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“Altra volta ne ragionai a lungo’: A Reinterpretation of Niccolò Machiavelli’s
Cryptic Clause in *The Prince*”

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“ALTRA VOLTA NE RAGIONAI A LUNGO”:
A REINTERPRETATION OF NICCOLÒ
MACHIARELLI’S CRYPTIC CLAUSE IN
THE PRINCE

JÉRÉMIE BARTHAS*

The opening sentence of *The Prince*’s second chapter reads (in the first Florentine edition of 1532): “Io lascerò indietro il ragionare delle Repub. perche altra volta ne ragionai a lungo: volterommi solo al Principato [...]”¹ These words can be translated into English as: “I shall refrain from discussing republics because I have discussed them at length elsewhere. I shall concern myself solely with principedoms [...]”² Another example of translation, most recently, is: “I shall leave out reasoning on republics because on another occasion I have discussed them at length. I shall apply myself only to the principality [...]”³ Here, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) indicates to his primary intended reader — a dedicatee from the “illustrious house” of Medici — an unexpected shift from a previous topic of work to a new one: from republics to the principate.⁴ In doing so, he assumed that his reader knew about him before he wrote *The Prince*, including his work in the service of the popular Republic of the Great Council

* The author would like to thank John Najemy, Gabriele Pedullà, Camilla Russell, and Camila Vergara for their suggestions on the manuscript. Note that entries under “Machiavelli” in the Cited Works section have been ordered chronologically.

¹ Machiavelli, *Il principe*, ed. Giunta, 1r.

² This is Atkinson’s 1976 translation, 99.

³ This is Connell’s 2016 translation, 40.

⁴ Regarding the dedication, in the final chapter of *The Prince* Machiavelli refers several times to the “illustre Casa vostra,” that is, the branch of the Medici family related to Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449–1492). After the death of his eldest son, Piero (1472–1503), his second son, Giovanni (1475–1521), was the head of the family and, from 1513, of the Church (r. as Pope Leo X from March 1513 to December 1521). Lorenzo’s nephew, Giulio (1478–1534), was Archbishop of Florence from April 1513. Lorenzo’s third son, Giuliano (1479–1516), supervised Florentine diplomacy from May. Piero’s son, Lorenzo (1492–1519), headed the government of Florence from August 1513. The book carries a dedication to this Lorenzo, but on 10 December 1513 Machiavelli announced to Francesco Vettori that he was considering a dedication to Giuliano.

(1494–1512), and indeed was familiar with his previous written reflections on the subject of republics, to which he seems to be alluding.

Apparently with a view to neutralizing any *a priori* opinions against him, Machiavelli strategically assumes his essential position from the start: in the dedicatory letter, he uses a counterintuitive formula to associate his social and political status with special analytical skills (“to understand the nature of princes fully, one must be of the people”).⁵ Then, at the beginning of Chapter 2, as we have seen above, he refers to a “reasoning on republics.” Supposedly obvious to at least one intended reader when it was written, the subordinate clause, *perché altra volta ne ragionai a lungo*, became a central issue for many scholarly controversies — and perhaps artificial ones — particularly after 1950. What was Machiavelli specifically referring to when stating that he had dealt at length with the topic of republics before composing *The Prince*? This essay is presented with the aim of proposing a new, more logical and simpler solution than those previously formulated in relation to this highly specific, but key question: it contends that Machiavelli was referring here to certain pieces of legislation that he had elaborated for the Florentine Republic — in particular the *Militie Florentine Ordinatio* of December 1506 — rather than to some general studies on republican political systems. In doing so, the essay begins by outlining the construction and transmission of the issue; it goes on to survey major printed editions with editors’ *apparatus*; and it reconsiders the factual data therein offered. While not a comprehensive treatment of this question, the present survey aims to bring sufficient evidence to support its central contention.

Pioneer Hypothesis: Conring’s *Animadversiones Politicae*

Apart from *The Art of War*, published in 1521, Machiavelli’s major theoretical works — the *Discourses on Livy* and *The Prince* — were printed a few years after he died (June 1527), in 1531 and 1532 respectively. That copies of his manuscripts had been circulated, read, discussed, and used by other authors before 1531–32 was attested already in the dedicatory letters of their first two publishers, Antonio Blado (1490–1567) in Rome and Bernardo Giunta (1478–1550/1) in Florence.⁶ However, both editors omitted any details re-

⁵ *The Prince*, trans. Atkinson, 95.

⁶ See Pincin, “Sul testo” (where most relevant documents are gathered). The dedicatory letters in the Blado and Giunta editions of *The Prince* are translated into English in

garding the works’ chronology and the history of their redaction. While both indicated some unsolvable editorial difficulties, mainly linguistic in nature, Giunta also suggested that Machiavelli probably would have wished to revise his *Discourses* further before printed publication.

Be that as it may, internal evidence in the *Discourses* reveals that Machiavelli was writing for readers who knew *The Prince* already: not only are there explicit references to the latter, but also the reader encounters reiterations, developments, resumptions, or clarifications of ideas and analyses that appeared first in the earlier and much briefer work. Hence, even if the *Discourses* were printed a couple of months before *The Prince*, a reader of both texts easily would have deduced the chronological anteriority of *The Prince*. Political and military events in the second decade of the sixteenth century further attest to this dating schema: while in *The Prince* the latest event referred to is the defeat of the Venetian army in October 1513 (which appears in the concluding chapter), in the *Discourses*’ first chapter, Machiavelli makes a striking reference to the victory of the Great Turk against the Mamelukes, which occurred in January 1517.

The *ragionare delle repubbliche* to which Machiavelli alludes at the beginning of *The Prince* thus could have been located at a date prior to October 1513 (while it should exclude the *Discourses* as the possible text to which he was referring, since this work in all likelihood post-dated *The Prince* by several years). Machiavelli wished to record something here at the time of writing, and his allusion was intended to be immediately comprehensible to somebody in late 1513. But such comprehensibility was no longer necessarily the case by the time of *The Prince*’s printed publication almost twenty years later. However, the cryptic clause — *perché altra volta ne ragionai a lungo* — was not essential to the overall meaning of the sentence and presumably could be ignored by most readers, without undermining the main point that the focus of the treatise would be principalities and not republics. Yet the obscure section of the sentence would pose a problem to translators, prompting them to identify it and highlight its interpretive challenges.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the issue surfaced among foreign editors. In his 1660 Latin edition of *The Prince*, Hermann Conring (1606–81), professor of philosophy at Helmstedt in Lower Saxony, was the

Connell’s 2016 edition. For the reception of Machiavelli’s works before 1531, see Barthas, “Une canaille et des libertins,” with further references.

first editor to propose an erudite approach to the text.⁷ Presumably, he was also the first to gloss the cryptic phrase that he rendered into Latin as: “I will omit to talk about Republics, because we have talked about them at length elsewhere” (“Omittam de Rebuspub. disserere: quia de his alias fusius diximus”).⁸ In the companion volume to his 1660 translation, he explained:

De Rebus publicis justam Machiavelli doctrinam hodie nullam habemus; tantum sparsim huc pertinentia deprehendimus, in dissertationibus ad Livii I. decad. itaque forte sine causa hîc gloriatur Machiavellus.⁹

(Today we have no complete teaching by Machiavelli on republics; we find only scattered [passages] pertaining [to republics] in the *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy*. And perhaps Machiavelli boasted of this without good reason.)

