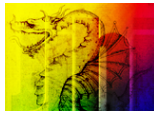


# JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY HISTORY OF IDEAS



2012

Volume 1 Issue 1

Item 5

– Section 2: Articles –

Skinner contra Skinner  
Civic Discord and Republican Liberty in  
Machiavelli's 'Mature' Texts

by

Mauricio Suchowlansky



## JIHI 2012

Volume 1 Issue 1

### Section 1: Editorials

1. *A New Journal* (M. Albertone – E. Pasini)
2. *Une nouvelle revue* (M. Albertone – E. Pasini)

### Section 2: Articles

3. *Open Society or Closed Salon? A Reading of Brillat-Savarin's "Physiologie du goût"* (C. Hashimoto)
4. *Interêt immédiat et vanité. Vers un individualisme responsable et organisateur* (A. Tiran)

#### Subsection: Method

5. *Skinner contra Skinner. Civic Discord and Republican Liberty in Machiavelli's 'Mature' Texts* (M. Suchowlansky)

### Section 3: Notes

6. *Of Engineers and Dragons. The JIHI Logo* (E. Pasini)

### Section 4: Reviews

7. *Book Reviews* (C. Carnino, R. Gronda, S. Mammola)

### Section 5: News & Notices

8. *Activities of the GISI | Les activités du GISI (2011-2012)*

.....

# Skinner contra Skinner

## Civic Discord and Republican Liberty in Machiavelli's 'Mature' Texts

Mauricio Suchowlansky \*

*The purpose of this work is to question the extent to which Skinner and other scholars working on the methodological premises of the Cambridge approach have considered the intellectual development of Niccolò Machiavelli between his early and late texts. First, by positing a contextual reading of the concept of civic discord as introduced in the Florentine Histories and the Discursus Florentinarum Rerum, I claim that Skinner has misrepresented some of Machiavelli's late or mature texts and hence has conceived and created a 'myth of coherence' in terms of the republican thought of the author—mostly influenced by Skinner's own reading of the Discourses on Livy. I consider the differences that appear between the early and late Machiavelli's texts as belonging to different conceptual and situational contexts, which reveal both changes of intention and actual changes of mind on the part of the author. Secondly, I claim that Machiavelli did not maintain the same understanding of the concept civic discord throughout his intellectual life. By the late texts, the means that Machiavelli employs to represent the various social groups, their conflicts and the difficulty of managing such structural dilemmas are the result of a different conceptual paradigm in which no group is labelled 'guardians of liberty'; instead, all societal sectors are considered as equally ambitious and consequently equally dangerous for the maintenance of the vivere libero. Contrary to Skinner's observations, the late Machiavelli considers the safeguard of liberty as a result of the dispersal of authority throughout watertight councils that institutionalise, and make ineffective, the potentially corrosive ambizione of all social groupings of the city.*

\* University of Toronto ([mauricio.suchowlansky@utoronto.ca](mailto:mauricio.suchowlansky@utoronto.ca)).



The following paper will examine the extent to which Skinner's historiographical research is in line with his methodological approach. There are two primary reasons for wanting to embark on such an endeavour. First, although several scholars have put forward critiques about this supposedly inherent discrepancy in Skinner's interpretative and methodological works, few have actually done so 'from within' the methodological framework that Skinner and other 'Cambridge scholars' prescribe<sup>1</sup>. Second, and more importantly, while part of the argument is that Skinner's interpretative endeavours do not respect the methodological strictures that he himself advances, this work is an attempt to assess the extent to which Machiavelli maintains the same 'neo-Roman' view of civic discord and freedom in both his 'early' and 'mature' political and historical texts.

I provide an exposition of Machiavelli's uses of the concept of civic discord as an exemplar of what Skinner considers to be Machiavelli's neo-Roman republican thought, and, by following Skinner's methodological strictures, I show that the interpretation of this concept leads in a surpris-

<sup>1</sup> Holly Hamilton-Bleakley, "Linguistic Philosophy and the *Foundations*", in *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, eds. James Tully, Annabel Brett and Holly Hamilton-Bleakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32-3; David Boucher, "The Denial of Perennial Problems: The Negative Side of Quentin's Skinner's Theory", *Interpretation* 12, no. 2-3 (1984): 287-8; Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 73-77; Iain Hampsher-Monk, "History of Political Thought and the Political Thought of History", in *The History of Political Thought in the National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 172-3. In 2009, the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* dedicated a special issue to critical studies of Skinner's contextual approach. See, for instance, Mark Bevir, "Contextualism: From Modernist Method to Post-Analytic Historicism?", *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 3 (2009): 211-44. Even more recently, the *Journal of the History of Ideas* published a special issue dedicated to the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Skinner's "Meaning and Understanding". See especially, Melissa Lane, "Doing Our Own Thinking for Ourselves: On Quentin Skinner's Genealogical Turn", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73, no. 1 (2012): 71-82; Bryan Garsten, "Liberalism and Rhetorical Vision of Politics", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 73, no. 1 (2012): 83-94.

ingly different direction<sup>1</sup>. Machiavelli's appreciation of the ubiquitous tumults of the Roman republic and the capacity to channel, let alone circumvent, the opposing forces of the nobles and the people becomes more difficult to discern in his 'mature' texts. This is because the linguistic realm of Machiavelli's analysis of civic discord and freedom in the *Florentine Histories* and the *Discursus Florentinarum Rerum* is not that of ancient Rome but rather that of his contemporary and beloved Florence<sup>2</sup>. The main threat to the liberty of the Florentines, Machiavelli proposes in these two 'mature' texts, did not arise out of some sort of external arbitrary domination, but rather out of the city's intrinsic social and political weaknesses. In this respect, political contestation—a fundamental aspect of the neo-Roman conception of freedom—is 're-discovered' in Machiavelli's 'late' texts as the primary effort behind his search for better institutional foundations for the Florentine republic. Thus, a 'true' Skinnerian approach, I argue, should consider the differences that may appear in texts that belong to different situational and ideological contexts, which may and often do reveal both changes of intention and actual changes of mind on the part of the author. This is solved by the insistence on what some Cambridge scholars refer to as the 'intellectual development' of an author, a methodological

<sup>1</sup> Mark Jurdjevic, for instance, provides a critique of Skinner's interpretation of Machiavelli with which I thoroughly agree, but, unfortunately, he is unable to provide a solid critique of the methodological and interpretative sides of the Skinnerian project. Mark Jurdjevic, "Machiavelli's Hybrid Republicanism", *English Historical Review* 122 (2007): 1229-30. Several other scholars have noticed and critiqued Skinner's interpretation of the concept of civic discord in Machiavelli's political thought. See, among others, Marie Gaille-Nikodimov, *Conflit Civil et Liberté. La politique machiavélienne entre histoire et médecine* (Paris: Honoré Champion Éditeur, 2004), 181-3; Filippo del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation* (London: Continuum, 2009), 72-90; John Najemy, "Society, Class and State in Machiavelli's Discourses on Livy", in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 96-111; John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 8-14.

<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Niccolò Machiavelli, "Discursus Florentinarum Rerum", in *Machiavelli: the Chief Works and Others*, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989). I have consulted the *Tutte Le Opere* edition to verify the accuracy of the English translations (*Tutte Le Opere*, ed. Mario Martelli, Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1972).

precaution meant to avoid what Skinner himself refers to as ‘myth of coherence’<sup>1</sup>.

The remaining of this work will be dedicated, first, to briefly expose the reader to Skinner’s methodological approach; second, it will discuss Skinner’s interpretative texts, with a particular emphasis on those texts in which an interpretation of Machiavelli’s concept of civic discord is provided. Third, it will analyze Skinner’s interpretative texts, showing how they fail to provide an in-depth account of the linguistic differences between the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories* and the *Discursus Florentinaurum Rerum*. Finally, I will provide some preliminary conclusions on the potentials of the contextual approach and on Skinner’s interpretations of Machiavelli’s republican political thought.



