# Wealth, Status, and Faction in Machiavelli's Worldview

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Abstract:

Machiavelli's views on the role of wealth in politics are contextualized by exploring their underlying material conditions. First, Machiavelli's attitudes towards wealth are reconstructed through an analysis of the *Prince* and *Discourses*. Then, the emerging picture is linked to the socio-anthropological notion of an 'economy of esteem,' conflating wealth and status. Finally, Machiavelli's proposed solution to the dilemmas of acquisitiveness and corruption, a competition for honor regulated by the republic, is shown to depend on a reading of the Roman historians that obscures the profound social differences between Antiquity and the Italian *Comuni*.

The present article concerns itself with Machiavelli's attitudes towards wealth. While nothing resembling a systematic economic theory can be found in his works, Machiavelli's reflections on politics are replete with references to the role of riches in society: these workings are key to deciphering intentions in the political realm, since many passions are stoked by the acquisitive urge.

Though the early history of Machiavelli's reception was influenced by these themes, modern interpreters who see his signal contribution as a rationalization of political thought typically do not dwell on his views about wealth. In general, references to the 'economic' in the secondary literature have tended to point to a way of thinking, explicitly modern, based on *Zweckrationalität*, the precise weighing of costs and benefits, the ability to choose the appropriate means to an end. Italian-language scholars at both ends of the political spectrum have adopted this interpretative approach.[1] Even Marxists, such as Louis Althusser, have preferred to focus on the issue of the popular masses' role as the driving force of history, rather than examining the economic bases of his thought.[2] Claude Lefort, in many ways an outlier in this trend, ultimately speaks metaphorically of an 'economics of desire.'[3] More recent secondary literature has begun to address these themes, with specific attention both to the whole of the Machiavelli canon and to his historical context.[4] In a somewhat different vein, a significant

[1] Cf. e.g. Luigi Russo, *Machiavelli*, 3rd ed., Biblioteca Di Cultura Moderna (Bari: Laterza, 1949), 192; Ugo Spirito, *Machiavelli e Guicciardini*, 2nd ed., Studi Storici e Politici (Roma: Leonardo, 1945), 41.
[2] Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, ed. François Matheron, trans. Gregory Elliott (London; New York: Verso, 1999 [1962]), 128–9.
[3] Claude Lefort, "Machiavel: la dimension économique du politique," in *Les Formes de l'histoire: essais d'anthropologie politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 127–140.
[4] Kent Brudney, "Machiavelli on Social Class and Class Conflict," *Political Theory* 12, no. 4 (November 1984): 507-19; Domenico Taranto, "Arte dello Stato e valutazione dell'economia in Machiavelli," in *Langues et écritures de la république et de la guerre: études sur Machiavel*, ed. Alessandro Fontana et al. (Genova: Name, 2004); Filippo Del Lucchese, "Crisis and Power: Economics, Politics and Conflict in Machiavelli's Political Thought," *History of*

interpretive tendency, articulated by John McCormick,[5] has read Machiavelli's theory of politics straightforwardly as a conflict over material resources between haves and have-nots, rich and poor, the wealthy and the popular element.

For reasons that will become apparent in the course of this essay, I am not entirely convinced by this interpretive path into Machiavelli's political thought. I wish to argue that his views on wealth, and thus their role in his politics, were embedded in a social structure profoundly unlike our own in being shaped decisively by an intertwining of economic class and social status. The category of plutocracy as we have known it since the nineteenth century, i.e. as wealth-based domination without status or social responsibility, is anachronistic to Machiavelli's world.[6] His attitudes towards wealth should rather be considered by replacing them within the economic *doxa* of the age. But if we do so, the political conflicts between groups that Machiavelli discusses can hardly be understood as plain redistributive struggles. The argument presented therefore aspires to join the interpretative literature on Machiavelli that seeks to stress the remoteness of his political thought and our estrangement from it, by contextualizing it with the help of other branches of historical inquiry.[7]

The article proceeds as follows. First, I inductively reconstruct Machiavelli's views on wealth by retracing the significant *loci* in the *Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*.[8] Then, I propose an interpretation of his economic worldview based on his pessimistic anthropology of

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*Political Thought* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 75-96; Pierluigi Ciocca, "Machiavelli e l'economia," *Rivista di storia economica* 29, no. 2 (August 2013): 249-60; Francesco Marchesi, "Machiavelli e la crisi finanziaria del Cinquecento: conflitto economico e retorica della guerra," *Il pensiero economico italiano* 23, no. 1 (2015): 11-22; perhaps most importantly, the seminal study by Jérémie Barthas, *L'argent n'est pas le nerf de la guerre: essai sur une prétendue erreur de Machiavel* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2011).

[5] John P McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); also see the earlier John P. McCormick, "Machiavellian Democracy: Controlling Elites with Ferocious Populism," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 2 (June 2001): 297–313; John P. McCormick, "Machiavelli Against Republicanism: On the Cambridge School's 'Guicciardinian Moments,'" *Political Theory* 31, no. 5 (October 2003): 615–643; John P. McCormick, "Contain the Wealthy and Patrol the Magistrates: Restoring Elite Accountability to Popular Government," *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 2 (May 2006): 147–163.