In presenting this view, Conring had examined the following questions: was there any piece available in Machiavelli’s known corpus of political writings that dealt essentially with the topic of republics? Could the *Discourses* qualify mainly as a discussion on republics? Like Jean Bodin and Alberico Gentili before him, Conring had no doubts regarding Machiavelli’s commitment to popular liberty. He had engaged with the Florentine’s political science, not with moral prejudice, but rather from the academic point of view of the Aristotelian constitutional doctrine that framed his standard of judgment. At Conring’s time, the known body of Machiavelli’s political writings was more limited than today: in addition to *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, it included only a narration of Cesare Borgia’s coup of Senigallia, and two reports on foreign political systems (the French monarchy and the German empire in Tyrol).¹⁰ For Conring, a proper doctrinal treatment on republics was missing in Machiavelli’s hitherto identified writings. He acknowledged that some elements of the subject could be found in the *Discourses*, but he

⁷ See Procacci, *Machiavelli nella cultura europea*, 257–264 and Bertelli and Innocenti, *Bibliografia machiavelliana*, xcii–xciii.

⁸ Conring’s 1660 Latin edition of Machiavelli’s *Princeps*, 3.

⁹ Conring, *Animadversiones politicae*, 9. Note that, where translated quotations appear without the name of the translator, these are provided by the author of this article.

¹⁰ See the “Testina” edition of Machiavelli’s *Tutte le opere*, with the false date of 1550.

stated also that they were haphazardly distributed, suggesting that, overall, the book could not be identified with this topic. While leaving open the possibility of an unknown work specifically focused on republics, Conring concluded rather that Machiavelli intended to glorify himself by claiming to have written something that he had not actually done.

Conring’s conclusion evaded the difficulty of deciphering the clause properly by nurturing a critical view of Machiavelli’s tendency not only to exaggerate his data and ideas but also to show off. Despite its technical evasiveness, Conring’s two lines of interpretation were so seminal that most subsequent analyses of this question over the next three-and-a-half centuries were variations on this view, tending in three distinct directions. The first position opposed the Conring thesis by defining the *Discourses* as essentially a “reasoning on republics” (and thus identifying this work as the *ragionare delle repubbliche* mentioned in *The Prince*). The second interpretive direction further developed Conring’s suggestion by speculating on a lost treatise on republics, whose fundamental elements Machiavelli would have integrated into the *Discourses* (since at least a portion of this work deals with republics). The third view accepted the unlikelihood of determining with certainty what Machiavelli meant when he introduced the clause in the first sentence of Chapter 2 in *The Prince*.

Uncertainties: Commentaries from the Seventeenth Century to Italian Unification

Another element in the debate was opened with the 1683 French translation of *The Prince* by Abraham-Nicolas Amelot de la Houssaie (1634–1706), who rendered Machiavelli’s sentence as, “I will bypass talking about Republics, which I have amply addressed elsewhere” (“Je me passerai de parler des Républiques, dont j’ai traité ailleurs amplement”), to which he added in the margin: “In the *Discourses on Livy*.”¹¹ According to this reading, Machiavelli’s claim constituted an unambiguous cross-reference to the *Discourses*. Even if one probable influence on Amelot’s opinion was the tendency in France — almost uniformly practised in printings of *The Prince* from 1571 to 1664 — to place the *Discourses* immediately before it in a single volume edition, his annotation also was part of an *apparatus* serving a broader political and cultural

¹¹ Amelot’s edition and translation of *Le prince*, 3.

agenda.¹² More than a simple invitation to further reading, some readers would find a hint in favour of *The Prince*'s crypto-republicanism — an idea advanced by Amelot in his preface — and the view that it was a sort of satirical coda to the *Discourses*.

Amelot did not give any clear evidence to support his interpretation of the clause: he neither engaged with Conring's doubts on the nature of the *Discourses*, nor did he consider the other internal elements that pointed to the work as being posterior to *The Prince*. However, his analysis was accepted at face value and had a major impact, spawning numerous new editions, reprints, and translations throughout the eighteenth century. The result was that Amelot's analysis provided the frame for interpretations of the clause, even among authors who admitted that the history of the composition of *The Prince* and the *Discourses* had yet to be established.¹³

The sceptical reading of the cryptic clause — which assumed that its sense had been lost — gained new strength in 1810 after the delayed publication (three decades after it had been discovered) of the famous letter written by Machiavelli to Francesco Vettori (1474–1539), dated 10 December 1513. In this letter, Machiavelli wrote that he had “composed a small work *On Principlities*,” that he had given it to one of his best friends to read, and that he was currently revising it in the hope — with Vettori's help — of being employed by “these Medici lords.”¹⁴ The publication of this letter in the early nineteenth century, so long after *The Prince* first appeared on the cultural landscape of Europe, led scholars to conclude that *The Prince*'s date of composition was 1513; it also led to a reorienting of certain questions that had developed over the centuries concerning Machiavelli's motives and intentions for the work and its relationship to the *Discourses*.¹⁵

One of these reorientations came with the co-called “Italia 1813” edition of *The Prince*: the editors amended the preface to their already groundbreaking 1782 edition by introducing specific elements to clarify the chronology of Machiavelli's major works. They observed that:

¹² See Soll, *Publishing The Prince*.

¹³ For example, the 1733 anonymous reviewer of “Joh. Frider. Christ, *De Nicolao Machiavello libri tres* (1731),” 343 n. c; and 346.

¹⁴ In Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Connell, 136.

¹⁵ See Procacci, *Machiavelli nella cultura europea*, 352–354, 364–366, 374–375, 382.

At various points in the *Discourses*, the author refers to the book of *The Prince* as having been written earlier. We have the date of *The Prince* in the letter to Vettori from 10 October 1513 [sic], and we have the date of the *Discourses* in Book 3, Chapter 27, where Machiavelli recounts that the city of Pistoia was divided between the Panciatichi and Cancellieri families “fifteen years ago.” Because this division — actually a civil war — occurred in the years 1500 and 1501, the *Discourses* are posterior to *The Prince* by about 3 years, and were written around 1516.¹⁶

In reality, the ‘civil war’ in Pistoia lasted until April 1502, which rather indicates once more 1517–18 as “the ‘present’ of the *Discourses*.”¹⁷ And, indeed, the earliest testimony of a relationship between Machiavelli and the dedicatees of the *Discourses* — Zanobi Buondelmonti (1491–1527) and Cosimo Rucellai (1495–1519), without whom he claimed twice he would not have engaged in such a difficult enterprise — is his letter to Lodovico Alamanni of 17 December 1517, first published in 1783.¹⁸ In any case, and presumably unable to shed any light on Machiavelli’s cryptic clause in *The Prince*, the editors passed over it in silence.

After “Italia 1813,” the view that the *Discourses* were written somewhere between 1516 and 1519, subsequent to *The Prince*’s composition in 1513, was still challenged by the puzzle of the cryptic clause. In 1833, the French historian Alexis-François Artaud became convinced that, in the absence of the author’s original manuscript, “the passage had been altered” at some point to meet some supposed publication requirements, even if the meaning and motivation of the alteration — an addition? — were unclear.¹⁹ Instead, the 1857 annotated edition of the complete works addressed the problem by positing that “the allusion [to earlier political writings] would be inexplicable unless it is supposed, as makes most sense, that a significant part of the *Discourses* was

¹⁶ The anonymous (R. Tanzini) editors in their preface to the “Italia 1813” edition of Machiavelli’s *Opere*, 1:lxxv–lxxvi. Compare to the anonymous (Tanzini and B. Follini) editors in the “Cambiagi” 1782–83 edition, 1:lxxvi. On the dating of Machiavelli’s letter to Vettori — 10 December instead of 10 October 1513 — see Villari, *Niccolò Machiavelli and his Times*, 3:264–265 n.