## 1. Skinner’s Contextual Approach

Since part of my endeavour is to show how Skinner partly adheres to, and partly departs from, his own approach, I find it important to provide the reader with a detailed treatment of this methodological approach to the study of historical texts<sup>2</sup>. In his edited volume, James Tully states that Skinner’s approach to interpreting historical texts could be divided into

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, *History and Theory* 8 (1969): 3-53. Later reprinted in James Tully’s edited volume on Skinner’s methodological and interpretative works. James Tully, ed. *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988): 63-112; Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57-89.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Mikael Hornqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-37; also, Marco Geuna, “Skinner, Pre-humanist Rhetorical Culture and Machiavelli”, in *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 50-72. Unlike other critics of the Skinnerian approach, I take Skinner’s interpretative texts as being methodolog-

‘five different steps’<sup>1</sup>. The first two steps that Tully points out, and which are of utmost importance for the endeavour here pursued, are centred on the question “what is or was an author doing in writing a text in relation to other available texts which make up the ideological context?”<sup>2</sup>. More specifically, this means that in order to comprehend the intentionality of, say, Machiavelli’s use of the concept of civic discord in the *Florentine Histories*, one would have to look at other texts that have established the linguistic, conceptual, and epistemological conventions governing the theme at the time<sup>3</sup>. This type of examination, Tully explains, allows Machiavelli scholars to observe how the text contributes and/or challenges the underlying assumptions of the conventional forms of the genre, an examination that allows us to determine the extent to which Machiavelli accepted or repudiated the conceptions of the political debate of his time<sup>4</sup>. The second step of Skinner’s methodological prescription centres on the individual text and its more practical content, content that allows the student to determine what the author’s intentions were during the process of composition vis-à-vis the political debates and problems of her own time<sup>5</sup>.

The ‘third step’ in Skinner’s method is what could be defined as the

ically consistent, since the focus of inquiry remains the same—that is, the importance of conventional language and authorial agency. In other words, I take Skinner’s own methodological development to be rather peripheral to the interest and questions of my endeavour. For a different critique see, Robert Lamb, “Recent Developments in the Thought of Quentin Skinner and the Ambitions of Contextualism”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 3 (2009): 246-265.

<sup>1</sup> James Tully, “The Pen is a Mighty Sword”, in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, 7-16. Since one of the objectives of this work is to assess the extent to which Skinner’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s intentions is in line with the method, and not to assess what Tully defines as the ‘practical side’ of the political ideology of the author under treatment, I will only discuss the first four ‘steps’ (cf. *ibidem*, 17-8).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Iain Hampsher-Monk, “The History of Political Thought and the Political History of Thought”, in *The History of Political Thought in the National Context*, eds. Dario Castiglione and Iain Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 164.

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), XIII.

<sup>5</sup> James Tully, “The Pen is a Mighty Sword”, 8.

study of ideology itself. That is, since the ‘battle of ideas’ takes place on the battlefield of ‘old’ conceptions of, say, civic discord, the historian of ideas must then encounter ‘minor’ texts in order to survey and identify the conventions and ideologies of the period. It is after this moment, which Tully refers to as ‘benchmark’, that the historian of ideas is ready to observe the intentions the author, as changing or reinforcing, the ideological conventions of the time<sup>1</sup>. Part of the fourth step is what Tully refers to as the contextualization of the ideological weight of an utterance<sup>2</sup>. That is to say, the historian of ideas should evaluate the political vocabulary employed in a given text and compare it to the conventional usages of the time. In other words, by grasping the standard use of certain political terminology—for instance civic discord—that is used by a given actor to describe and evaluate political action, “the historian of ideas can comprehend the constitutive character of (political) practices”<sup>3</sup>.

This exploration of the first four steps of Skinner’s approach bring us to the four methodological recommendations—or ‘myths’—Skinner puts forward in his groundbreaking text, *Meaning and Understanding*. As aforementioned, Skinner criticizes any method governed by “the claim that the text itself should form the self-sufficient object of inquiry and understanding”<sup>4</sup>. Skinner presents this type of argumentation as the ‘myth of prolepsis’ or as “statements or given actions [that have to] await a future action in order for them to attain the meaning claimed on their behalf”<sup>5</sup>. That is, we cannot place an author’s utterance within a linguistic realm that does not belong to his time, otherwise we would wrongly be adding an intention to the utterance that may not have had at its precise historical moment<sup>6</sup>.

Skinner labels ‘myth of doctrine’ those attempts to give meaning to

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Meaning and Understanding*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Holly Hamilton-Bleakley, “Linguistic Philosophy and the *Foundations*”, 20.

<sup>6</sup> David Boucher, “On Shklar’s and Franklin’s Reviews of Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*”, *Political Theory* (1980): 407.



‘scattered remarks’<sup>1</sup>. As Tarcov puts it, it is a preconceived doctrine that “produces ‘hypostatized’ or reified doctrines described as ‘growing organisms’, the ‘non-history of anticipations’ or ‘foundations’ or ‘almost wholly semantic’ debates about when doctrines ‘really emerged’”<sup>2</sup>. Skinner then defines as ‘myth of parochialism’ those mistaken attempts to overemphasize the ‘familiarity’ or closeness of an alien notion or subject of study. Following the work of philosophers of language such as J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Skinner consequently argues that the use of a term is delimited by the ‘linguistic games’ established at the time the author wrote the text<sup>3</sup>.

As for the ‘myth of coherence’, Skinner states that if “a given classic writer is not altogether consistent, or (...) he fails altogether to give any systematic account of his beliefs”, the historian may mistakenly conceive as his task “to supply or find in each of these texts the coherence which they may appear to lack”<sup>4</sup>. The problem with this type of endeavour is that it attributes significance in such a way that no place is left for the analysis of what the author himself may have meant to say. Part of this methodological stricture is the idea that, since an author’s different texts may have belonged to different ideological *milieus*—to different worlds of questions or problems—, one may only be able to grasp the authorial intentions given in a particular text by considering the potential ‘intellectual development’ of the author. As Geuna comments with respect to Skinner’s *Foundations*, “the idea of an intellectual development in Machiavelli between *The Prince* and the *Discourses* seems acceptable to [Skinner] and appears to underlie his choice of commenting on the two works in two distinct chapters”<sup>5</sup>. This would be to say, then, that since Machi-

<sup>1</sup> Holly Hamilton-Bleakley, “Linguistic Philosophy and the *Foundations*”, 34.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan Tarcov, “Quentin Skinner’s Method and Machiavelli’s *Prince*”, *Ethics* (1982): 694.

<sup>3</sup> Holly Hamilton-Bleakley, “Linguistic Philosophy and the *Foundations*”, 28. Some scholars have critiqued Skinner for having misunderstood the philosophy of language of Collingwood and Wittgenstein. See, for instance, Kenneth McIntyre, “Historicity and Methodology of Hermeneutics: Collingwood’s Influence on Skinner and Gadamer”, *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2 (2008): 138-166.

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Meaning and Understanding*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Marco Geuna, “Skinner, Pre-humanist Rhetorical Culture and Machiavelli”, 56.

avelli's texts belong to different linguistic contexts, his 'political manoeuvres', targets, and the normative qualities of his texts should also be different. By emphasizing the differences between texts, Skinner points out, "Machiavelli's discourse (...) is never abstract, but takes into account the historical-political conditions" in which his political ideas need to be realised<sup>1</sup>. If we are to consider the Machiavelli of *The Prince* with that of the *Discourses*, Skinner tells us, we must take into account the fact that "Machiavelli's life underwent a permanent change", which refers not only to the shift in the more personal aspects of his life but also to his linguistic and political interests, as well<sup>2</sup>.



## 2. Skinner's Interpretative Approach: Machiavelli's Notion of Civic Discord

In this section, I will provide a concise discussion of Skinner's major texts, especially those in which he interprets Machiavelli's conception of civic discord. By doing so, I introduce the reader to Skinner's 'practical' take on the methodological assumptions above discussed, and I provide a 'stepping stone' for the more 'contextual'—and critical—section presented below.

Following Tully's interpretation of the historical method, we must begin by asking, "what is or was an author doing in writing a text in relation to other available texts which make up the ideological context?"<sup>3</sup>. In the case of Skinner's interpretation of Machiavelli's concept of civil discord,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, 60.

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction* (New York: Wong and Hill, 1981), 48-50.

<sup>3</sup> James Tully, "The Pen is a Mighty Sword", 7.

we must take, as a point of departure, the various linguistic conventions within which Machiavelli's use of the concept resides. In other words, we want to know in what dialogue Machiavelli was intervening when he referred to the notion of civic discord, and how Machiavelli's use of the concept either reproduced or challenged its conventional usage<sup>1</sup>.