[6] Cf. M. F. N. Giglioli, "Plutocracy and Pluto-Democracy: The Pervasive Power of Wealth in Modern Society as Polemics and Social Science," in *Governing Diversities: Democracy, Diversity and Human Nature*, ed. Joanne M. Paul (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 55–66.

[7] Cf. for instance Anthony Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

[8] Machiavelli's references to wealth are certainly not confined to these two texts: indeed, Domenico Taranto (*cit.*) has extensively researched the passages related to the sort of activity we would label 'economic' in Machiavelli's diplomatic writings, political memorandums, correspondence, and even in his comedies and verse. The reason this essay focuses its reconstruction on the *Prince* and *Discourses* is that I wish to investigate how Machiavelli's often-implicit assumptions about the realm of material production and exchange affected his more general and abstract understanding of politics. In fact, the discussion of the Ciompi episode from the *Florentine Histories* (*v. infra*) provides an illuminating counterexample, by highlighting the tension between the empirical historical matter and the conceptual categories of Machiavelli the theorist.

acquisitiveness and corruption, and show how it depended on the pre-modern economy of esteem in the face-to-face society of the *Comuni*, a society in which one was not considered properly rich if one was not also socially prominent and politically influent. The argument will thus be seen to shine a rather different light on the notion of 'economy of esteem,' recently resurrected by theorists working in the civic republican tradition as a corrective to the impersonality of market relations.[9] Finally, I argue that Machiavelli's proposed solution to the ills of wealth in politics, a regulated competition for honor within the bounds of republican institutions, was itself marred by a misreading of the record of Antiquity, for the ideological aspect of the portrayal of faction in the Roman historians escaped him. Thus was his republicanism ultimately condemned to political marginality in his own time, as a distorted mirror of its social conditions rather than the bearer of the *realtà effettuale*.

**Machiavelli's understanding of wealth**

Machiavelli does not reflect on economic processes of production with any degree of care, or explore the origins of wealth. In general, he tends to assume a *laissez-faire* stance, in which the people, if sufficiently guaranteed of their property rights, will naturally multiply their riches.[10] The two main sources of wealth, in Machiavelli's world, are the produce of agriculture and the proceeds of commerce.[11]

Machiavelli explicitly rejects the notion of rural isolationism and of poverty of the community *as a whole* being conducive to virtue: he openly doubts the wisdom of sterile locations for city-building,[12] it not being prudent to renounce the advantages fertile land can confer on a city in view of expansion. It must be noted, however, that the world of the *Prince* and the *Discourses* does not feature much social mobility based on economic achievement. There seems to be no social dynamic comparable to Dante's *la gente nova e i subiti guadagni*.[13] Machiavelli says that nobody can start from nothing and become a man of means without

[9] Geoffrey Brennan and Philip Pettit, *The Economy of Esteem: An Essay on Civil and Political Society* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[10] D II.2.3. The edition of Machiavelli's texts I have employed is: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Opere*, ed. Corrado Vivanti, Biblioteca Della Pléiade (Torino: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1997). References to passages in the *Prince* and *Discourses* use the abbreviations "P" and "D" followed by the number of the book (for the *Discourses*), the chapter, and the paragraph.
[11] Ibid., P 21.7.
[12] Ibid., D I.1.4–5.
[13] *Divina Commedia*, Inferno, XVI: 73.

employing at least fraud, and more often fraud supplemented by force.[14] The rich typically become poor and *vice versa* by political *fiat* or violence.[15]

If the *Prince* and the *Discourses* are laconic on the subject of wealth creation, there are plentiful examples of the uses individuals can make of their riches. They can, of course, simply enjoy them privately.[16] More pertinently for our concerns, wealth may be used to purchase influence and popularity, for instance by offering gifts, paying dowries, lending money.[17] It can also, of course, take the form of outright corruption.[18] In general, the ability to change the will of men and their allegiances by means of money is represented as a pervasive, engulfing social phenomenon.[19]

The collective effects of the private use of wealth for political purposes are manifold. Differentiation is introduced into the body of the polity. The universal quest for wealth, and the reality of its concentration in few hands, especially if not protected by sufficient coercive force, encourages extortion and robbery.[20] In parallel, the political realm becomes affected by the differences in status that the disparity in wealth can produce:[21] corruption, the ultimate ill of the polity, ensues.