¹⁷ Inglese, “La vera cognizione,” 93. Note that, for reasons of space, translated quotations from modern secondary sources do not include the original-language quotation.

¹⁸ In the “Cambiagi” edition, 6:56.

¹⁹ Artaud, *Machiavel*, 1:285 n. 1, 2:325.

composed before *The Prince*.²⁰ By contrast, in the general introduction to the six volumes, published in 1873–77, of Machiavelli’s historical, diplomatic, administrative, and minor political writings, the Florentine editors left the interpretive problem of the clause unexamined: in the immediate aftermath of Italian unification, they understood the *Discourses* not so much as a “reasoning on republics” but rather as a broader analysis of the organisation of power, institutions, and state building developed after Machiavelli’s focus on the revolutionary moment exemplified by *The Prince*.²¹ By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the thesis of the antecedence of the *Discourses* would impose itself as a matter of faith at the highest levels of scholarship.

*Paradigmatic Crystallisation:
Burd’s and Lisio’s Editions of Il Principe*

In 1891, the first modern, large, and systematic *apparatus* of *The Prince* was published by the British historian Lawrence Arthur Burd (1863–1931), a secondary school teacher by profession. His note on *altra volta ne ragionai a lungo* runs over two pages. In his analysis, he accepted and left unquestioned the notion that *The Discourses on Livy* were essentially a “reasoning on republics,” and he supported the idea that the clause might be an allusion to the *Discourses*. He observed that, while the December 1513 letter to Vettori, along with a series of internal references in the text, point to the anteriority of *The Prince*, these “facts” nonetheless above all would “make it clear that Machiavelli must have been engaged many years in writing the *Discorsi*.” This very plausible point could be conceded without inferring that Machiavelli necessarily referred to the *Discourses* in *The Prince*. Burd added a further premise, asserting that “the difficulty [...] is satisfactorily solved if we suppose that both books were begun at the same time, i.e. in 1513, and that some portion of at least Book 1 of the *Discorsi* was finished before *The Prince*.”²²

To support this view, Burd (re)introduced the notion of an interpolation, which he would *a priori* dismiss if applied to *The Prince*’s cryptic clause. The only example he used to illustrate this notion would be revealed to be

²⁰ In the “Usigli” 1857 edition of the *Opere*, 397 n. 1.

²¹ See Passerini, in the general introduction to the 1873–77 edition of the *Opere*, 1:xxxv.

²² In Burd’s 1891 edition of *Il Principe*, 180–181 n. 1.

flawed.²³ This might explain further why he did not address some chronological considerations with more precision: for instance, an event mentioned in the *Discourses*' first chapter, which occurred in January 1517, could stand as an obvious terminus after which the book was composed.

Burd's conclusions benefited from the authority of Pasquale Villari (1827–1917). A decade before Burd's edition was published, Machiavelli's most influential biographer had asserted that the *Discourses* were well advanced when Machiavelli started to compose *The Prince*. What were the facts supporting this assertion? In presenting a clear non-sequitur, Villari argued that his point was established because an explicit reference to *The Prince* occurs only at the beginning of the second book of the *Discourses*, and not earlier.²⁴ This certainly was not sufficient to prove that Book 1 of the *Discourses* was written before *The Prince*, and Villari was unable to provide any other corroborative evidence. Nonetheless, Burd deduced from this interpretation that *The Prince* could contain an allusion to the *Discourses*' first book, or at least “some portion” of it, as supposedly was the case with the reference to the “reasoning on republics.” But he considered none of the new difficulties resulting from his proposed solution, chiefly that, to be understood as he suggested, the cryptic clause would have been intended to notify a reader who knew this “portion” of the *Discourses*.

The first critical edition of *The Prince* came out eight years after Burd's pioneer edition. The editor, Giuseppe Lisio (1870–1912), identified a manuscript variant that emerged from Machiavelli's closest circle. The variant pertained to the cryptic clause, and Lisio showed how Biagio Buonaccorsi, Machiavelli's friend and former collaborator at the Chancery, transcribed *ragionai ad lungo* in one manuscript, but *parlai ad lungo* in another.²⁵ In Machiavelli's language, *ragionare*, *parlare*, but also *trattare*, and *discorrere* appear as somewhat synonymous and interchangeable. Two instances in *The Prince* are particularly striking for the similarities that they show with the phrase under consideration here. In Chapter 8, Machiavelli writes that: “I do not think I should refrain from discussing them [i.e. *the two methods for an ordinary*

²³ See Rossi, “Per la storia,” 196; see also Walker's introduction and commentary to Machiavelli's *Discourses*, 1:43–45, 2:133 (1975 edition).

²⁴ See Villari, *Niccolò Machiavelli and his Times*, 3:265 n. For a similar critique of Villari's argument, see Rossi, “Per la storia,” 195.

²⁵ In Lisio's 1899 critical edition of *Il Principe*, 6 n. See Inglese's 1994 critical edition of *De Principatibus*, 63 table 8.

citizen to become a prince] even though one of them may be gone into at greater length in a treatise on republics” (“Non mi pare da lasciarli indietro, ancora che dell’uno si possa più diffusamente ragionare dove si trattassi delle repubbliche”).²⁶ An even closer phrase appears in Chapter 12: “I shall refrain from discussing the topic of laws, and discuss armies” (“io lascerò indietro el ragionare delle legge e parlerò delle arme”).²⁷

The variant, *parlai*, in *The Prince’s* second chapter would be insufficient to sustain the opinion that, when Machiavelli wrote the phrase “Io lascerò indietro il ragionare delle Republiche, perché altra volta ne ragionai a lungo,” he was referring not to something he had actually written, but to oral discussions during his long experience at the head of the second Chancery of the popular Republic.²⁸ In *The Prince* (and the *Discourses* as well), these terms — reasoning, speaking, discussing, treating — refer mostly to things written, or that would or should be written: there is an unequivocal textual object, existing or envisioned, behind them. Even with *parlai*, Machiavelli’s expression is clear, and, one might add, “there is no reason to dilute its meaning. [...] It alludes to a text.”²⁹

It is noteworthy that Lisio also did not understand *ragionai* or *parlai* differently. In the edition he designed for secondary school students a year after the critical edition, he provided a valuable historical, philological, and stylistic commentary, which is, however, sometimes overburdened by dismissive comments on the substance of Machiavelli’s thought. In his interpretation of *altra volta*, he absolutised Villari’s and Burd’s contention: “*altra volta*, in the *Discorsi*, composed between 1513 and 1519; but, here, Machiavelli refers especially to the first book.”³⁰ Lisio put his grammatical skills to the service of this view by attempting to overcome the problem of the phrase in Chapter 8 of *The Prince*, in which, as we have seen, Machiavelli had written that a special topic he was about to discuss could be analysed more amply in another work,

²⁶ *Il Principe*, ed. Lisio (1899), 39; trans. Atkinson, 177.

²⁷ *Il Principe*, ed. Lisio (1899), 55; trans. Atkinson, 219.

²⁸ This variant is also insufficient to sustain that Machiavelli was referring to oral responses provided to his interrogators in his capacity as ex-Second Chancellor of the Republic while he was in jail and tortured, as suggested in Wootton’s edition (1994) of Machiavelli’s *Selected Political Writings*, xxv. The author acknowledges Max Skjönsberg for this reference to Wootton’s hypothesis.

²⁹ Inglese, “La vera cognizione,” 94.