For Skinner, the ideological milieu of Machiavelli's texts dates back to the *Quattrocento*, a time during which some scholars began to make claims about the importance of eradicating civic discord or the 'tyrannical interests of private factions' that were considered to be the main obstacle to the free way of life<sup>2</sup>. This conception of civic strife as detrimental to the life of the polity was directly borrowed from Roman sources, who had argued that virtue of the social life resided in the independence from arbitrary domination, either by foreign powers or by the passions of individual interests or social groups<sup>3</sup>. This republican impetus, Skinner points out, led to the re-appropriation of the vocabulary of civil liberty already employed by scholars of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and forged "a genre devoted at once to celebrating their civic greatness in the highest humanist style, and at the same time to explaining it in terms of their uninterrupted loyalty to their long-established systems of 'free' government"<sup>4</sup>.

Humanists such as Poggio Bracciolini and Leonardo Bruni put forward the quasi-Aristotelian argument that participation in public matters was the necessary means to educate the citizens in the moral virtues of unity and the common good<sup>5</sup>. Among the texts of this new genre, we find Bruni's *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis*, in which Bruni glorifies Florence's strength and glory by highlighting the city's free way of life understood as

<sup>1</sup> Skinner begins by situating Machiavelli within the realm of the discourse of the Florentine 'civic humanism' by stating that "(...) this background of Florentine 'civic humanism' provides us with the context that enables us to grasp what Machiavelli is doing in his *Discourses* [praising the city's *vivere libero*], his commentary on the early books of Livy's history of Rome" (Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. II, 6).

<sup>2</sup> Marco Geuna, "Skinner, Pre-humanist Rhetorical Culture and Machiavelli", 53.

<sup>3</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. II, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. I, 127. Also, Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric*, 105-8.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Jurdjevic, "Machiavelli's Hybrid Republicanism", 1239.

free from external conquest and internal factional discords<sup>1</sup>. Texts within this paradigm of humanist republicanism praised the greatness and glory of the republican system of political values and a tradition that had no ties to the tyrannical mentality of dependence all the while it praised the unity and self-rule of the city-republics<sup>2</sup>.

Florentine republican writers of the early *Cinquecento* considered order and unity as the fundamental vertices for the flourishing of the common good of the community. As Skinner points out, there was a shift in the comprehension of the institution of republicanism: “the majority [of scholars] agreed that Florence ought now to settle for an aristocratic or *stretto* form of mixed constitution”<sup>3</sup>. For instance, Francesco Guicciardini argued that the large political enfranchisement that the Florentine republican constitution established by 1494 created an exaggerated polarity between the noble and the popular interests<sup>4</sup>. Contrary to what previous scholars had argued, this polarity of interests was now interpreted as paradoxically reproducing the factional divisions that it sought to avoid. Thus, Guicciardini proposed “the introduction of a Senate of some two hundred *ottimati* (...) to restore the balance between the two extremes in the approved Venetian style”<sup>5</sup>. Whereas these aristocratic republican writers never ceased to argue that the main solution to civic discords was the spread of moral and civic education throughout the entire citizen-body, this new type of republican scholarship renewed its interest in mixed government by arguing that in order to assure self-rule and civic peace, the leading share in government should be restricted to the most prominent citizens<sup>6</sup>.

We must now dedicate ourselves to introducing our subject of interest,

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. I, 144.

<sup>2</sup> John Najemy, “Arti and Ordini in Machiavelli’s *Istorie Fiorentine*”, in *Essays Presented to Myron Gilmore*, eds. Sergio Bertelli and Gloria Ramakus (Florence: La Nuova Casa Editrice, 1977), 166.

<sup>3</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. II, 148-9.

<sup>4</sup> Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 149.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, 149-50.

<sup>6</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 329-30.

in this case the concept of civic discord, within this linguistic context in order to observe the political manoeuvres, or the interactions with the manipulation of ideological conventions, on the part of Machiavelli<sup>1</sup>. As Skinner explicitly states, it is with the *Discourses on Livy* that Machiavelli initiates his inquiry on the problems of republicanism<sup>2</sup>. Machiavelli begins his *Discourses*—in the first eighteen chapters of Book I—by identifying the features that enabled the Roman republic to survive, expand and become great. That is, much like the neo-Roman humanists that preceded him, Machiavelli refers to the Roman sources in order to construct his conception of republicanism. Yet, while the *Discourses* are largely given over to a passionate, almost nostalgic restatement of the great tradition of Florentine republicanism, Machiavelli at the same time reiterates and attacks the humanist ideal of civic virtue and its role in public life<sup>3</sup>.

Skinner then embarks onto the study of ideology itself, and begins to provide an interpretation of how Machiavelli incrementally deviates from the traditional ideological conceptions of his time. Following the typical humanist consideration of the ‘internal’ threat to the order of a polity, Skinner’s Machiavelli states that the main goal of a government is to keep, as much as possible, private interests and ambitions at bay<sup>4</sup>. However, and contrary to the conventional conception of the intellectual Florentine circle, Machiavelli held the shocking conviction that the conflicts between the people and the great citizens or nobles were the key to success. As Pocock rightly states in his *Machiavellian Moment*, most contemporaries of Machiavelli promoted the Venetian model, model which had eroded civil strife in an almost mechanised fashion, relocating the weight of moral flourishing of the republic to a complex institutional setting at the expense of the individual proclivity to pursue private interests<sup>5</sup>. That is, whereas most Florentine intellectuals of the early *Cinquecento* supported the Venetian exemplar of a well ordered and faction-less repub-

<sup>1</sup> Mikael Hornqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, 16.

<sup>2</sup> Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric*, 67.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 105.

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. I, 152-5.

<sup>5</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Tradition*, 284.

lic, Machiavelli went on to characterize the so-called ‘petty squabbles’ of Rome’s internal history as the key to their greatness. Nevertheless, Skinner is also aware of the fact that Machiavelli saw the downside of civic strife, the chronic suspicion and fear of the threat of tyranny and/or the potential overthrowing of the republic by giving too much authority to a given social sector<sup>1</sup>.

Skinner then provides an ‘evaluative turn’—the so-called ‘fourth step’ of his method—that provides an ‘insight’ on the tools Machiavelli employs in order to judge and evaluate political action. Skinner argues that in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli conceives the neo-Roman ideal of civil freedom as fundamental to the health of the polity; yet, when comes to giving reasons for the greatness of the mixed constitution, Machiavelli alters the conventional language of civic discord. Machiavelli begins his argument by unfolding the sociological axiom, “that in every republic there are two opposed factions”, that of the nobles or *grandi* and that of the people or *popolani*<sup>2</sup>. This claim, moreover, entails a further difference with the conventional usage of the humanist conception of civic discord, since Machiavelli assumes that every social group seeks to promote its own factional interest to the detriment of those of others and even that of the common good. As part of this novel conception of the sociology of the city, the Machiavelli of the *Discourses* explains that divisions amongst *grandi* and *popolani* are “serious and natural”, since it is inherent to the nature of the former “the wish to rule” whereas the nature of the latter is “not to

<sup>1</sup> Some fervent admirers of Machiavelli’s populism have critiqued Skinner’s ‘irenic’ understanding of the concept of civic discord. Still, these scholars read their own predilections—principally the seething resentment of the rich, a strong enthusiasm for revolutionary rupture and an admiration for equality under the law—in Machiavelli’s texts, and consequently overlook the most ‘aristocratic’ and parochial segments of Machiavelli’s texts—such as his support of the Senatorial politics in Rome. Marie Gaille-Nikodimov, *Conflict Civil et Liberté*, 180-1; Filippo del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation*, 125-7; John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 3, 27 and 101-5. See, also, Paul Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 30-1 and 50.

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 66. See also, Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. II, 152. Machiavelli uses the binary opposition of *grandi* and *popolo*, for instance, no less than twenty times in chapter 9 of *The Prince*, and Book I.4 of the *Discourses*.

be enthralled”<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, Machiavelli stresses the importance of a well-trained populace, insisting that they are better than the aristocrats at judging particulars, mainly because the biases of a group, whose main interest is the *vivere libero* are less harmful than those of individuals whose main goal is the acquisition of political power<sup>2</sup>. By defining social discord as an inherent and healthy aspect of the civil life of the republic, Machiavelli both reproduces one of the most prominent linguistic conventions of the neo-Roman republicanism of the Renaissance and re-appropriates its ‘illocutionary force’ by giving the notion a new intentionality.