Since the use of wealth in the political sphere can be so damaging, a certain degree of equality is needed for the institutions of the republic to be efficient. Such *pari equalità*[22] need not be absolute: it need only prevent the possibility that a citizen may have enough riches to buy himself a personal following.[23] Indeed, the precondition of equality is as valid for oligarchies as for more democratic republics: Lycurgus was able to found a constitution that lasted for centuries because he instituted a stricter equality of wealth (*piú equalità di sustanze*), while allowing greater status inequality (*meno equalità di grado*).[24] The plebeians were excluded from holding

[14] Machiavelli, *Opere*, D II.13.1.
[15] Ibid., D I.26.1.
[16] Ibid., D I.10.5, D I.16.3.
[17] Ibid., D III.28.1; also, D I.46.1.
[18] Ibid., e.g., D I.8.3, D I.42.1, D I.49.1.
[19] Ibid., P 17.2.
[20] Ibid., D III.29.1.
[21] Ibid., D I.10.5, D III.26.1.
[22] Ibid., D I.55.2.
[23] Ibid., D I.34.2.
[24] Ibid., D I.6.2.

office in Sparta, but since Machiavelli later reminds us that men care for material possessions more than honors[25] the constitutional system was stable.

The discussion of Lycurgus leads us to one of the core tenets of Machiavelli's political-economic thought: citizens must be kept poor and public finances rich in order for the State to prosper. This core belief in republican frugality is restated various times throughout the *Discourses*.[26] We are told that poverty renders men industrious, that the key elected posts in the republic (such as the consulate) will not fall to the undeserving rich if all the population is poor, and that indeed when *virtú* has its public recognition riches may even become less desirable.[27]

If republican frugality is the ideal, it is not on the other hand feasible to redistribute wealth through the political process once inequalities have developed: men forget the death of their father sooner than the loss of their patrimony, and the history of land reform in Rome should alert us to the extreme divisiveness of such policies.[28] Machiavelli places the blame for the crisis caused by the *lex agraria* squarely on the shoulders of the plebeians, who were not content with sharing the consulate and other honors with the patricians, a demand they articulated out of necessity (*i.e.* in order not to be dominated), but instead persevered in requesting that the wealth of the nobles be enjoyed in common as well, a request that was proof of (excessive) ambition. If redistribution after the fact is unrealistic, a well-ordered republic should not allow inequality to develop in the first place. However, provisions such as Lycurgus' institution of a leather coinage to dissuade commerce between Sparta and the outside world risk to choke demographic expansion, thus sapping the strength of the city by other means.[29] Therefore, the best means to preserve civic equality is the foundation of colonies.[30]

The picture becomes more complex when we shift from the level of the individual to the collective, and consider the sources from which the government is supposed to draw its wealth. These are in effect two: domestic taxation and plunder from foreign wars. Taxes, although they are considered one of the cornerstones of public administration,[31] should not, according to Machiavelli, be extensively employed in good governance.[32] The prince is encouraged to risk the

[25] Ibid., D I.37.3.
[26] Ibid., e.g. D II.19.1, D III.25, D I.37.1.
[27] Ibid., D I.3.2, D III.16.2, D III.25.1.
[28] Ibid., P 17.3, D I.37.
[29] Ibid., D II.3.1.
[30] Ibid., D II.7.1.
[31] Ibid., D I.16.5.
[32] Ibid., P 3.3.

reputation of a miser rather than have to raise taxes, and the Roman senate receives some measure of approval from Machiavelli for lowering the tax on salt to convince the plebs to fight Porsenna.[33] Also, the domestic tax base becomes a liability when fighting an enemy on one's home ground.[34] On the other hand, taxes can be used to pursue (modest) redistributive policy goals, for example by levying monies from the rich in order to pay the army a living wage (thus making protracted campaigns in foreign countries possible).[35] In these cases, however, the rulers must appear not to have been pressured into acquiescing in their subjects' demands under duress, for the proposal to lower taxes can be a demagogic one as well.[36] Rulers must instead encourage respect for the institutions by making free choices in the public interest. Protecting the good name of the institutions is fundamental because of the need to discourage behaviors such as tax evasion, although a voluntary system of contributions can only occur in non-corrupt States, such as the German imperial cities; a corrupt matter, instead, needs a strong authority to govern it.[37] The strength of the ruler, though, should never extend to the point of endangering the free enjoyment of private property, which seems to be the most important tenet in Machiavelli's domestic politics.[38] As we have said, expropriations are most pernicious, for they create fractures in the polity, cause hate, and also because they tend to feed on one another, engendering a mindset that renders the ruler dependent on a fundamentally unsustainable mode of financing his expenses.[39]

Financing the public treasury by foreign expansion is a no less problematic solution. Although Machiavelli praises States that are able to extract tributes and pensions from abroad,[40] he believes that expansion fuelled only by desire for the spoils of war is unbecoming of a truly virtuous polity. Furthermore, in order to live off warfare, it is necessary to have a virtuous military:[41] looting cannot, then, be a cause of the strength of a city, it can only be one of the consequences and prizes for *virtú*.

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[33] Ibid., P 16.1, D I.32.1.
[34] Ibid., D II.12.1, D II.12.3, P 10.3.
[35] Ibid., D I.51.1.
[36] Ibid., D I.8.1.
[37] Ibid., D I.8.3, D I.55.1–2.
[38] Ibid., P 19.1.
[39] Ibid., P 16.3, P 17.3, D III.6.20.
[40] Ibid., D II.30.2, P 5.1.
[41] Ibid., D II.10.2.

