus' tyranny led to many revenges and suspicions towards the citizens. This never happened in Rome in the time between the expulsion of the kings and the advent of Sulla and Marius. For Machiavelli, this different attitude of Athens and Rome towards their citizens does not qualify the first as a bad regime by definition but was simply the result of different specific circumstances.

Machiavelli justifies Athens by saying that 'for whoever considers things subtly will see for himself that if freedom had been taken away in Rome as in Athens, Rome would not have been more merciful toward its citizens than the latter was'.⁸⁴ Very often, Machiavelli couples Athens with Rome as examples of popular republics, thereby seeming to pay little importance to the idea that for him Rome is a mixed regime unlike Athens. For example, he highlights 'how much greatness Athens arrived at in the space of a hundred years after it was freed from the tyranny of Pisistratus'.⁸⁵ In another passage, Machiavelli seems to couple Sparta and Athens together, thus softening the opposition drawn in I. 2 between the two, thus emphasizing that both were 'two republics

⁸⁰ McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, p. 58.

⁸¹ *Discourses*, I. 2 (p. 13).

⁸² McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, p. 58.

⁸³ *Discourses*, p. 63.

⁸⁴ *Discourses*, pp. 63–4.

⁸⁵ *Discourses*, p. 129.

very armed and ordered with very good laws'.⁸⁶ In the *Proemio* of the *Florentine Histories*, when he opposes the bad complex divisions of Florence, which led to sects, and the good disunion between the *plebs* and the *grandi* in Rome, he only mentions Athens among all possible republics that flourished, as it contained a similar division. Once again, beyond any rigid distinction between simple and mixed regimes, he couples Athens with Rome.

Machiavelli's attitude towards Athens is more positive than most political judgments that can be found among almost all Roman writers.⁸⁷ It is also more positive than the Florentine political reflection of the fifteenth century⁸⁸ and compared to the assessment of Athenian democracy that a staunch defender of oligarchic republicanism like Guicciardini would make even after the end of the popular republic. Machiavelli's view reflects the more positive assessments of Athenian democracy that can be found occasionally in the intellectual and political context of the new popular republic set up by Savonarola and Soderini, for example in Salamonio.⁸⁹ However his positive view of Athens is still striking if compared to the condemnation of Athenian democracy that can be found in other defenders of popular republicanism, such as Scala and Giannotti.

All in all, Machiavelli's relativistic consideration of simple regimes could appear to fit his thought particularly well within the Aristotelian tradition. If there is one aspect that most scholars have shown in their research on late Medieval and early modern Aristotelianism, the spread of the translation of the *Politics* from the end of the thirteenth century attests to the extreme flexibility with which Aristotle's ideas, which were already relativistic in themselves, could be used to adapt to different kinds of political regimes, from monarchies to republics. In the *Politics*, Aristotle argues that the best constitution is that which adapts to the nature of the citizenry.⁹⁰ This claim was also

⁸⁶ *Discourses*, p. 134.

⁸⁷ See J. Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton, 2011), p. 124. Unfortunately, the most recent thoughtful and wide-ranging contributions on this topic were published too late to be included in my study: Gabriele Pedullà, 'Athenian Democracy in the Late Middle Ages and Early Humanism' and 'Athenian Democracy in the Italian Renaissance', both in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Athenian Democracy: From the Late Middle Ages to the Contemporary Era*, ed. Dino Piovani and Giovanni Giorgini (Leiden-Boston, 2021), respectively pp. 57–104 and 105–52.

⁸⁸ See J. Roberts, 'Florentine Perceptions of Athenian Democracy', *Mediaevalia et Humanistica*, 15 (1987), pp. 25–41; and Alamanni coupling Rome and Sparta, but not Athens, in E. Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 140–5.

⁸⁹ Hankins, *Virtue Politics*, pp. 382–5.