According to Skinner, Machiavelli agrees with his republican predecessors that the majority of the people can safely be assumed to have it as their fundamental desire to lead a life of personal liberty without the interference of any arbitrary power—a prototypical conception of what Skinner refers to as ‘republican freedom’—, but he further claims that, if we wish to prevent the government from falling into the hands of an arbitrary faction—and the consequent arousal of civil strife—, we must organize it in such a way that government remains in the hands of the body-citizen as a whole<sup>3</sup>.

Still, and because men never do good except by necessity, freedom is conceived as a form of service, Skinner points out, since “devotion to public service is held to be a necessary condition of maintaining personal liberty”<sup>4</sup>. For instance, in the first book of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli argues

<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17; Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 195.

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Rebhorn, *Foxes and Lions: Machiavelli's Confidence Man* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 90-1. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli recommends the support of the people to the detriment of that of the *grandi* because “the end of the people is more decent than that of the great”. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 39. Also, *Discourses*, I, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 58. See also, Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. II, 161; Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric*, 102.

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. II, 163. Skinner also writes, “unless each citizen behaves with *virtù*, and in consequence places the good of his community above all private ambitions and factional allegiances, the goal of civic *grandezza* can never be achieved”. Quentin Skinner, “Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and the Pre-Humanist Origins of Republican Ideas”, in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, eds. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 138.

that after the expulsion of the Tarquins the nobility was no longer compelled to respect the people, and “spat out the people the poison they had kept in their breasts, and injured them in any way they could”<sup>1</sup>. In order to avoid the impetuous attempts of the nobles, the Romans created the Tribunes of the people, who had the power to reject any decision taken by the aristocratic Senate<sup>2</sup>. Machiavelli alone among his contemporaries, as the example of Guicciardini accurately portrays, promoted such type of large government as the means to obstruct the arousal of civic discord and the consequent loss of freedom. He alone thinks that if the aristocrats form the government, they will be prone to rule for their interest. The Machiavelli of the *Discourses* preferred the greatness of ancient Rome, contrary to the aristocratic Venetian republic, because “when the common people are set up as guardians of their own liberty, they will take better care of it” than the nobles would<sup>3</sup>. One can then see that Machiavelli further twists the conventional view of discord by arguing that, unless the constitution promotes such a free way of life, the possibility of conceiving a well-ordered republic will be close to none. Skinner points out that this is part of Machiavelli’s manipulative endeavour: if we want to maximise freedom, we must become servants of the public good<sup>4</sup>. This observation, moreover, gives us a grasp of what Skinner had defined as the legitimization of a moral identity. Machiavelli borrows and manipulates ancient uses of liberty in order to challenge the contemporary reflections on the subject.

Thus, for Skinner,

Machiavelli’s solution (...) is to accept that broadly-based republics will lack for serenity, while recognising that this is something to be endured rather than reformed (...) Rome’s continual domestic unrest was undoubtedly ‘an inconvenience’, but ‘it was an inconvenience indispensable to the attainment of Roman greatness’<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 16-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. II, 163.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, 154.



In Skinner's conception, Machiavelli proposes a republican setting that, by preventing selfish interests from co-opting the institutions of government, does a *service* to the whole of the polity: it keeps the self-destructive tendencies of the individuals at bay all the while it promotes freedom and security in the form of what Skinner and other scholars have referred to as *vivere libero*<sup>1</sup>.

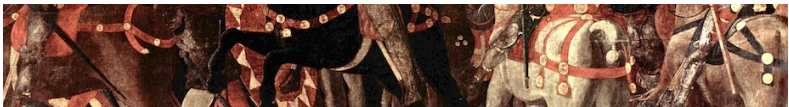
This paradoxical conception of the common good, moreover, does not prevent Skinner from defining Machiavelli as a humanist. Machiavelli is still a 'neo-Roman' in the sense that he promotes a republican way of life that transforms the selfish behaviour of social groups and individuals into a virtuous way of acting for the benefit of all. "In Rome, each faction was able to keep watch over the other and prevent it from legislating purely in its own interests"<sup>2</sup>. Law, then, becomes an educative tool, one that promotes some sort of 'civic *askesis*' and helps create a virtuous citizen-body. For Skinner, though, law and coercion cannot be regarded exclusively as restrictions on freedom. They can also be used as instruments for making choices between real alternatives and not just a quasi-natural question of tendencies or inclinations. On the one hand, it keeps the active disposition of the nobles at bay: their desire to dominate is counter-balanced by the active role of the populace. On the other, the *popolani* take up a dual active political role: they engage in political action in order 'not to be dominated', while they act as a check to the tyrannical ambitions of the nobility. By relying on the humanist language of civic participation, Skinner argues that Machiavelli rejects the *Cinquecento* republican model of aristocratic government and promotes the novel conception of a large

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10-1: "[Machiavelli] agrees that the overwhelming majority of citizens in any polity can safely be assumed to have it as their fundamental desire to lead a life of personal liberty. A few men, it is true, will always want instead to dominate others (...). But most men 'simply want not to be ruled' they want to be able 'to live as free men' (*vivere liberi*), pursuing their own ends as far as possible without insecurity or unnecessary interference". Cited in Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric*, 103.

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. II, 30: "The condition of freedom is related to the ways of living that prevail or legitimate the polity, and here Machiavelli follows the tradition of city-republics in so far as he considers conquest and tyranny as parallel threats to the free way of life". Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric*, 104.

republican government that does not eradicate civic discords, but rather employs them for the good of the community as a whole. In other words, Skinner observes that for Machiavelli the performance of public actions and the cultivation of certain virtuous skills are necessary instruments for the avoidance of civil discord, and thus necessary for the maintenance of liberty<sup>1</sup>. Liberty is not the absence of others and their different interests, but rather the presence of others as both challenges to oneself and as a limit to the natural *ambizione*, the potential forms of tyrannical rule.

Skinner considers this neo-Roman impetus as underlying Machiavelli's later major text, the *Florentine Histories*, as well<sup>2</sup>. That is, Skinner argues that Machiavelli, *post res perditas*, maintains throughout all his political and historical texts the same understanding of civil discord: first, as an instrumental 'necessary evil' of the social life, and second as the only possible channel for republican flourishing—that is, it promotes the twin goals of classical republicanism, civic *virtù* and *grandezza*. As I will discuss below, Skinner's main interpretive error is that he wrongly overlooks the 'basic values' of the *Histories*, something that Skinner *does* take into account with respect to Machiavelli's (early) political texts, most especially the *Discourses*<sup>3</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> This is the reason for which some interpreters of Skinner have argued that *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* belong to two different linguistic and conceptual worlds. The former is focused on the *virtù* of the individual (and on securing the existence of a polity) the other on the *virtù* of a people (and the maintenance of the *vivere libero* or free way of life). Marco Geuna, "Skinner, Pre-humanist Rhetorical Culture and Machiavelli", 61. Also, Maurizio Viroli, "Machiavelli and the Republican Ideal of Politics", in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, 154-5.

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 83.

<sup>3</sup> Marco Geuna, "Skinner, Pre-humanist Rhetorical Culture and Machiavelli", 60-1.

### 3. The 'Late Machiavelli': The "Florentine Histories" and the "Discursus"

Skinner and other Cambridge scholars have thoroughly overlooked the theoretical and interpretative importance of Machiavelli's 'mature' texts. For instance, in his methodological and analytical multi-volume, *Visions of Politics*, Skinner cites the *Histories* in passing and consecrates a mere ten pages to it in his *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*. Moreover, in *The Machiavellian Moment*, J.G.A. Pocock cites the *Histories* only twice and does so only in passing. Consequently, both scholars have been reluctant to understand Machiavelli's political thought in terms of the practical and more contingent historical process and his conceptual shifts over time; instead, they have created a rather static reading of Machiavelli's texts as consistent with the neo-Roman paradigm of republicanism. Moreover, in *Machiavelli*, Skinner refers to the *Histories* no less than three times as belonging to the same ideological and linguistic paradigm than the *Discourses on Livy*<sup>1</sup>. Given Skinner's methodological approach, its sensibility to historical and linguistic conventions, it is striking that he does not situate the *Histories*, let alone the *Discursus Florentinarum Rerum*, within the context of his early and mature works. In other words, arguing for a conceptual similarity between, for instance, the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories* is hard if Skinner's interpretation relies so strongly on only one of the two texts<sup>2</sup>.