Obtaining revenue for the public treasury thus remains a difficult task. It is somewhat clearer, in the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, how those who govern can (and should) use public wealth in fashioning policy, and how they should regulate economic matters. Money allows rulers to create incentives and disincentives. Rewards are destined for those citizens who have served the republic well: they need not be excessively large, for their only function is as a physical reification of the intangibles of honor and reputation, for which all good citizens in a healthy polity should strive.[42] Republics possess an advantage: since public finances do not belong to any single individual (in the way the treasury of a kingdom personally belongs to the patrimonialist ruler), republics can be more generous with deserving citizens and avoid ingratitude.[43] At the other end of the spectrum, pecuniary penalties allow magistrates to mete out more humane punishments to those who have misbehaved.[44] In general, whenever those in power are able to employ wealth judiciously for the benefit of the community, they can steer public passions discreetly in the right direction, avoiding the development of contempt for the institutions (leading to tax evasion) without employing excessively invasive means (such as arbitrary confiscation), and can guarantee the general goal of secure enjoyment of private property.

Riches appear to be useful for the State in pursuit of its domestic policies. This function, however, remains circumscribed to internal affairs. In foreign relations wealth is as much if not more of a liability than it is an asset.[45] First of all, countries in the world of the *Prince* and the *Discourses* do not appear to engage in any peaceable economic transactions with each other. Commerce is an affair of individuals: States fight wars. In choosing the means to conduct conflict, States are well advised to adopt an economic mindset (as Rome did),[46] but the basis of prowess in war is good arms and *virtú*, not wealth. Thus, the adoption of purely economic modes of warfare, *i.e.* fighting with money, whether by corruption or, more importantly, through mercenary armies, is repeatedly stigmatized.[47] Mercenary soldiers are cowardly, untrustworthy, expensive, aggressive more in foraging than in battle. The economic motives of mercenary warfare progressively corrupt military orders, for example by favoring cavalry over infantry

[42] Ibid., D I.24.2.
[43] Ibid., D I.29.3.
[44] Ibid., D I.31.2.
[45] Ibid., D II.10.1.
[46] Ibid., D II.32.1, D II.24.4; also D II.6.3.
[47] Ibid., D I.6.4; P 12, D I.43, D II.20.

without any functional reason for doing so.[48] Mercenary arms are deleterious even for those who fill their ranks: they sap the strength in manpower of their provinces of origin, and encourage the basest human desires, greed and cruelty.[49]

The example of Rome should discourage the use of money even for such minor purposes as securing the repatriation of prisoners of war.[50] There is almost a 'contamination phobia' in Machiavelli regarding the psychological impact of wealth on military valor, both in defeat (when Camillus saves Rome at the very moment it was about to sell its liberty by tribute "*ut romani auro redempti non viverent*")[51] and in victory (in the episode of the revolt of the legions prompted by the mirage of Capuan riches).[52]

Any lack of *virtú* will by necessity entail searching for protection:[53] some forms of tribute, such as the one subjecting the German cities to the Emperor, are relatively benign, but most times States too weak to defend themselves will have to spend very large sums to provide for their safety, often with uncertain results.[54] Protection money, especially after a defeat, can become a regular *pensione*; alternatively, the region can be subjected to sackings and lootings, an event that recurs time and again in the pages of the *Prince* and the *Discourses*.[55]

Summing up, wealth in war is seldom an advantage and often a burden. This occurs because, relative to the domestic sphere, the importance of the two modes by which wealth changes hands, by contract or by force, is reversed. While within well-ordered States the laws prevent property from being arbitrarily alienated,[56] in foreign affairs pillage is the most common form of appropriation. The States that believe they can pay to have their fighting done for them have not understood that those who possess coercive power inevitably (and quickly) realize their employers have no way to impose their wishes: thus the employers cease to be independent actors, having become simple stakes in the military-diplomatic game.

No discussion of Machiavelli's views on wealth would be complete without mentioning his understanding of the psychological motives underlying the desire for riches. The problem

[48] Ibid., D II.18.3.
[49] Ibid., D II.4.2, D III.43.1.
[50] Ibid., D III.31.2.
[51] Ibid., D II.30.1.
[52] Ibid., D II.19.4, D II.20.1.
[53] Ibid., D III.16.3, P 13.6; also see D II.30.2.
[54] Ibid., D II.19.3; D I.38.3, D III.43.1.
[55] Ibid., e.g. P 10.3, P 16.3, P 26.2; D I.10.5, D II.12.3, D II.26.1, D II.27.2, D II.32.3, D III.12.2, D III.21.1.
[56] Ibid., P 17.1.

concerns the lack of limitations to the natural acquisitive impulses: while *acquistare* is a normal desire for all human beings,[57] some men become so blinded by this passion that they are unable to respect the 'rules of the game' of the polity. Thus they become dangerous for society, and their behavior is qualified as *avarizia*, *cupidità*, or *rapacità*.[58] This is only partially a failure of the institutions, for the problem is primarily psychological: the *rapaci* do not accept the basic goal of societal peace as the free enjoyment of private property. Such an ideal may be overly passive, anti-political, while they by contrast may be active and cunning, but their abilities are detrimental to society: they subvert the institutions and customs of *vivere libero*.