³⁰ See Lisio, in his 1900 edition (*Biblioteca carducciana*) of *Il Principe*, 16 n.

“dove si trattassi delle repubbliche,” which refers to something that could be, but was not actually, written. But Lisio complicated the picture, suggesting that, because Tuscan grammatical practices sometimes allowed the use of the subjunctive in place of the indicative, Machiavelli was referring here to some chapters of the *Discourses* as well.³¹

In his preface, Lisio advanced sound arguments in narrowing down to four months the period of composition of *The Prince* (from August onward): he did this based on Machiavelli’s correspondence with Vettori between March and December 1513, but with the dubious aim of leaving as much time as possible for the framing of the *Discourses* after Machiavelli was released from jail in March 1513.³² Still, even if we imagine Machiavelli rereading Livy in his house in Sant’Andrea in Percussina, and even if Livy appears as one of Machiavelli’s important sources already in *The Prince*, there is nothing in that correspondence (or elsewhere) from which one can infer that the ex-Chancellor had planned the *Discourses on Livy*, and written part of them, before devoting himself to writing his short masterpiece.³³

Crisis: Locating the Bridge from the Discorsi to Il Principe

Despite the sceptical position assumed *comme en passant* by Oreste Tommasini, who risked a controversial hypothesis by distinguishing two phases in the composition of *The Prince*,³⁴ the predominant belief in ‘discourses’ antecedent to *The Prince* was well entrenched, even though it had not yet been supported by any unambiguous evidence. When, in 1923, Federico Chabod — then a twenty-two-year-old student in history at the University of Turin — took up the challenge of editing *The Prince*, his general views on the history of the composition of Machiavelli’s works were framed by Villari’s ideas. Chabod prepared his edition by writing a long research essay that he defended as his *tesi di laurea* in June 1924 and would eventually publish in the following year. On the issue under consideration here, the essay contains an original suggestion: building on the view that, at the time when Machiavelli started work on *The Prince*, the first book of the *Discourses* was already largely complete, Chabod identified the bridge between the *Discourses* and

³¹ See the Lisio edition (1900), *Il Principe*, 56 n.

³² This observation is made in Lisio’s 1900 edition, *Il Principe*, xvi–xvii.

³³ See Najemy, *Between Friends*, 159 n. 17, 174 n. 25, 180–184 and n. 16.

³⁴ See Tommasini, *La vita e gli scritti*, 2:89.

The Prince by focussing on *Discourses* Book 1, Chapter 18, which deals with how to maintain or introduce a free state in a corrupted city.³⁵

According to this theory, Machiavelli, just released from jail, began arranging his notes on ancient Roman history and then conceived and composed the first eighteen chapters of the *Discourses*. Discussing the closing paragraph of *Discourses* Book 1, Chapter 18, Chabod asserted:

Machiavelli, then, was again turning his attention from Rome to the corrupt society of his own day; his receptivity and his imagination, having been moulded and developed by the civilization of the Ancients, were being applied once more to present-day life, for reasons both practical and emotional. And so we have *The Prince*.³⁶

About this chapter, in which Machiavelli affirms the need for a *podestà quasi regia* to restrain those who no longer accept being governed within the republican institutional framework, Chabod comments that “we see clearly outlined the harsh, astute figure of the new prince.”³⁷

In the 1924 preface to his edition of *The Prince* — composed after these reflections were written but printed sometime before — Chabod took a step back and conformed to the mainstream view on this point: he referred in general terms to “the first fragments of the *Discorsi*” as having been undertaken before Machiavelli composed *The Prince*.³⁸ And in the explanatory note on *altra volta*, Chabod reproduced Lisio’s gloss at the same place.³⁹ From then on, Chabod would not depart from this line,⁴⁰ seemingly no longer convinced by his own earlier insight concerning the precise point in the text at which Machiavelli stopped writing what became the *Discourses* and began *The Prince*. It might be worth noting that while his preparatory essay was being published, so were the *leggi eccezionali del fascismo*, and that, during the summer of 1925, Chabod would help a distinguished anti-fascist historian

³⁵ Chabod, “Del *Principe*,” in his *Scritti*, 32 n. 1; “*The Prince*,” trans. Moore, 31 n. 2.

³⁶ Chabod, “*The Prince*,” 38 n. 1 (*Scritti*, 36–37 n. 3).

³⁷ Chabod, “*The Prince*,” 36 (*Scritti*, 35).

³⁸ In Chabod’s edition of *Il Principe*, xxi (1961 reprint); or in his *Scritti*, 12.

³⁹ See the Chabod edition (1961 reprint), *Il Principe*, 6 n. 2: “In the *Discorsi*, composed between 1513 and 1519; here it refers to the first book.”

⁴⁰ See Chabod, *Scritti*, 210 [1934], 394 [1947], 399 [1948], 249 [1953].

(Gaetano Salvemini) escape persecution. By 1926, however, Chabod’s early view on the transition from the *Discourses* to *The Prince* had been assimilated into the fascist cultural policy: the formula “ecco il Principe” was timely!⁴¹

Chabod revised his position promptly (without explicitly disavowing it). In an essay published in late 1927 on the composition of *The Prince*, he combined textual analysis with a careful examination of historical circumstances. Whether he succeeded or not in establishing the improbability of revisions after December 1513,⁴² the fact is that he no longer attempted to explain the genesis of *The Prince* through reference to an intellectual development that emerged during the composition of the *Discourses*. In the some fifty pages exclusively dedicated to the dating of *The Prince*, Chabod did not even refer to the cryptic clause, but he pointed out that the dedicatee could not yet have read the *Discourses*,⁴³ and he cited favourably an author (Ermete Rossi) who had just then adopted the sceptical position regarding the impossibility of knowing what Machiavelli was referring to.⁴⁴

Seemingly thus abandoned by Chabod, the insights posited in his early work nevertheless made a comeback; this involved the assumption concerning the special character of the first eighteen chapters of the *Discourses*, their identification with the “reasoning on republics,” and their chronological priority over *The Prince*. The themes re-emerged in 1950, with a British edition of the *Discourses*, the first to provide a systematic scholarly *apparatus* of the work (including a 200-page introduction, plus an entire volume of notes and tables). The editor, the Jesuit Leslie J. Walker, proposed a closer study of the *Discourses*’ structure: while he corrected some manifest flaws in Villari’s and Burd’s chronological readings, Walker adhered to their view of the *Discourses* as having been commenced during the second trimester of 1513; he also re-introduced the notion — without acknowledging Chabod’s 1925 essay — of a discontinuity at the point of Book 1, Chapter 18, arguing that it was here that the introductory section to the commentary on Livy ended.⁴⁵

⁴¹ See Ercole, *La politica*, 197. Ercole is among the signatories of the *Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals* (April 1925).

⁴² The subject is still surprisingly controversial today: see Martelli and Marcelli’s 2006 edition of *Il Principe* (*Edizione nazionale*), 427–487 and Inglese’s most recent conclusions in the introduction to his 2013 edition (*Einaudi tascabili*) of the same text, xix–xxx.

⁴³ See Chabod, “Sulla composizione,” in his *Scritti*, 148.

⁴⁴ See Chabod, *Scritti*, 156, with reference to Rossi, “Per la storia,” 199.

⁴⁵ See Walker’s introduction to the *Discourses*, 40 and 61.