One of the problems with Skinner's interpretation of the 'late' texts is made explicit in his *Machiavelli*. Skinner states that the basic linguistic realm within which Machiavelli writes his historical text is that of classical historiography. "The two basic tenets of classical—and hence of humanist—historiography were that works of history should inculcate moral lessons, and that their materials should therefore be selected and

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 82-4.

<sup>2</sup> It is true that, for the most part, the *Florentine Histories* is an outgrowth of his previous political texts, principally *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*. Nevertheless, it is also true that some new elements are added, largely in acknowledgement of the increasing complexity of the sociology of a city in decline. John Najemy, "Machiavelli and the Medici: The Lessons of Florentine History", *Renaissance Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1982): 550.

organized in such a way as to highlight the proper lessons with the maximum force”<sup>1</sup>. In the previous section, I presented the use of the concept of civic discord in the *Discourses on Livy* as belonging to, and facing the problems of, the linguistic vocabulary of classical and humanist ‘neo-Romanism’, whose central tenet was the conception of the *vivere libero*—understood as independence from external and arbitrary restrictions. Moreover, I claimed that Machiavelli’s observations with respect to civic discord are indebted to the concepts of humanism all the while he provides new meaning to the concept. For the Machiavelli of the *Discourses*, civic discord is an inalienable aspect of the sociology of any polity, due partly to the nature of all human beings, and partly to the existence of social divisions in all polities. Consequently, civic discord is a necessary and inherent aspect of politics, one that Machiavelli attempts to employ for the service of the common good. Nevertheless, Skinner’s neo-Roman Machiavelli makes the case that discord provides a ‘service’ to the polity, first, by tempering the ambition of the rich and the noble, and second by promoting a sort of moral education to the citizens. In other words, Skinner’s Machiavelli is still a humanist and more especially a ‘neo-Roman’ because he conceived political participation as a means to create a virtuous citizen-body<sup>2</sup>.

With respect to Machiavelli’s history of the city, Skinner misguidedly states that the conceptual vocabulary of the text is similar, if not the exact same one, as the one of Machiavelli’s response to the first ten books of Livy<sup>3</sup>. Renaissance historians of the calibre of Najemy and Gilbert state that the Machiavelli of the early 1520s thoroughly abandoned Sallust, Cicero and Polybius’ conceptual vocabulary of Roman republicanism, and, instead, he decidedly turned toward a parochial linguistic model<sup>4</sup>. This

<sup>1</sup> One may also wonder about the ‘linguistic context’ of the *Discursus* about which Skinner has nothing to say. Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 78.

<sup>2</sup> Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. I, 157-165.

<sup>3</sup> In the short chapter dedicated to the *Florentine Histories*, Skinner repeats, no less than four times, that the relevant themes and arguments have “already been treated extensively in the *Discourses*” (Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 82-3, 85).

<sup>4</sup> To this it should be added that Machiavelli wrote the *Histories* under a contract with the philo-Medicean Florentine *Studio*. Additionally, Machiavelli was invited to write the

shift in Machiavelli's vocabulary exemplifies what Skinner, in his more Collingwoodian turn, would define as the 'question-and-answer game' of a text. As Skinner states, "I assume that each of Machiavelli's treatises was asking *its own questions*, and *I looked for coherence only at the level of each individual text*"<sup>1</sup>. The fact that the Machiavelli of the *Histories* became a parochially-oriented historian reveals that the text was part of a different linguistic, and ideological, battle, meant to provide an answer to a specific—and different—set of questions. In terms of the main issue of this chapter—as Najemy accurately points out—the late Machiavelli seems to have shifted gears when comes to his understanding of the quality of civic discord<sup>2</sup>. The complex and dynamic means that Machiavelli employs to represent the various social groups and their conflicts and the difficulty of managing such a structural dilemma, somewhat 'forced' Machiavelli to present his conception of civic discord as beyond the binary Roman language of the *Discourses*. In the *Histories* and the *Discursus*, instead, Machiavelli emphasises the degree to which the fragile consensus of Florentine politics was no longer a feasible solution under a context of a declining republic. Unlike Skinner's interpretation, in the *Florentine Histories* and in the *Discursus* we get to see 'another' Machiavelli, one who highlights the importance of the institutional design of the republican constitution to the detriment of the value of humanist moral education or the potential *virtù* and *grandezza* of the citizen-body.

This difference becomes evident if we take into account the abovementioned

*Discursus* in 1519 by the Medici Pope Leo X as part of a debate on constitutional reform following the death of the last secular heir of the Medici family, Lorenzo *il giovane*, in 1519. In other words, by 1519/1520, the political and ideological context in which Machiavelli was submerged, both personally and generally, had radically shifted to the point that Machiavelli considered, more than ever before, that the Medici were willing to make significant changes to the organization of the *Stato*. Marina Marietti, "Machiavel: Historiographe de Medicis", in *Les Écrivains du Pouvoir en Italie à l'époque de la Renaissance*, ed. André Rochon (Paris: Université Paris-Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1974), 105-6.

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Skinner, "Surveying the *Foundations*: a Retrospect and Reassessment", in *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 241 (my emphasis).

<sup>2</sup> John Najemy, "Machiavelli and the Medici: The Lessons of Florentine History", 574-5. Also, Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence*, 159.

tioned ‘first step’ of Skinner’s method. As stated above, Skinner’s observes that the milieu of the *Histories* is that of humanist historiography with its purposes mainly defined as the inculcation of moral and political lessons through judiciously selected and organised historical exemplars<sup>1</sup>. One of the aspects of the *Florentine Histories* that has been consistently pointed out by several Machiavelli and Renaissance scholars is Machiavelli’s re-conception of historiography. As Ridolfi posits, Machiavelli “was more at home extracting principles of political science from history than writing it”<sup>2</sup>. Also, Felix Gilbert stresses that Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories* provides a selective and thorough series of accounted events, though its narrative does not comprise a connected history<sup>3</sup>.

In this respect, Skinner himself tells us that Machiavelli never attempts to provide a complete narrative of events, but rather tries to ‘spotlight’ certain events, either by edifying an almost fictional narrative or by discussing certain aspects at length<sup>4</sup>. This is in line with the *Preface* to the *Histories*, in which Machiavelli lets his readership know that he first intended to write a history of Florence from Cosimo de’ Medici’s assumption of power in 1434 to the death of Lorenzo de’ Medici in 1492. One of the reasons Machiavelli gives for pursuing such ‘short’ a theme is that previous historiographers, Poggio Bracciolini and Leonardo Bruni, had already recounted the history of the city prior to that date<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, Machiavelli radically modifies his task because both Bruni and Poggio neglected the civic discords of the city and their effects or consequences, as if these were unworthy of retelling<sup>6</sup>. Either those humanists thought civic discord did not deserve to be included in their works of history or they went through the subject rapidly so as to avoid offending the liv-

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 78.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 195 and 197.

<sup>3</sup> “Events which Machiavelli believed contained valuable historical lessons”, Gilbert writes, “such as the tyranny of the Duke of Athens and the revolt of the Ciompi, are recited in great detail, whereas the happenings of intervening decades are hardly mentioned” (Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence*, 238-9).

<sup>4</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 79.

<sup>5</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 6-7.

ing descendants of their predecessors<sup>1</sup>. This is “unworthy of great men”, Machiavelli reproaches, “because if nothing else delights or instructs in history, it is that which is described *in detail*; if no other lesson is useful to the citizens who govern republics, it is that which shows the causes of the hatred and divisions of the city”<sup>2</sup>. Machiavelli the historian then announces the theme of his narrative, “for most other republics which we have information have been content with one division (...) but Florence, not content with one, had many”<sup>3</sup>. Machiavelli gives a particular emphasis to the “many” internal discords of the city, most especially those recounted in Books I-IV: those between the old nobility and the popular sectors (Book II), those of the popular leaders and the plebs (Book III) and the struggles between the ‘popular aristocrats’ (Book IV)<sup>4</sup>. In doing so, Machiavelli’s narrative in the first four books of the work let the reader know that the rise of the Medici in 1434 was not the result of the decisions of a single political faction—read, the Medici family—, but rather the outcome of a historical process, the political disenfranchisement of the losing factions, and the consequent weakness of Florentine republican institutions.

These first books not only depict the conceptual and linguistic world of Machiavelli but they also provide the point of departure for his critique of the views of previous historians on the concept of civic discord<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Nicolai Rubinstein, “Florentine Constitutionalism and Medici Ascendancy in the Fifteenth Century”, in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 444-6.