**The uses of wealth: status and esteem**

The unifying theme emerging from Machiavelli's scattered remarks about wealth and politics, and indeed the most characteristic of his worldview, is the fear of corruption that money causes to arise in a polity. The term *corrompere*, charged with organic and medical connotations, is of classical derivation, and covers a wide semantic field, both political and moral, individual as well as collective.[59] It indicates a departure from *virtú*, the keystone of Machiavelli's system of positive political values, and as a dynamic process it is inextricably linked with his cyclical conception of history and of political decadence.[60] The aspect of corruption that makes it so pervasive and formidable, however, is the mechanism linking it to a universal human propensity, the acquisitive one. Since everyone is guided by the imperative to *acquistare*, Machiavelli realizes that there is no logical break in the linear development that leads the poor and the weak, for whom covetousness is an existential necessity, to set their sights ever higher as soon as their immediate needs are met, and so attempt to encroach upon their neighbors. As soon as this process is considered at a societal level, the argument goes, it follows that the quest for wealth, and conversely the power and influence its possession entails, will readily displace *virtú*.

How are we to understand and evaluate this argument about corruption? Historically, many societies have found themselves in need of dealing with differences among members concerning access to resources, and with the consequences these differences portend for decision-making;

[57] Ibid., P 3.11.
[58] Ibid., e.g. D III.29.1, P 19.7.
[59] Cf. J. Patrick Dobel, "The Corruption of a State," *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 3 (September 1978): 958–973; Marchesi, "Machiavelli e la crisi finanziaria:" 17; Taranto, "Arte dello Stato:" 356-8; Fabio Raimondi, *L'ordinamento della libertà: Machiavelli a Firenze*, (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2013): chap. 1.
[60] Cf. Ezio Raimondi, "Machiavelli and the Rhetoric of the Warrior," *MLN* 92, no. 1 (January 1977): 4.

confidence in the ability to do so in a satisfactory manner, however, has varied widely. In this section, we will be exploring the hypothesis that Machiavelli's pessimism about the possibilities of overcoming, or indeed limiting, corruption was related to the characteristics of the society in which he was immersed and to the type of wealth and social relations it fostered.

The starting point for such an analysis is the nature of wealth itself as perceived by Machiavelli and his contemporaries. From several references[61] in the *Prince* and the *Discourses* we obtain an image broadly congruent with scholarly generalizations of pre-modern European economic life:[62] wealth is conceptualized as a *patrimonio*,[63] a general term that lumps money with land, buildings, livestock &c.—the term most often employed is *roba*, which we would be tempted to translate as 'stuff.' Moreover, the notion of *patrimonio* is seen to include personal status, relations, one's family and dependents, and the whole web of contacts and alliances that contribute to a man's standing in the world. This heterogeneous compound is only partially fungible. In other words, it would not have been intelligible to conceive of it as something with a pure monetary equivalent. Rather, it bears a distinct resemblance to that personal sphere of necessities for survival that in the late 17th century John Locke would seek to protect as 'life, liberty, and possessions.'[64]

The material reasons for which a broader 'sociological' notion of wealth than what we consider typical made sense for Machiavelli and his contemporaries to hold have similarly been discussed in the economic history literature.[65] The low surplus of pre-industrial economies entailed that a catastrophic failure in production, leading to widespread famine, was a recurrent possibility: stockpiling of basic necessities was a prudent course of action for anyone who could afford to ensure against pervasive insecurity. Furthermore, the lack of productive investment opportunities, the relative inability of the State to tax wealth, and the frequency with which

[61] Machiavelli, *Opere*, P 3.5 ("I campi e le case"), P 7.6 ("danari, veste e cavalli"), P 17.2 ("el sangue, la roba, la vita, i figliuoli"), P 19.1 ("roba e donne"), P 22.3 ("ricc[hezze], onori, carichi"), D II.6.3 ("oro, argento, preda"), D III.2.1 ("onori e utili")...

[62] Cf. Carlo M. Cipolla, *Storia Economica dell'Europa Pre-Industriale*, Universale Paperbacks Il Mulino (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1974), 19–29.

[63] Machiavelli, *Opere*, P 8.4.

[64] Cf. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), sec. 6, 59, 69, 87, 135.