The 1950s Debate and its Aftermath

In the following years, Chabod's early hypothesis received a tacit revision in Felix Gilbert's 1953 review essay of Walker's edition of the *Discourses*.⁴⁶ In 1954 it was repeated by Roberto Ridolfi in his authoritative biography of Machiavelli,⁴⁷ and then in 1958 it was supported and expanded further by Gennaro Sasso, in a book initiated under Chabod's leadership, completed by 1956, and whose subtitle underlined its focus on the genesis of Machiavelli's political thought.⁴⁸ Also in 1958, an English translation appeared of Chabod's 1925 essay, but his hypothesis concerning the links between *The Prince* and the *Discourses* received strong criticism almost immediately, this time from John H. Whitfield, who emphasised the absence of probative philological, textual, or factual elements. Thus, regarding the exegesis of the cryptic clause, it is possible to conclude that by 1960 each of the three interpretations already in vogue in Conring's annotation had re-surfaced and found their defenders once more. Let us see how more specifically.

The thesis of the antecedence of the *Discourses*' first eighteen chapters had become the cardinal element in the reconstruction of the history of Machiavelli's political thought, according to which the theoretical value of the *Discourses* stopped at Book 1, Chapter 18, which in turn served as a "birth certificate" for *The Prince*. It is perhaps worth pointing out that this reconstruction was perpetuated in the same way as it had begun, as a mere circular reasoning. Though in the mid-1950s Sasso attempted to ground his views on chronological arguments through a "genetic approach," by the early 1990's he would consider them unnecessary: he came to assert that "no 'chronological' or purely 'philological' argument will project the shadow of a doubt" on the representation of Machiavelli as a theoretician of the "transition from the republic to the principate."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ See Gilbert, "The Composition," 148–153.

⁴⁷ See Ridolfi, *The Life*, 147–149 (and 294 n. 10). Compare with the seventh Italian edition (1978), *Vita*, 233–235 (and 511 n. 10).

⁴⁸ See Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli. Storia del suo pensiero politico*.

⁴⁹ Compare Sasso's 1958 book, *Niccolò Machiavelli. Storia del suo pensiero politico*, 213–219, 357–360, with its third edition (1993), *Niccolò Machiavelli. Volume 1. Il pensiero politico*, 349–365, 560–561 (353–354, for the quotations). See also Sasso's 1963 edition of *Il Principe e altri scritti*, xvi–xxi, 11 n. 1 (on "altra volta").

Even if the reappearance of the speculative interpretation did take chronological and philological factors seriously, it remained a prisoner of the fundamental belief promoted by the antecedence thesis. For example, in his review essay, “The Composition and Structure of Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*,” which critiqued Walker’s edition, Gilbert stated that “a consideration of the chronological references leads to the conclusion, that of the six years during which the *Discorsi* are supposed to have been written, the year 1517 was particularly important.”⁵⁰ While his analysis convincingly “eliminates the possibility of a simultaneous conception of *The Prince* and the *Discorsi*,” Gilbert maintained the hypothesis of the special character of the first eighteen chapters, which he thought came from a now lost book: in this way, he saved the antecedence thesis by venturing this “theory about an early treatise on republics,” whose material would have been rearranged and revised in 1517 to form the initial part of the *Discourses*. Gilbert emphasized the “speculative” character of this theory — which he admitted he could not support by any evidence — as he wished to distinguish it clearly from the other results and the more definite part of his study.⁵¹ Surprisingly enough, however, the aspect of the work that has most influenced subsequent generations of scholars is the speculative part alone: about three decades later, it served as the fragile foundation for far-fetched experiments in inverting expected dates, and in dislocating and relocating the text of the *Discourses*, effectively at the whim of interpreters.⁵²

Instead, the recovery of the sceptical view marked the first effort to confront the hypothesis of a lost “book on republics”: after examining Gilbert’s study, Hans Baron concluded that “no part of the *Discorsi* existed in 1513, not our present text nor a first draft nor any preparatory work now lost.”⁵³ This led to a renewal of the idea — already suggested in some ways by Artaud and others — of a late insertion into *The Prince*’s second chapter of the cryptic phrase, which would explain the possible cross-textual reference to the later work of the *Discourses*. According to Baron, “the ideas of the *Prince* did have an incubation period of many years, and they were not preceded by any of

⁵⁰ Gilbert, “The Composition,” 139.

⁵¹ Gilbert, “The Composition,” 152–153.

⁵² As has happened in Larivaille, *La pensée politique* and Bausi, *I Discorsi*. For a fuller discussion, see Barthas, “Analecta machiavelliana. II.”

⁵³ See Baron, “The *Principe* and the Puzzle,” 423. On the first circulation of *The Prince*, see Inglese’s 1994 critical edition of *De Principatibus*, 14–18.

the republican considerations found in the *Discourses*.⁵⁴ Given the lack of evidence on the circulation of *The Prince* prior to early 1516, one might conjecture that “in 1515–16 [Machiavelli] was still at liberty to adapt the text to changed conditions”⁵⁵ and therefore to add the clause at a time when — in Baron’s opinion — he was working on the *Discourses*.

In view of the lack of an earlier manuscript for *The Prince*, and in the absence of definite evidence to locate the *Discourses* in 1515–16, this simpler solution — still today widely accepted in the Anglosphere⁵⁶ — was unprovable as well. Hence, the more radical form of the sceptical interpretation reappeared with Whitfield in the late 1950s, followed by Carlo Dionisotti in the next decade, both of whom saw no reason to divorce the first eighteen chapters from the rest of the *Discorsi*: they also rejected the dubious identification of the “reasoning on republics” with the *Discourses* in any form whatsoever. By refusing to engage in guessing-games given the contemporary level of knowledge and the uncertainty of the documentation, this approach did not yield an alternative solution. “And the sentence of the *Prince*?” asked Whitfield: “That must remain, as far as I can see, still at present a puzzle with no proved answer. This does not seem to me a tragedy, though I shall hope that it may be a challenge.”⁵⁷ As Dionisotti put it: “One speaks of an *Urfaust* when one possesses a copy of that version. When the text comes to light of the *Urdiscourses* preceding *The Prince*, or the copy of Livy that Machiavelli annotated in the margins, then we will discuss the matter.”⁵⁸

Despite its rather artificial character, the academic controversy that developed around the question of the cryptic phrase was not devoid of relevance

⁵⁴ Baron, “Machiavelli: The Republican,” 228 n. 2.

⁵⁵ Baron, “Machiavelli: The Republican,” 238.

⁵⁶ See, most recently, Black, *Machiavelli*, 93; see also Connell’s 2016 edition of *The Prince*, 40 n. 1.

⁵⁷ Whitfield, “Gilbert, Hexter and Baron,” in Whitfield, *Discourses*, 206. The same volume also contains the chapter, “The Case of Machiavelli,” which is a detailed review essay on Sasso’s 1958 book, with useful reviews of Walker’s 1950 edition of the *Discourses*, and of Chabod’s 1958 collection of essays, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*. Whitfield discussed Bertelli’s treatment of the 1950s controversy (which appeared in Bertelli’s 1960 edition of *Il Principe e Discorsi*, 109–116) in Gilmore, ed., *Studies*, 364–369. On the controversy involving Gilbert and Whitfield, see Clough in the 1975 reprint of Walker’s edition, xxx–xxxix.