<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 6 (my emphasis). Also, Mark Phillips, “Barefoot Boy Makes Good”, *Speculum* (1984): 586-7.

<sup>3</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> The events recounted in these three chapters are the rise and fall of the Duke of Athens in 1342, the Ciompi revolt of 1378, and Cosimo de’ Medici’s assumption to power in 1434 (Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 79). Also, Marina Marietti, “Une Figure Emblématique: Michele di Lando vu par Machiavel”, *Chroniques italiennes* 69-70 (2002): 130. For a superb analysis of the events of Book III, see, Anna Maria Cabrini, *Interpretazione e Stile in Machiavelli: Il Terzo Libro delle Istorie* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 1990), 89-123.

<sup>5</sup> With respect to the importance of the first half of the *Histories*, Anselmi explains that, whereas the first four books are dedicated to a dynamic conception of the civic struggles during the republican period, the last four books are the representation of a “*storia medicea* (...) storia (...) di un radicale mutamento istituzionale, che porta Firenze a perdere gli antichi

Najemy states that, “however justified [his critique] in the case of Poggio, [Machiavelli] was distinctly unfair with regard to Bruni”<sup>1</sup>. This is because, in his *History of the Florentine People*, Bruni had already recounted at length those three events that Machiavelli now views as fundamental for his lesson; “surely it is here if anywhere that Machiavelli gives concrete expression of his own divergence from the authoritative tradition established by Bruni”<sup>2</sup>. That is, the Florentine was mostly interested in showing that his understanding of the historical and political development of the city radically departed from that of his famous predecessors. His history of the city is less dedicated to the inculcation of moral and political lessons and more to the understanding of how the dynamic social composition of Florence shaped the development of the republican institutions of the city.



Having thus succinctly developed the ‘conceptual and linguistic’ world of Machiavelli, we must now attempt to grasp the manoeuvres that Machiavelli implements in this text in order to reproduce or criticise the ideological milieu of his time. Machiavelli’s observes in the *Histories* that Florence’s society was divided into three opposing social groups, definition that deviates and complicates the binary understanding of civic conflicts in Rome and resembles his own conception of the Venetian social body in the *Discourses*<sup>3</sup>. Here, Machiavelli distinguishes first between the *gentiluomini* and the *popolani* to then say that among the former there were those who were nobles “in fatto” and those who were nobles merely “in

ordinamenti repubblicani e ad assumere quelli signorilli”. See Gian Mario Anselmi, *Ricerche Sul Machiavelli Storico* (Pisa: Pacini Editore, 1979), 128.

<sup>1</sup> John Najemy, “Arti and Ordini in Machiavelli’s *Istorie Fiorentine*”, 161-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, *Arti and Ordini*, 162.

<sup>3</sup> Marina Marietti, *Machiavelli: L’Eccezione Fiorentina* (Firenze: Cadmo, 2005): 109.



nome". Florence too was dominated by a 'popular aristocracy' or aristocrats 'in name': as he recounts in Books II and III of the *Histories*, the popular sectors displaced the nobiliary class from government after the fall of the tyranny of Gualteri di Brienne in 1343, event that came to modify the already multifaceted social composition of the city<sup>1</sup>. More important, the events of 1343 result in the end of the patrician domination of government, the loss of the "virtue of arms", the "generosity of spirit" that the nobles represented, and the rise of the *popolo* as the new dominating political sector. Machiavelli boldly notices that the new popular leaders did not pursue their 'natural' objective of living according to the laws; the popular classes show the same, if not more, political ambition than the old noblemen<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, at the end of Book II and the beginning of the following one, Machiavelli stresses the paradoxical outcome of the victory of the *popolo* that will shape the social character of Florence up until Machiavelli's own times: the old noblemen were forced to adopt the attitudes—political and otherwise—of the people<sup>3</sup>. The result, then, is what Machiavelli defines as "mirabile ugualità" or admirable social similarity between the old and the new political leaders of the city. This *mirabile ugualità* is in fact the *quid* of the chapter and of Machiavelli's view of civic discords in the Florentine context: while the victory of the *popolo* gave the opportunity to actively participate in the political affairs of the city to a larger cohort of Florentines, this outcome did not seem to compensate the high price of the loss of the nobles' *ethos* and their military valour—and the appearance of a whole new set of social actors, which was far from representing what Machiavelli boldly defines as *mirabile ugualità*. The military mental-

<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 20 and *Florentine Histories*, 104-6.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, in Book II, Machiavelli explains that "The ruin of the nobles was so great (...) that they never again dared to take up arms against the people (...)" to then say in the introductory chapter to Book III, that "the *Florentine people fought to be alone in government* (...) [therefore] the desire of the Florentine people was injurious and unjust [ingiurioso e ingiusto]" (Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 104-5, my emphasis).

<sup>3</sup> Since the nobles were deprived of the magistracies, "it was necessary for them not only to be but to appear similar to the men of the people in their conduct, spirit, and mode of living" (*ibidem*, 106).

ity of the old nobility is replaced by the anti-military mercantile *ethos* of the popular sectors, event which becomes a fundamental factor in Machiavelli's conception of a healthy body-politic<sup>1</sup>.

In addition, it is worth considering that the following Book (III) presents another important dimension in his negative portrayal of the history of Florence—that is, the divisions between the newly-victorious *popolo* and the *plebe*. Machiavelli explains that after the revolt that saw a plebeian leader, Michele di Lando, take the head of government in June 1378, the 'popular aristocratic' faction became hopelessly arrogant. Their obsession with petty factional quarrels and delusions of grandeur made them a threat for the newly established popular republican order<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, Machiavelli tells us that the plebs perceived that Michele di Lando, "in reforming the state had been too partisan toward the greater people", and they decided to take up arms once again "with their usual boldness" and "presumption" after all the "dignity they had given him and the honour they had done him"<sup>3</sup>. Having failed to obtain total control of the government through legal means, the radical factions of the populace then attempted to employ force against Michele's regime. Their arrogance, much like that of the old aristocrats, is now highlighted as detrimental to the order of Florence<sup>4</sup>.

Even more significant is the passage in the *Histories* in which Machiavelli puts an exposition of his own conception of human nature in the

<sup>1</sup> This analysis of the character of the Florentines may owe something to the mercantile society within which Machiavelli lived and wrote. That is, Machiavelli did not live in the Rome of farmers and warriors, but rather in the Florence of merchants, tradesmen, craftsmen and bankers—such as the Medici: "The republic was left in the hands of men nurtured in trade [Restando la repubblica nelle mani d'uomini nutriti nella mercanzia]" (*ibidem*, 50). Moreover, Machiavelli's political life between 1519-1521 is marked by the mercantile *ethos* of contemporary Florence: he was sent to Genova to represent some Florentine merchants in a case of bankruptcy, and he was also sent to Lucca to represent several Florentine merchants and bankers in another bankruptcy case. See Francesco Bausi, *Machiavelli* (Roma: Salerno Editrice, 2005), 85-6.

<sup>2</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 130-1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 128-129.

<sup>4</sup> Strikingly, Skinner does refer to this novel characterization of social classes, but, unfortunately, he gives no further importance to it. See Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 84-5.

mouth of an anonymous speaker. All men, this speaker says, have the same ancestor, and he then claims, “strip us all naked, you will see that we are alike”<sup>1</sup>. For the Machiavelli of the *Histories*, ambition, the main ‘internal’ cause of civic discord, rules the lives of all human beings alike, regardless of their social position. In other words, Machiavelli sees no difference between the populace and their desire to live freely as compared to the lust for power on the part of the aristocracy<sup>2</sup>. All social sectors, fighting out of ambition, become a problem for the security of the polity, something that the three aforementioned chapters make explicit<sup>3</sup>. These Books not only speak of the lacerations of Florence’s social and civic fabric, but also highlight the extent to which each and every single government resulted in some form of abuse of power: the loss of the noble *ethos*, the brief rule of the minor guilds, the counterrevolution of the oligarchy and finally the oligarchic government that imposed the political institutions that paved the way for the rise of the Medici *stato*—recounted in Books V–VIII<sup>4</sup>. Thus, if we accept Skinner’s interpretation of the *Discourses*, we face the problem of making sense of the derogatory conception of the Florentine social groupings, their historical transformations and their role in the institutional instability of the city as presented in the *Histories*. In this respect, it is hard to accept Skinner’s claim that for Machiavelli “if we can find the cause of Rome’s success we can repeat it”<sup>5</sup>. If we accept that the entirety of Florence’s society now proves to be more a problem than a solution for the republic, then, Skinner’s ‘neo-Roman’ characterization of Machiavelli’s political thought faces a serious challenge.