[65] Cipolla, *Storia Economica*, 123–6, 177ff; at greater length, Paul Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque: sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique*, Points histoire (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1995).

sacking and pillaging occurred all offered incentives towards either the hoarding (and hiding) of wealth or its conversion into the fundamental means of production, land.[66]

Ideological barriers in the path of the productive reinvestment of capital have also of course been explored in depth, beginning with the nexus of issues surrounding the theological status of interest-bearing loans and the sin of usury.[67] The protracted negotiation on the religious acceptability of lending certainly contributed to the massive transfer of wealth in the direction of the Church, especially in moments of crisis, such as the plague-stricken mid-14th century.[68] In parallel, a pauperist ideology was often articulated within the Church (as in the case of St. Antonino, the early 15th-century bishop of Florence).[69]

While religious strictures undoubtedly had the most impact at the level of the population as a whole, the spread of humanism and the rediscovery of the Ancient World in 15th-century Italy also arguably had consequences for the economic mentality of the cultured elite: the revival of Ancient ethical goals of learning, cultivation, and moral perfectionism required freedom from work and the revaluation of classical *otium*.[70] While in the Low Middle Ages the *vita contemplativa* had been largely devolved to a class of Weberian *virtuosi* in the convents and monasteries, the new humanist ethos presented itself as a universalist dispensation for the lay elite.

To sum up: I have argued (with some necessarily brutal simplifications and broad generalizations) that (a) the image of wealth underlying Machiavelli's fears of corruption was already, and unavoidably, a sociologically 'embedded' one, implying that it could not simply be conceived of in terms of money, and (b) that in any case several factors, material and spiritual (*sit venia verbo*), stood in the way of money being employed in the fashion the 19th century has led us to think of as standard, namely, to reproduce itself.

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[66] For a good summing up of classic debates on the general development of the economy in the Renaissance, see Judith C. Brown, "Prosperity or Hard Times in Renaissance Italy?," *Renaissance Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1989): 761–780.

[67] Joseph Alois Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), part II, chapter 2; for a more recent take on the Florentine case, see Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), chap. 7 and Conclusion.

[68] Cipolla, *Storia Economica*, 66–7.

[69] Cf. Corrado Vivanti's "Introduzione" to Machiavelli, *Opere*; also, Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis*, cit.; see Samuel Cohn, "After the Black Death: Labour Legislation and Attitudes towards Labour in Late-Medieval Western Europe," *Economic History Review* 60, no. 3 (2007): 457–485 for an argument about the relations between catastrophic mortality, the compression of wages, and penitential religious movements.

[70] Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955), 6–8; Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Sonnenschein, 1878), Part Three.

An objection to the argument might run as follows: this image of an economic sphere embedded within a tightly-knit web of social expectations[71] is overly broad; it can be posited of most pre-modern societies— but how well does it describe the world of Renaissance Florence, a city of merchants, bankers, and money-lenders on the cutting edge of economic rationality of its time? These pages are hardly the venue for revisiting the classic historiographical controversy on the mentalities at the origin of capitalist development.[72] For the purposes of my argument, I believe it is sufficient to point out a (rather less controversial) trend line, the so-called process of *refeudalization* of Italy in the 'long Quattrocento,' by which the ruling class progressively turned from productive pursuits to the status of *rentiers*.[73]

If wealth is not saved and invested, it is typically consumed, and beyond a certain level of satisfaction of basic needs, such consumption becomes conspicuous. On the basis of these considerations, it should be easier to understand why for Machiavelli and his contemporaries ostentatious spending would be thought to arise inexorably from great wealth disparity, and, in the face-to-face society of the Italian *Comuni*, lead in turn to ruinous competition and a debasement of public spirit.

To be sure, the city authorities had some mechanisms at their disposal to co-opt or compress the personal consumption of the wealthiest citizens. The histories of the Medieval City-States are dotted with sumptuary laws.[74] In parallel, having leading men finance the expenses for the many public festivities could serve to neutralize in a civic fashion the political implications of their generosity: hence, Cipolla discusses the significance of the great expenses incurred for public festivities in pre-modern Europe,[75] while Baxandall mentions the importance of sacred representations for civic life in *Quattrocento* Florence.[76]

Ultimately, however, the pressures in favor of the display of munificence as a signaling mechanism for participation in the ruling class proved too strong: "beyond a certain point," as a historian of a different time has put it, "wealth becomes a symbol of social position, and no

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[71] Cf. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1944).
[72] Cf. Amintore Fanfani, *Catholicism, Protestantism, and Capitalism* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1935).
[73] Ciocca, "Machiavelli e l'economia:" 254; Marchesi, "Machiavelli e la crisi finanziaria:" 18; Taranto, "Arte dello Stato:" 353-4.
[74] See Emanuela Zanda, *Fighting Hydra-Like Luxury: Sumptuary Regulation in the Roman Republic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011): 90-9, for a comparison between Classical and late-Medieval sumptuary laws in Italy.
[75] Cipolla, *Storia Economica*, 60.
[76] Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), cit.

longer an instrument for the fulfillment of personal desires."[77] As mentioned above, the phenomenon can be seen as a facet of a broad-based shift, when viewed in the *longue durée*, by which the economic pre-eminence of the city elites was ultimately frozen into status and rank ordering, and, for the very few, monarchical rule. It was the transition by which these elites reacted to the insecurity caused by economic decline and geopolitical marginalization: the new equilibrium was the early modern *società cetuale* (society of estates).[78] This was the final historical outcome of the phenomenon Machiavelli witnessed perhaps at its key turning point.