⁵⁸ Dionisotti, “Machiavelli letterato,” 131 (then in *Machiavellerie*, 255); in English, “Machiavelli, Man of Letters,” trans. Holmes, 42 (modified).

to the wider debates about the interpretation of Machiavelli's thinking, and it enlightened also the politico-cultural agendas of interpreters. Most contenders in the controversy succeeded in presenting convincing objections to hypotheses formulated by others, and in unveiling the ideological premise behind the subtle arguments of their adversaries. However, they appear to be less convincing when outlining, substantiating, and defending their own theories. For instance, Baron made a legitimate claim when he denounced the historical conception outlined by Chabod and his school, “in which the political thought of the Italian Renaissance appears essentially as a contribution to absolutism,”⁵⁹ similarly, Sasso is convincing in his denunciation of Baron's attempt to exorcize the “scandal” of *The Prince* by loosening, through chronological arguments, its conceptual links with the *Discourses*.⁶⁰

By the end of the twentieth century, and after almost fifty years of an inconclusive controversy, Corrado Vivanti identified how this academic quarrel above all had reinforced the tendency to textual hypercriticism, a methodology that risks the mishandling of notions of contradiction and interpolation which were originally developed in classical philology for ancient texts. In 2000, this interpretive trajectory was about to strengthen again by permeating the *Edizione nazionale delle opere di Niccolò Machiavelli*.⁶¹ In attempting to highlight its methodological limitations, Vivanti echoed Dionisotti's earlier sentiments: “we can have fun over and over with guess-work, but we must accept the *Discourses* as they are.”⁶² This is valid for *The Prince* as well.⁶³ As for the meaning of *altra volta ne ragionai a lungo*, Vivanti chose to retain a doubtful tone, leaving its meaning substantially undetermined.⁶⁴

On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the year of *The Prince*'s composition in 1513, another opponent of textual hypercritical tendencies, Giorgio Inglese, added to this position in his second “minor” edition of the

⁵⁹ Baron, “Machiavelli: The Republican,” 232. According to Whitfield, *Discourses*, 62: “[Sasso] puts forward, even if unconsciously, a Machiavelli whom I would call Fascist.”

⁶⁰ Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli. Volume 1. Il pensiero politico*, 352–353. For a similar remark on Baron, see Whitfield, *Discourses*, 203.

⁶¹ See Martelli's 1997 memo publicly launching the program for the *Edizione nazionale* and Bausi's 2001 apparatus to the *Edizione nazionale* of the *Discorsi*. For more insights on this trend, see Barthas, “Analecta machiavelliana. II.”

⁶² In Vivanti's 2000 edition of the *Discorsi* (with Guicciardini's *Considerazioni*), I.

⁶³ See Inglese's introduction to his 1994 critical edition of *De Principatibus*, 30 and, most recently, Inglese, “Sul testo,” 74.

⁶⁴ See Vivanti's 1997–2005 edition of the *Opere*, 1:834 n. 1 (for paragraph 1), 893–894.

work by presenting a kind of last stand of resistance against the apparent loss of sense induced by pure sceptical indeterminacy. In a footnote about the famous cryptic phrase on *altra volta*, he specifies: “reference to lost ‘discourses’ on the best way to institute a republic, that were presumably transfused in *Discourses* Book 1, Chapters 5–6,” where Machiavelli considers the political systems of the republics of Rome, Sparta and Venice.⁶⁵ Strikingly, from the time of Amelot’s interpretive work in the seventeenth century, and under the unrelenting pressure of textual scholarship, the identification of parts of the *Discourses* as somehow being enmeshed in *The Prince*’s cryptic clause progressively had melted away by lack of convincing evidence: from the broad-sweep view that the entire *Discourses* might be discerned there, to a narrowing of this reading to its first book, and then from the first eighteen chapters to identifying a couple of ‘discourses’ near the beginning. In his recent commentary, Gabriele Pedullà registered as “equally unprovable” the “four main interpretations” of *altra volta*: as a reference to a) the *Discourses*; b) a lost “book on republics”; c) the *Discourses*, but integrated in a late revision of *The Prince*’s manuscript; and d) the complex web of dispatches that the Florentine secretary sent to the republic’s magistracies before November 1512 — as suggested recently by Raffaele Ruggiero.⁶⁶ Upon such cleared ground, it may be argued that finally it is possible to build up new foundations for understanding Machiavelli’s phrase.

Refoundation

Even though the chronological question was central to the debate, whatever the precise time frame for the composition of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, it should have had no fundamental impact on the meaning of the puzzling hint of a “reasoning on republics” that Machiavelli proudly claims in *The Prince* to have produced somewhere else. The controversy instead turns entirely on a retrospective projection, as identified by Baron (and Chabod before him): Machiavelli would not have told the primary intended reader of his work that

⁶⁵ In Inglese’s 2013 edition of *Il Principe*, 8 n. 3. Compare with Inglese’s previous footnote in his 1995 edition (*Einaudi tascabili*) of the same text, 7 n.: “*altra volta*: reference to the first chapters of the *Discourses* or, better, to a lost work then integrated in the ‘commentary’ on Livy.”

⁶⁶ In Pedullà’s 2013 edition of *Il Principe*, 14 n. 1. See Ruggiero’s hypothesis — *altra volta* as a reference to the “complessa mole degli scritti machiavelliani di governo, anteriori al 1512” — in his 2008 edition of *Il Principe*, 51–52 n. 2.

he had reasoned at length about a subject elsewhere if that other work could not be known or accessible to him.⁶⁷ For those scholars who conjecture on a missing ‘book on republics,’ a further conjecture is thus necessary to be added: that Giuliano di Lorenzo de’ Medici (1479–1516) — mentioned by Machiavelli as a possible dedicatee for *The Prince* in early December 1513 — already would have seen the text mentioned in Chapter 2 of *The Prince*.⁶⁸ Not only is there no relevant evidence about anything of this nature, but also the famous letter to Vettori itself suggests the contrary: if Giuliano knew this lost book, this would testify to a relationship that would have left Machiavelli with less doubt than he expressed about the opportunity to present him the “little book” or not. Seen in this light, the point should be conceded even by those who hope for a possible appearance of the ‘*ante-Discorsi*’: when Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, there was no reader in Florence who could have been expected to have known the *Discourses*, part of them, or any kind of preparatory works and fragments that could have been merged into them. Hence, in attempting to uncover the meaning of his cryptic phrase, rather than adding conjectures to conjectures, we need to focus on the available material as it is, and we need to try to discover Machiavelli’s thought as much as possible on its own terms, by re-tracing to the extent that we can his own intellectual process in writing it down.

While Baron established some sound foundations in the matter, his inquiry must be relocated, from being a matter of *time* to a matter of *thing*. Despite the most common opinion (also shared by Baron) that the *Discourses* were intended in the reference to a “reasoning on republics” at the beginning of *The Prince*, this may well not be the case. The solution to the puzzling question raised by the cryptic clause depends on the answer to the following consideration: what could Machiavelli’s first intended readers, at least in Florence, be expected to know as resulting from his lengthy “reasoning on republics”? In 1661, Conring was less informed than a Florentine was in 1513 about Machiavelli’s main point of focus and expertise while he was serving the popular Republic. The seventeenth-century German scholar considered the state of the documentation at hand to be insufficient to allow the identification of a specific writing of Machiavelli. But is this documentation still insufficient for us? Is there a political writing of some sort that could have

⁶⁷ Baron, “*The Principe* and the Puzzle,” 411.

⁶⁸ See Martelli and Marcelli’s 2006 edition of *Il Principe*, 66 n. 3 and Larivaille, Marchand, and Martelli’s 2008 bilingual edition of *Il Principe / Le Prince*, xxxiii–xxxiv n. 35, 91.

justified Machiavelli's claim of authorship as he expressed it in *The Prince* in 1513, and did it have a certain amount of public fame? An affirmative response necessarily lies within the web of Machiavelli's Chancery papers (as perceived in a general sense by Ruggiero). Among these writings, one text essentially can support Machiavelli's apparently cryptic claim in *The Prince*, and it was well known, not only in Florence.