⁹⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1288a and 1296b.

present in Ptolemy of Lucca,⁹¹ who, as we saw, was one of the main sources for Savonarola and Scala. Several late medieval and early modern Aristotelians stuck to the idea that the right regime for a city-state depends on a number of considerations that make it better for some to have popular government and, for others, oligarchy or monarchy. This does not mean that they do not have certain preferences for some regimes over others. However, they rarely make these preferences absolute. As we saw, Machiavelli makes no exception to this relativism and it would seem that, in rejecting Polybius' anti-relativism, he puts himself closer to the Aristotelian tradition.

At the same time, we saw that all the late Medieval and early modern interpreters of democracy agree that the latter is a corrupt regime. First, like Aristotle, all of them argue that democracy in itself is a corrupt regime with respect to the virtuous idea of popular government. Interestingly, quite often they do this by sticking to Aristotle's idea that in democracy, one component of the political community, i.e. the poor, rule in their own interest against the rich, thereby violating Aristotle's golden rule that in good regimes rule is always for the common good. Second, at the same time they all accept Aristotle's idea that the mixed regime, the *politeia*, should include a democratic element. Of course, each of them then differs on the extent to which this democratic element in the mixed polity should be empowered. So for example, while most authors endorse the mixed regime, others maintain a certain preference for different kinds of popular regimes.⁹² None of these authors, however, uses the word in its Latin translation positively.

If the term democracy started to be used positively by Savonarola, Giannotti and Scala, this does not mean that they defended democracy based on an absolute normative preference for it. Rather, these authors' preference for democracy always appears to be contingent and preferential. Take the case of two supporters of popular republics in Machiavelli's time: Girolamo Savonarola and Donato Giannotti. Both were Aristotelian and like Machiavelli were relativistic in their defences of popular republics.

Drawing on Ptolemy of Lucca's Aristotelian claim that the best government is that which depends on the nature of each specific people, Savonarola is not an unquestioned defender of popular republics. Echoing Aristotle, he claims that monarchic government is the best by nature, also because it reflects the monarchy of Jesus Christ.⁹³ As a result, his defence of popular republicanism is tied specifically to the Florentine exception. As he writes in

⁹¹ For Ptolemy see *De regimine principum*, IV, 8. However, before modernity, Thomas Aquinas was taken to be the author of the entire treatise, so when pre-modern sources rely on it, they do so believing that they are drawing on Aquinas.

⁹² On this see Blythe, *Ideal Government*.

⁹³ Savonarola, *Treatise*, p. 179.

the *Treatise*, since it is so used to liberty and equality, Florence must have a radical popular government with the Great Council.⁹⁴

Likewise, Giannotti switches from being a supporter of a moderate regime to being a supporter of radical republicanism. However, even when he shows the strongest commitment to popular republicanism in Florence in his *Treatise on the Constitution of Florence*, Giannotti remains committed to the idea of a mixed regime that is based on the Venetian example.⁹⁵ Neither Savonarola nor Giannotti ever defend popular republics by claiming that the multitude is better than the few in absolute terms or by giving a social-economic connotation to their anti-aristocratic populist ideas. This means that neither Savonarola nor Giannotti are as radical as Machiavelli in defending popular republics.

Machiavelli's relativism in his defence of popular republics is looser than that of the aforementioned authors. His relationship to Aristotelianism is two-fold. On the one hand, as we saw, he appropriates the Aristotelian language of democracy as is found in his contemporaries. On the other hand, he sticks to Polybius to present a more self-sufficient absolute defence of popular republics that softens his broader relativism. Machiavelli's defence of democracy does not consist simply in a positive rehabilitation of this word but also on a clear choice of empowering the main actor of any democratic regime and popular republic: the people understood as synonyms of the plebs. In this sense, Machiavelli does not at all reinstate the negative Aristotelian view of democracy as a regime that empowers the poor. This is the true innovation that distinguishes Machiavelli from most previous authors who had expressed their judgment on Aristotle's democracy. Based on Aristotelian language, Machiavelli shows an uncompromising and unprecedented positive view of popular republics based on a positive view of the people. Moreover, unlike both Aristotle, Polybius and, in fact, most of these previous authors, Machiavelli's classification of constitutions goes beyond the basic division into simple and mixed regimes. For Machiavelli, the key distinction is between aristocratic and popular republics, regardless of whether these are simple or mixed regimes.⁹⁶ This is his way of revising the strong Polybian ideas in favour of mixed government.