But to return to the first link of the chain, the crucial point to consider in understanding how the conspicuous consumption of wealth upset the political balance within the world of the City-State is the reputation and esteem components of the notion of *patrimonio*. There is extensive textual evidence to support the case that, for Machiavelli, the respect and deference others afford us is reckoned a good in much the same way as houses, fields, money, jewelry, and other material objects are. The terms *riputazione* and *rispetto* recur endlessly in Machiavelli: they are general terms, much like *acquistare*, and a great deal of social interaction, domestic and foreign, political and military, revolves around symbolic exchanges of respect—or its forcible transfer. Social esteem is, however, a rather special commodity. First of all, it is a positional good: it is artificially scarce, by definition, or it loses all meaning. Secondly, even in a face-to-face society, there are strict limits to allowable participation in the competition: to be pragmatically felicitous, an enactment of social esteem requires a non-participating audience to exalt the status of the protagonists.[79] Thirdly, in order to mediate esteem through transfers of wealth, there must be a parallel unequal exchange of gifts and patronage, which can then acquire symbolic value.[80] In short, the purpose of the entire matter becomes the measuring and expression of social distance.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the instances Machiavelli recounts in which affairs relating to women enter the public sphere. Women, as the literature on gender in Machiavelli has

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[77] Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque*, cit. (my translation).
[78] Cf. Judith A. Hook, "Justice, Authority and the Creation of the Ancien Régime in Italy," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 34, Fifth Series (1984): 71–89, who insists on the demand for law and order occasioned by the crisis of the justice system of the Comuni as a key dimension of this broad societal shift. On this same line, also see Andrea Zorzi, "Contrôle social, ordre public et répression judiciaire à Florence à l'époque communale: éléments et problèmes," trans. Josiane Tourres, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 45, no. 5 (September 1990): 1169–1188.
[79] For broad historical examples, cf. Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).
[80] On this, see the classic Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2007).

taught us to see,[81] are an element of the οἶκος with a potential to destabilize the public order. Women are a major vehicle for ostentation of wealth; they can serve as a means of matrimonial exchange, and alliance; they are most often the object of male desire; the public perception of their behavior is an important element of their family's reputation; public morality chiefly concerns what is permissible to them; they are an economic charge of the male members of their family, but also the conduits (through dowries and inheritances) for the transfer of wealth. As Simone de Beauvoir would put it,[82] in Machiavelli's world men respect (or disrespect) each other through their women, but at the same time their agency is not completely annulled by society, and at times their acts and choices can have unpredictable consequences for the male, public sphere. It is therefore in this context, where issues of honor, social expectations, and hard monetary considerations intertwine, that the intervention of a benefactor can set in motion the process of acquisitiveness related to esteem. Helping to marry daughters off is one of the private paths to influence that Machiavelli considers most insidious to the republic.

That the authorities may have trouble dealing with a rich benefactor derives not only from thankfulness for generosity, which Machiavelli elsewhere does not seem to consider very reliable,[83] but also from the respect that normally is bestowed on wealth, seen as a capacity to influence other people's lives, for better or for worse. In fact, one of the major problems that Machiavelli's preference for a State that keeps citizens poor encounters is the widespread popular contempt for poverty, equated with powerlessness: Machiavelli himself recognizes this fact in the chapter on liberality in the *Prince*,[84] and the natural respect that accrues to wealth is indeed a trope in the political thought of the age.[85]

The fact itself that the Church thematized poverty and that the poor were a theologically relevant category (in a way unknown to Classical Antiquity), may have exacerbated the stigma connected to them in the public sphere. Religious pauperism was not a humanism: the moral entitlement to charitable aid did not *ipso facto* qualify the poor as political subjects—in fact,

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[81] Beginning with the classic account by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); cf. also Barbara Spackman's contribution to John M. Najemy, *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 14; Michelle Tolman Clarke, "On the Woman Question in Machiavelli," *The Review of Politics* 67, no. 2 (2005): 229–255.
[82] Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 2: 212.
[83] Machiavelli, *Opere*, D I.29.
[84] Ibid., P 16.
[85] Cf. the argument in Guicciardini's Discorso di Logrogno, as discussed in Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*, Ideas in Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 72.

quite the contrary.[86] In any case, poverty was widespread and visible in Machiavelli's world, but its ills were not primarily the responsibility of the State to counter, but rather of charitable institutions, especially tied to the Church.[87] Naturally, most governments attempted to defuse crisis situations, for instance by intervening, through market mechanisms or by *fiat*, on the price of grain during shortages.[88] This, however, was a policy dictated by considerations of law and order, to prevent seditions fueled by hunger, more than by aims of redistribution or by a sense of responsibility for social cohesion, &c. In general, the role of the authorities in economic matters was seen mainly as upholding justice, especially in defense of property rights, setting the conditions in which industry and commerce were believed to flourish. Eric Nelson's main contention[89] is precisely that the Roman conception of justice, anchored in the defense of property rights, did not allow for the possibility of an economically interventionist government. In many ways, the State's inability to confront the political risks represented by the wealthy was mirrored in its exclusion from the organized care of the indigent.