It is clear from the 1975 book by Jean-Jacques Marchand — in which for the first time Machiavelli's early political writings (1499–1512) were critically edited and systematically analysed — that these works fall into three main categories: a) drafts of speeches, preparatory works, analyses, reports, and memoranda on internal policy in Tuscany; b) observations, records, and embassy reports on external policy and foreign political systems; and c) texts of two laws reforming the military system in Tuscany. Each of these writings raises difficult questions about authorship, and none was meant for publication, at least in the 'literary' understanding of the term, except possibly the "Ritratto delle cose della Magna" ("Portrait of German affairs"), presumably from late 1512, which rendered a final embassy report perhaps more attractive for a broader audience.

By contrast, Machiavelli's two legislative texts were published, in the sense that they were approved by the assembly of the Great Council in its capacity as supreme legislative power. As far as we know, only the first work was included in the official volumes of registered laws: this contained the law of 6 December 1506, relative to the institution of mass-conscription for a home-grown militia in the Florentine dominions in Tuscany.⁶⁹ It was of ground-breaking importance. The second law, of 30 March 1512, which instituted a corps of mounted troops, in addition to the already-established infantry troops,⁷⁰ was a corollary to the earlier law and, as such, testifies to the ongoing development and progressive realization of the concept instituted in 1506. The thesis here is that when Machiavelli evoked his long "reasoning on republics" he had in mind not some general considerations on the republican form of government — as scholars have supposed since the time of Conring — but the specific defence of republican institutions that he had

⁶⁹ Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), Provvisioni, Registri 197, fols. 34v–39r. This document is described and edited in Marchand, *Niccolò Machiavelli: i primi scritti politici*, 146–147 and 451–461.

⁷⁰ ASF, Provvisioni, Protocolli 65, fols. 225r–238r. This document is described and edited in Marchand, *Niccolò Machiavelli: i primi scritti politici*, 237–239 and 501–506.

sponsored in his legislation. In other words, the contention here is that the puzzling statement in *The Prince* refers to the law that reformed the military system in the popular Republic.

The preamble of the 1506 law contains important indications about its spirit, expressing the ideal motives and purposes around which consensus was formed. This preamble is worth citing at some length here:

Considerato i magnifici et excelsi Signori come tutte le Republiche, che pe' tempi passati si sono mantenute et accresc[i]ute, hanno sempre hauto per loro principal fondamento due cose, cioè: la iustitia e l'arme, per poter raffrenare e correggere i subditi et per potersi difendere dalli nimici; et considerato che la Republica vostra è di buone et sante leggi bene instituta et ordinata circa la administratione della iustitia, et che gli manca solo il provedersi bene dell'arme; et havendo, per lungha experientia, benché con grande spendio et pericolo, cognosc[i]uto quanta pocha speranza si possi havere nelle gente et arme externe et mercennarie, perché, se sono assai et reputeate, sono o insopportabili o sospette, et se sono poche o senza reputatione, non sono d'alcuna utilità; giudichano essere bene d'armarsi d'arme proprie et d'huomini suoi proprii, de' quali el dominio vostro n'è copioso, in modo che facilmente se ne potrà havere quel numero et d'huomini bene qualificati che si disegnerà.⁷¹

(Whereas it has been observed by the Magnificent and Exalted Signors that all republics which in times past have preserved and increased themselves have always had as their chief basis two things, to wit, justice and arms, in order to restrain and to govern their subjects, and in order to defend themselves from their enemies; and whereas they have observed that your republic is well founded on good and holy laws, and organized for the administration of justice, and that she lacks only to be well

⁷¹ The transcription follows Marchand's edition (*Niccolò Machiavelli: i primi scritti politici*, 451). The law was first printed in the 'Cambiagi' edition. To date, it has been translated into English only partially: "A Provision for Infantry [a selection from the Preamble]," in Machiavelli, *Chief Works*, ed. and trans. Gilbert, 1:3 (here, slightly revised and completed).

provided with arms; and since through long experience, indeed with great expense and danger, she has learned how little hope it is possible to place in foreign and hired arms, because when they are numerous and of high repute they are either unendurable or suspected, and if they are few and without reputation, they are of no use, these Signors judge it well that she should be armed with her [own arms] and with her own men; [your territory is so populous that it will be easy to make the number of well-qualified men that will be planned].)

In his classic work, Oreste Tommasini identified the significant impact of the institution of the militia, not only in Tuscany and Italy, but also at the international level: for instance, reduced spending for defence and a high number of conscripts were what most impressed the king of France.⁷² From the viewpoint of internal political conflicts, another aspect of Machiavelli's law was no less crucial: the conscripts were placed under the authority of a new civilian board, the Nine of the Militia, whose members were an emanation of the Great Council. For war missions only, the battalions were to be run by the committee of Ten of War. After years of popular suspicion over military power, the Nine could be seen as a form of counter-power to the Ten.⁷³ Not surprisingly, after the coup of September 1512, the restored Medici regime actually dismantled the Nine and the command structure of the militia, and in early November it dismissed Machiavelli from all of his posts: as chancellor for territorial affairs, secretary to the Signoria, to the Ten, and to the Nine. But, contrary to what is commonly written in the literature, it held back on dismantling the militia itself: from Bologna, Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici (1475–1521; r. as Pope Leo X, 1513–21) asked his cousin Giulio (1478–1534; r. as Pope Clement VII, 1523–34) to reorganize the battalions “with most loyal chiefs” (“con capi fidelissimi”),⁷⁴ and by the end of December

⁷² See Tommasini, *La vita e gli scritti*, 1:371. Primary sources include: Francesco Pandolfini, Dispatch to the Ten of War, 27 December 1506, in Canestrini and Desjardins, *Négociations*, 200. See Najemy, *A History*, 412 (with further references).

⁷³ See Barthas, “Machiavelli, from the Ten to the Nine,” 159–164.

⁷⁴ Giovanni de' Medici, Letter to Giulio de' Medici, 15 December 1512, in ASF, Carte Stroziane, II, 86, fol. 225r; also quoted in Simonetta, “L'aborto,” 201.

the *Dieci di balia* was revived, concentrating under its authority the special military powers it had had before the revolution of 1494.⁷⁵

Tommasini also noted that a directive from the Ten — issued on 8 July 1513 — finally ordered the disarming of the conscripts’ battalions; he added, however, that this order was suspended in a second directive *sine die*, on 19 August, that is, a week after Lorenzo de’ Medici the Younger (1492–1519) arrived in Florence to assume the reins of power.⁷⁶ The difference between this second directive and its antecedent may well have resulted in a misleading impression among contemporary observers (including Machiavelli): the first was intended for “omnibus rectoribus” of the Florentine militia, whereas the second was addressed only to some of them.⁷⁷ This meant that the most visible process underway during the summer of 1513 was the disarmament of the militia; it is possible that many at the time reasonably interpreted the process as a more general step towards implementing its disbandment. Chabod, in his 1927 essay, suggested that this last hypothesis, touching Machiavelli’s “own creation and own life,” may have affected him considerably during the initial stages of composing *The Prince*, in which the argument in defence of the “*arme proprie*” is of course fundamental.⁷⁸

Chabod further believed that a Medici ruler, envisioned as the first official reader of *The Prince*, may have been “unaware of Machiavelli’s writings on the Florentine militia.”⁷⁹ But it is difficult to imagine that such a foundational text of that time — the 6 December 1506 law — would not have attracted the attention of the Medici, since their new government was discussing the issue in those days and continued discussing it for some months. By February 1514, the Medici Pope Leo X had expressed his views regarding the reorganization of the Florentine forces and the preservation of the militia, and Lorenzo thought the number of conscripts and battalions should be sharply reduced.⁸⁰ The *balia* finally issued the new decree regulating the

⁷⁵ This decree of the *Balia* — which apparently has gone unnoticed in previous scholarship — is preserved in ASF, Balie 43, fol. 76r.