This apparent challenge is made more explicit if we considered the ‘other’ late political text of Machiavelli, the *Discursus Florentinarum Rerum*. Written roughly during the same time as the *Histories*, the *Discursus* proposes a constitutional reform for Florence, and, though not explicitly, expresses a line of thought similar to the treatment of civic discord

<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 122–3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 96.

<sup>3</sup> In Book II, for instance, the discords between the nobles and the people led, first to the tyrannical rule of the Duke of Athens and then to the violent events of 1343 (*ibidem*, 98–9).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 93–9 and 126–9.

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction*, 59.

of the *Florentine Histories*<sup>1</sup>. Whereas the template Machiavelli creates for the government of Florence emphasizes the collective terms of institutions and structures of Florence, it is thoroughly silent with respect to the educative aspect of citizen participation<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, and unlike the argument he presents in the *Discourses*, here Machiavelli abandons the conceptual vocabulary of binary opposition between the nobles and the *popolo* and the consequent affirmation that the *popolo* is a better guardian of republican institutions<sup>3</sup>. Rather than proposing a set of institutions based on the political enfranchisement of the people as a ‘check’ on the constant desire for acquisition and power on the part of the nobility, Machiavelli here argues for a complex set of watertight institutions that seek to enlarge the distribution of political authority throughout the collective voices of Florence: those of high rank, the middle sectors and the general populace<sup>4</sup>. Yet the most important aspect of Machiavelli’s constitutional theory for the government of Florence is not to provide a check on the ambition of the *grandi*; instead, it is meant to provide a check on all social groupings at once.

Prior to the bulk of the discussion on the reform, Machiavelli reminds his reader that one of the problems that the Florentine republic suffered

<sup>1</sup> In line with some of the assumptions here presented, Jurdjevic argues that the *Discursus* represents a change in Machiavelli’s concept of republicanism: “his thinking had changed in significant ways leading him to revise a number of critical assumptions from *The Prince* and the *Discourses*”. Mark Jurdjevic, “Machiavelli’s Hybrid Republicanism”, 1248. The following paragraphs are much indebted to Jurdjevic’s works and commentaries.

<sup>2</sup> In addition, most scholars have overlooked the fact that the *Discursus* is thoroughly silent on the civil militia and the military role of the people. See, for instance, John McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Jurdjevic, “Machiavelli’s Hybrid Republicanism”, 1253.

<sup>4</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discursus Florentinarum Rerum*, 107-11. As part of his attempt to call the attention of his readership, Machiavelli states that with the implementation of such reforms, the Medici’s “power is not only preserved but is increased, your friends continue to be honoured and safe, and the whole body of citizens has evident reasons for being satisfied” (*ibidem*, 107). Moreover, his appeal to the Medici family, most especially to Leo X, is reminiscent of the concluding remarks in the *Preface* of Book III of the *Histories*, where Machiavelli expresses that “Florence arrived at the point that it could easily have been reordered in any form of government by a wise lawgiver” (Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 106).

was that it never satisfied “all the parties among the citizens”<sup>1</sup>. This is in line with the aforementioned historical account of the governments as recounted in the *Histories*: all governments were the result of the social conflicts between the various social groups of the city and the consequent restrictive policies undertaken in order to achieve the ‘positive’ political objectives of particular social factions. In the *Discursus*, Machiavelli recommends the implementation of a hierarchy of councils, each of which was meant to represent a particular sector of the sociology of Florence. A small council of sixty-five members that would represent the aristocracy, one of one hundred that would represent that larger middle class sectors, and an even larger council of one thousand members that would represent the lower citizens of Florence<sup>2</sup>. As Skinner rightly claims, institutions in Machiavelli’s texts do serve as a “*temperamento*—a means of tempering, a curb—to control” the desires of those who may threaten the free way of life; yet, and unlike Skinner’s perception, the institutions Machiavelli introduces in the *Discursus* serve to control the *ambizione* of both the great, the *mezzani* and the general population<sup>3</sup>. Machiavelli’s reform, thus, proposes the political enfranchisement of all social sectors of the city all the while it guarantees what could be referred to as a ‘restrictive balance of power’ among all three represented social classes. In addition, the derogatory view of Florentine civic discords of the *Histories* and the consequent institutional configuration that Machiavelli presents in the *Discursus* show that participation does *not* constitute an instrumental condition of maintaining individual liberty, but rather an indispensable premise for the survival of the polity, *tout court*. The understanding as well as the configuration of the institutionalisation of conflict indicate that in the mature texts liberty is seen not only in the act of contestation—whether it be through legal or extra-legal means or via the educa-

<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discursus Florentinarum Rerum*, 103.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, 107-111. It is useful to compare such view on institutional creation with Skinner’s view that Machiavelli “is in fact a consistent even a fervent partisan of popular government” (Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of the Modern Political Thought*, vol. I, 159).

<sup>3</sup> Quentin Skinner, “The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical Perspectives and Historical Perspectives”, in *Philosophy in History*, eds. Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 211.

tion of the citizenry—but also in the more ‘positive’ act of participating through the proposed legal and institutional channels. All social sectors are considered to be equally politically ambitious and equally dangerous for the independence of the city—that is why Florence is characterized in the *Histories* as the city of “admirable equality”<sup>1</sup>.

Contrary to the argument of Skinner’s conception of the *Discourses*, then, the *Histories* and the *Discursus* show a Machiavelli that refrains from cataloguing one particular social sector as the ‘guardians of liberty’, and provides, instead, a novel sociological conception based on a complex tripartite society that understands all groups as driven by the *same* political desires<sup>2</sup>. The main political aspect in both texts is the necessity to give equal voice—though not equal weight—to all sectors of Florentine society, though the weight of the lesson in the later texts lies on the side of the institutional framework, not on the *ethos* of a virtuous population<sup>3</sup>. In

<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the very idea of institutionalizing contestability into the service of a good order makes of this mature Machiavelli a scholar much more attuned to the aristocratic intellectuals of the time, such as Francesco Guicciardini and Donato Giannotti. See Marina Marietti, *Machiavelli: L’Eccezione Fiorentina*, 87-8. For a different interpretation see, among others, Gennaro Sasso, “Machiavelli e Venezia: Considerazioni e Appunti”, in *Machiavelli e gli antichi e altri saggi*, vol. III (Milano: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore: 1988), 3-5 and 38-9. Also, John McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> “By the *Discursus*, Machiavelli sees the people and the nobility equally in terms of positive liberty: their desires are equally political, the problems they pose are identical and the solutions are identical — realising a form of government that gives them each their voice and role in the common enterprise of governing” (Mark Jurdjevic, “Machiavelli’s Hybrid Republicanism”, 138). See also Timothy Lukes, “Descending to the Particulars: The Palazzo, the Piazza and Machiavelli’s Republican Modes and Orders”, *The Journal of Politics* 71 (2009): 520-532.

<sup>3</sup> McCormick claims that the introduction of two popular offices in the *Discursus*, the Council of One Thousand and the Office of the *Proposti*, is the result of Machiavelli’s advocacy for a much more popular form of government than acknowledged by Skinner and other scholars. See John McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 9, 14, and most especially 102-5. Yet McCormick’s interpretation fails to acknowledge two distinct characteristics of these two ‘mature’ texts: first, the fact that in the *Discursus* Machiavelli also introduces a for-life senatorial office that resembles that of the Venetian *pregadi*. Second and more importantly, McCormick’s characterization of ‘the people’ overlooks the dynamic nature of Machiavelli’s conception of Florence’s social sectors and their political outcomes as presented throughout Books I-IV of the *Histories*. In this respect, Machiavelli’s constitutional text does not present extra-legal contestation as the fundamental means through which the people may succeed

other words, not only does Machiavelli refrain from speaking in the neo-Roman linguistic terms of *virtù* and civic *grandezza* but he also desists from speaking of republican liberty as the desire of the majority of the people to achieve their own ends without insecurity or unnecessary interference. Hence, this set of republican councils reveal that Machiavelli's thinking has shifted: the safeguard of liberty is the result of the dispersal of authority throughout mutually councils that institutionalise, and make ineffective, the potentially corrosive *ambizione* of three social groupings of the city. The nature of all Florentine men is to achieve political power, but it is also in their nature to achieve this objective in order to restrict the liberty of the rest of the population and, consequently, to put into danger the survival of the *vivere libero* of Florence. Notwithstanding, the 'late' Machiavelli could still be considered 'neo-Roman' in that he still regards contestation as an intrinsic aspect of the political life he espouses. The centrality and inescapability of debate and contestation in political affairs is not only reaffirmed but also 're-discovered' as the primary effort behind his search for better institutional foundations for the Florentine republic. In this sense, one could assert that the 'late' Machiavelli is different from the 'early' Machiavelli only in degree.