Machiavelli clearly states this in *Discourses* I. 5, in which he asks whether the guard of freedom should lie in the nobles or in the plebs and he clearly answers that the people should be the guardians of freedom because they are more reliable than the nobles in keeping it and not using it for their own advantages. In his *Considerations* on Machiavelli's *Discourses*, Guicciardini wrote that he did not understand this question because it was impossible to

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 181–4.

⁹⁵ Giannotti, *Repubblica fiorentina*, ed. Silvano.

⁹⁶ Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult*, p. 182.

make the answer compatible with the idea of the mixed regime.⁹⁷ He was right. We could admit, as some scholars have done, that Machiavelli talks about different types of mixed regimes. However this would not do justice to his discussion about the guard of freedom and his clear preference that this should lie with the people, clearly indicating his preference for popular over aristocratic republics.

This, among other things, is proof that for Machiavelli, Rome also qualifies as a democracy or *stato popolare*, because although Machiavelli defines it as a mixed regime, he claims that the Guard of freedom in Rome lies in the people and not in the nobles. At times, Machiavelli follows Polybius in writing that Sparta was also a mixed regime. However, for Machiavelli, there is no way in which Sparta can be grouped together with Rome, because in the case of Sparta, he maintains, the guard of freedom was to be found in the nobles. In this, as underlined by Pedullà, Machiavelli breaks with the humanist tradition by rejecting any identification of Rome with Sparta/Venice.⁹⁸

This leads to a concluding thought on the implications of analysing Machiavelli's place in the history of pre-modern democratic thought. In their interpretations of the democratic Machiavelli, scholars have tended to oppose Machiavelli to classical thought on democracy. McCormick himself, despite a few hints here and there, does not devote any specific attention to classical sources, and when he does, this is only to oppose Machiavelli to such classical authors as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero.

This article proves that the relationship of Machiavelli's theory of democracy to its two main classical sources, Aristotle and Polybius, is not one of a mere rejection. There are two ways to reconstruct Machiavelli's contribution to pre-modern democracy, one is to democracy as a word and the other is to democracy as a concept. On the former, Machiavelli is very much a classical thinker. He elaborates a language of democracy that depends heavily on Aristotle and Polybius. His language of democracy draws on the appropriation of Leonardo Bruni's rendering of Aristotle's concept of *demokratia* as *status popularis* that many partisans of popular republics radicalized towards the end of the fifteenth century. As this term came to overlap with the Vernacular phrase *stato popolare* to refer to popular republics especially towards the end of the fifteenth century, Machiavelli sticks to this usage of the word.

If reconstructing the sources of Machiavellian democracy proves that Machiavelli is very much a classical author in his language of democracy, we can see his originality within the history of pre-modern democracy as more conceptual than linguistic. Unlike Aristotle, Polybius and probably any previous author in the history of political thought, Machiavelli pushes the unquestionably positive assessments of popular republics that he could find in the

⁹⁷ F. Guicciardini, *Considerazioni sui Discorsi di Machiavelli*, in F. Guicciardini, *Opere I*, ed. E.L. Scarano (2 vols., Turin, 2010), pp. 617–18.

⁹⁸ Guicciardini, *Considerazioni sui Discorsi di Machiavelli*, p. 162.

Florence of Soderini to its extreme. Contextualizing Machiavelli within the pre-modern history of democracy in the fifteenth-century Florentine context confirms the views of those scholars who see Machiavelli as a democrat or a radical republican.

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