⁷⁶ See Tommasini, *La vita e gli scritti*, 2:127–128 n. 4.

⁷⁷ Current reference is ASF, Dieci di Balia, Missive 94, fols. 160v, 175r. The author wishes to thank Francesca Klein for assistance during research at the archive.

⁷⁸ Chabod, *Scritti*, 148, and n. 1.

⁷⁹ Chabod, *Scritti*, 148.

⁸⁰ See Lorenzo de’ Medici, Letter to Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici, 15 February 1514, edited by Tommasini, *La vita e gli scritti*, 2:995.

matter on 19 May 1514.⁸¹ Largely framed on the model of Machiavelli's 1506 law, this decree nonetheless reorganized the militia "differently from [how it was organized during] the time of the popular state" ("altrimenti che a tempo dello stato popolare") through a series of amendments.⁸² These amendments concerned the command structure in particular: perhaps most notably, the Nine — a core institution in Machiavelli's text — was formally abolished.⁸³ This negated the essence of the law of December 1506. In the following months, the regime consulted Machiavelli on the practical implementation of the new regulation: in a brief, afterwards entitled "Ghiribizzi d'ordinanza" ("Caprices on conscription"), the ex-Secretary took a clear stance against reducing the size of the conscripted armed forces.

Observations like those made by Tommasini thus help locate in closer proximity the law of December 1506 (instituting mass-conscription in Tuscany) and *The Prince*, written in the summer and fall of 1513. However, the literary conception of authorship that underpins Marchand's work on the early political writings led him to judge too readily the "limited importance" of this piece of legislation — with the notable exception of its preamble — "for the knowledge of Machiavelli's thinking and style."⁸⁴ This has heightened the concerns over Machiavelli's authorship of the law's final text (as registered by the Chancery), which resulted in its exclusion from the *Edizione nazionale* of his works.⁸⁵ The basis for this omission is questionable and derives partly from the fact that Machiavelli's name does not appear on the law, even though this was for procedural reasons, not because of doubts over his high level of involvement in its production. Formally, the author of the law was not the redactor of the text but the organ that sanctioned it, and its final registration required a last round of editing by those specialized in the niceties of legislative language. Moreover, in Florence the legal initiative belonged to the government, whose members could be considered as co-authoring the proposed law because they were responsible for its presentation before the

⁸¹ See ASF, Balie 43, fols. 157r–160v; edited in Canestrini, *Documenti*, 328–336.

⁸² Cerretani, *Ricordi*, 322.

⁸³ The revival of the Nine, on 11 June 1527, was one of the first acts of the last Florentine Republic (1527–30). This largely forgotten piece of legislation is preserved in ASF, Provvisioni, Registri 206, fol. 88r.

⁸⁴ Marchand, *Niccolò Machiavelli: i primi scritti politici*, 148.

⁸⁵ See the introduction to the "Provisione della ordinanza," in the 2001 edition of Machiavelli's *L'arte della guerra*, eds., Marchand, Fachard, and Masi, 477.

Councils. Although the making of a law was a collective process, there is enough evidence to consider Machiavelli’s participation as fundamental in this case, and not reducible, as Nicolai Rubinstein argued, “to the humbler role of raising troops in the Florentine *contado*.”⁸⁶ For instance, we still have Machiavelli’s preparatory texts — including “La Cagione dell’ordinanza” (“The Reason for the Militia”) which helps in understanding Machiavelli’s intentions, constraints, and strategies — plus a copy of the draft of the law itself, whose attribution to Machiavelli should remain unchallenged. Comparing the introduction of the *Cagione* and the beginning of the draft to the preamble of the official text of the law, Marchand correctly highlighted the fact that, whereas “justice and arms” are considered the foundation of all forms of rule in the *Cagione* and of “repubbliche e stati” in the draft, they are applicable only to “repubbliche” in the law’s final text. At first glance, then, the new military system that Machiavelli had conceptualized, developed, and implemented in Tuscany over many years could appear to the Medici rulers of Florence as designed especially for republics. As it was entirely reasonable for Machiavelli to allude to this law as being a previous work by him, it was also reasonable for him to assume that the identity of this text would be immediately comprehensible to the dedicatee as the *ragionare delle Repubbliche*.

Conclusion

Other works by the current author have analyzed Machiavelli’s experience in creating the militia within the context of the crisis between the new popular Republic and the old military-financial complex. In these works, the argument has been put forward that the Machiavellian project was part of an original political program to establish the Republic’s autonomy from financial power, and also a necessary response to the hostility that the aristocracy always manifested towards the popular government.⁸⁷ Focusing on Machiavelli’s *Scritti di governo*, one can perhaps develop further the hypothesis that arming the subjects from the Florentine territories was meant to lead to a deeper reform of territorial governance in a republican perspective.⁸⁸ One

⁸⁶ See Rubinstein, “Machiavelli and the World of Florentine Politics,” 16. For a systematic refutation of this view, see Guidi, *Un Segretario militante*, 210–237.

⁸⁷ In English, see Barthas, “Machiavelli, the Republic, and the Financial crisis.”

⁸⁸ See Marchand, *Niccolò Machiavelli: i primi scritti politici*, 334–341; Vivanti’s introduction to the *Opere*, 1:xxvii–xxix and n.; Guidi, *Un Segretario militante*, 325–337.

also can read the *Discourses* as a demonstration, through a comparison with ancient Rome, that the militia project was conceived as the initial phase of a larger process aimed at granting citizenship to the populations of the subject territories, with a view towards strengthening a free society.⁸⁹

A law is a condensed expression of a line of thought: it distils a concept with a view toward its practical implementation within a politically defined framework. Machiavelli's contemporaries, at least in Florence, had no doubt that the revolutionary law of December 1506 was the product of his own thinking.⁹⁰ After the submission of Pisa in 1509, and considering the achievement of what the law had instituted, one Florentine — who was a commissioner in Machiavelli's militia, and later would be the first reader of *The Prince*⁹¹ — wrote to Machiavelli that he considered him a prophet and a liberator, and the author of a philosophy that was not for fools to understand.⁹² The republican law instituting mass conscription was nothing less —Machiavelli suggested, in cryptic terms — than the prolegomen of *The Prince*.⁹³

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⁸⁹ See Pedullà, *Machiavelli in tumulto*, 341–418; in a revised version in English, *Machiavelli in Tumult*, 145–180.

⁹⁰ See, for instance, Guicciardini, *Storie fiorentine*, 424; in English, *The History of Florence*, 258.

⁹¹ “Filippo Casavecchia has seen it,” wrote Machiavelli in the above-mentioned letter to Vettori (in Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Connell, 135).

⁹² Filippo Casavecchia, Letter to Niccolò Machiavelli, 17 June 1509, in Atkinson and Sices, eds. and trans., *Machiavelli and his Friends*, 181–182. See Najemy, *A History*, 412–413 (with further references).

⁹³ The analysis in this essay that forms the basis for this argument further develops and substantiates a thesis already proposed by the author, published in Barthas, *L'argent*, 169–215.

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