Finally, what we find in these various political texts is that Machiavelli holds a dynamic understanding of civic conflict that is not rigidly fixed into axioms and schemas. It is for this reason that the binary social division that appears in the *Discourses*, and that Skinner highlights, is simply inadequate to explain the complexity of contemporary Florentine politics<sup>1</sup>. The tension in the lexical usage becomes evident for the first time

at controlling the elites; instead, extra-legality is replaced by the aforementioned watertight councils and the consequent competition for temporally limited shares of power. See also, Marie Gaille-Nikodimov, *Conflict Civil et Liberté*, 180-3; Filippo del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation*, 70-5.

<sup>1</sup> Marina Marietti, *Machiavelli: L'Eccezione Fiorentina*, 110-1.

in the *Florentine Histories*, where, on the one hand, Machiavelli seems to hold on to the thesis already presented in the *Discourses* that the demands of the people should be asserted, recognised and sent out in words. But, on the other hand, the use of a variety of terms such as *grandi*, *popolo* and *la plebe* or *primi*, *mezzani* and *ultimi*—or even the mixed term *primo popolo*—seem to grasp the growing importance of conflict and contestation not only as synonym of popular participation, but also as the reflection of the dynamic status of Florentine society—which is reflected in Machiavelli’s increasing interest in large structures of power and institutional models<sup>1</sup>.

This normative evaluation of civic discord gives insight with respect to what Machiavelli may have been ‘doing in’ when recapitulating the conventional usage of the concept of civic discord. In other words, unlike Skinner’s static Machiavelli, we get to observe what Geuna has defined as the ‘intellectual development’ of an author: since the conventional understanding of the late Renaissance was that history was a channel for moral and political lessons, Machiavelli should have given an answer that fitted such language<sup>2</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion: Skinner contra Skinner?

The comparative view here presented—which draws on what some Cambridge scholars have labelled ‘intellectual development of an author’, chal-

<sup>1</sup> This may lead us to enlarge our scope of analysis and embark on important questions such as ‘How is this theory of freedom different from the classical republican views of mixed constitutions or the theory of checks and balances espoused in writers such as the Federalists or Montesquieu?’. Tracing these patterns of influence, while an important and interesting exercise, lies beyond the scope of this article. See, for instance, Paul Rahe, *Against Throne and Altar*, 3-30; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of the Modern Political Thought*, vol. I., 44-5.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, one may hypothesize on this shift in Machiavelli’s republican thought and claim that Machiavelli’s late texts were much more historically contingent and less ideologically driven than expected, since the model he proposed for constitutional reform is much more in line with the Venetian model that some of Machiavelli’s Florentine contemporaries supported. See, for instance, J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Tradition*, 138; Marina Marietti, *Machiavelli: L’Eccezione Fiorentina*, 130-1.



lenges Skinner's assumptions with respect to the continuity in the political thought of Machiavelli between the *Discourses* and the 1519-1524 texts. I have shown that the 'late' Machiavelli proposes a republican conceptualisation that disregards, at least to some extent, the humanist political value of virtue and rather highlights the danger of tyranny and the historical weakness of Florence's republican institutions<sup>1</sup>. By so doing, Machiavelli somewhat rejects his previous conception of civic discord as a 'necessary' and 'useful' tool and emphasises the necessity of forging a complex institutional design meant to obstruct all forms of political ambition. By this I mean that Machiavelli's republican thought is more dynamic than what Skinner proposes: Machiavelli provided a vision of republicanism in the *Discourses* that was part of a particular ideological and linguistic battle and he decidedly revised his convictions in his later texts—in which the ideological battle was decidedly less 'Roman' and more 'Florentine'. For this reason, Skinner overlooks the contrasting republican answers—most especially the complex view of civic discords—that Machiavelli provides in his various texts. This mistake is in part due to Skinner's interpretation, for Machiavelli certainly believed that the Roman model of dealing with social discords merited some reflection, but—at least if we expand the frame and accommodate the lessons from the *Histories* and the *Discursus*—Machiavelli also interrogated the practical feasibility of such model in terms of the post-1519 Florentine context, something that Skinner overlooks<sup>2</sup>. This makes us challenge Skinner's neo-Roman concept, for it seems as if Skinner presupposes the neo-Roman paradigm to then make his contextual assumptions 'fit in' to the model, something that several critics have already pointed out<sup>3</sup>. Finally, there seem to be

<sup>1</sup> For Skinner, Machiavelli constantly shows a "(...) preference for *governo largo*", in which "(...) the people must be made guardians of liberty". (Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of the Modern Political Thought*, vol. I, 160).

<sup>2</sup> Though my aim is not to suggest that Skinner is thoroughly unfaithful to his methodological prescriptions or that his method is utterly wrong, I do believe that "Skinner's historical writings demonstrate (...) that he is prepared to ignore many of his negative conclusions in order to facilitate historical practice" (David Boucher, "The Denial of Perennial Problems: The Negative Side of Quentin's Skinner's Theory", 296). Also, Marie Gaille-Nikodimov, *Conflit Civil et Liberté*, 180.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Black, "Review Article: On Skinner's *The Foundations of Modern Political*

some methodological problems that scholars working within the ‘Skinnerian’ paradigm need to reconsider. This becomes evident, for instance, when Skinner claims that the methodological move of concentrating on differences rather than on commonalities among texts of the same author is meant to avoid slipping into the ‘myth of coherence’. When comes to interpreting the *Florentine Histories*—let alone the *Discursus*—Skinner presupposes a continuity between the *Discourses* and the *Histories*, even though he makes sure to state that they belong to two different ‘ideological battlefields’. Skinner’s fight, then, is not to maintain a ‘Cambridge-oriented’ interpretation of Machiavelli’s various political texts; to the contrary, Skinner creates a meta-narrative out of a particular text to then apply it throughout the Machiavelli corpus.

If we expand the method in order to comprehend the differences throughout Machiavelli’s corpus and interpret the texts less in terms of a monolithic ‘neo-Roman’ paradigm and more in terms of a dialogue about the needs and errors of the structure of power and politics of Renaissance Florence—most especially the Florentine context after the death of the last secular Medici heir in 1519—, perhaps, we would be able to observe the ‘transformational moments’ even within the intellectual life of Machiavelli<sup>1</sup>. Finally, one may also argue that the reason for the discrepancy between the theoretical and the historical practices in the works of Skinner is due to his own misinterpretation of the creation of an ideal prescriptive method to the study of texts<sup>2</sup>. His works show that in order to practice the activity of being a historian of ideas, it is impractical to ap-

*Thought*, *Political Studies* 23 (1981): 451-457; Marco Geuna, “Skinner, Pre-humanist Rhetorical Culture and Machiavelli”, 61; Mark Jurdjevic, “Machiavelli’s Hybrid Republicanism”, 1256; Robert Lamb, “Recent Developments in the Thought of Quentin Skinner and the Ambitions of Contextualism”, 256.

<sup>1</sup> Humfrey Butters, “Machiavelli and the Medici”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, 74-6.

<sup>2</sup> Though Palonen is sure to acknowledge that “methodological principles have to be considered as heuristic tools and not as legislative prohibitions, and in this sense there may always be good reason sometimes to disregard them to avoid deviation from the main narrative or over-extension of the analysis” (Kari Palonen, *Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric*, 66).

ply a methodological device dogmatically<sup>1</sup>. In this way, by being aware of these qualifications and the ‘risks’ of their interpretations, historians of ideas working within the ‘Skinnerian linguistic realm’ may be able to avoid and circumvent the paradox of ‘Skinner *contra* Skinner’.



*Paolo Uccello, La Battaglia di San Romano, triptych, Micheletto da Cotignola joins the battle (1438 ca.).*

<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, 45-6.