To sum up, I have argued that the prevalence of patronage in Machiavelli's society resulted from an encounter between compatible incentives. On the one hand, the elite faced diminishing productive investment opportunities, as well as social expectations that precluded an 'anonymous' enjoyment of wealth. On the other, various non-elite strata of the population required the support of powerful patrons for a series of life contingencies (marriages, legal representation, employment, food aid…) with which public authorities were unable or unwilling to help. Patronage ties sank deep into the social pyramid. Indeed, the foregoing discussion of examples of patronage gives us a picture *en creux* of the stratification of society. Following Najemy,[90] we can recognize a group, known as the *popolo*, whose main distance from the elite was its lack of

[86] On the evolution in the perception of the working poor, see Duccio Balestracci, "Lavoro e povertà in Toscana alla fine del Medioevo," *Studi Storici* 23, no. 3 (July 1982): 565–582.
[87] In the Sixteenth century the argument begins to be made for a transferal of responsibility for assistance to the poor from the Church to civil authorities: for the case of the city of Bruges, see the treatise by Vives *De subventione pauperum sive de humanis necessitatibus* (1526). Such a process picks up speed in the era of the Reformation and Counterreformation; arguably, it is made easier in the patrimonialist context of early-Modern Europe, where the sovereign can act as 'benefactor in chief.' On these topics, see Raffaella Sarti, *Vita di casa: abitare, mangiare, vestire nell'Europa moderna* (Roma, Bari: Laterza, 1999).
[88] Examples in Cipolla, *Storia Economica*, 62.
[89] Nelson, *The Greek Tradition*, passim.
[90] John Najemy, "Politics: Class and Patronage in Twentieth-Cenutry Italian Renaissance Historiography," in *The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century: Acts of an International Conference, Florence, Villa I Tatti, June 9-11, 1999*, ed. Allen Grieco, Michael Rocke, and Fiorella Giuffredi Superbi (Florence: Olschki, 2002): 119-36.

connections and prestige,[91] most notable in the case of marriage alliances. They were distinguished from the *plebe*, the working classes, who depended on the elite for employment opportunities, as well. These, in turn (and to say nothing about conditions in the countryside), are separate from the urban underclass, who did not have a productive role and relied on their patrons' largesse.[92]

**Competition for honor or factionalism?**

The universal propensity for acquisitiveness sets in motion a spiral of passions that may corrupt the city and ultimately endanger the republican order. Once massive inequalities exist, the remedy is often worse than the disease, for political clashes over wealth have a tendency to turn mean-spirited and hateful. The fact that wealth in Machiavelli's world is coupled with considerations of esteem actually makes matters worse, because it foregrounds the implications of wealth disparity for personal dependence and clientelism.[93]

In this somber picture of decadence, there is nonetheless reason for hope. Certain polities are able to redirect the competitive acquisitive passions of their citizens away from invidious comparisons of wealth, and into a sphere in which only purely reputational, moral goods are at stake. The desire persists, and therefore the interaction between competitors is still marked by clashes of will, at times violent. However, Machiavelli believes that the competition for honors within a republic can be organized in such a way as to provide the just rewards for merit, give all good citizens a hope of garnering some part of the prize (if not this year, perhaps in the next

[91] Najemy styles this group as a sort of middle class (*cit.*, 122-3), but his description of it ("They were not from prestigious lineages; although many were merchants and some of them made a lot of money, they did not come from old or landed wealth; they lacked the ties to the countryside that the elite had; and the majority of them did not have the marriage connections, the illustrious *parentadi*, the neighborhood power, or the swagger, arrogance, or *prepotenza* that allowed members of the elite to put together those clusters of friends, relatives, and neighbors who were expected to act or plead or lean on someone on their behalf:" 131) seems precisely the description not of a class but rather of a social group negatively defined by its lack of status. This may be no more than a nominalist issue, and indeed Najemy's main polemical target is the "consensus" theory of social relations in Renaissance Florence. However, if the group Najemy describes is the same as the 'popular humor' in Machiavelli, the conflict between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in the *Prince* and *Discourses* will then appear to be essentially about status, and restricted to a much smaller segment of the population. This in turn would seem to be problematic for interpretations that seek to imbue humors with substantive economic content.

[92] For further discussion of patronage, see Anthony Molho, *Firenze nel Quattrocento: politica e fiscalità* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2006): 31-42.

[93] For historical examples of these dynamics in fifteenth-century Florence, see Paul D. McLean, "Patronage, Citizenship, and the Stalled Emergence of the Modern State in Renaissance Florence," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47, no. 3 (July 2005): 638–664.

round of elections), and thus diffuse a respect for the 'rules of the game,' a sort of civic sportsmanship.

It is important to understand that, from an analytical point of view, such a solution to the problem of corruption and acquisitiveness represents a daring psychological gamble. Since in Machiavelli's world, as I have endeavored to argue, the wealthy could not avoid being influent, esteemed, honored, and so forth, and since it was precisely the envy for such a social position (over and above material goods) that fueled the resentment of the have-nots against the arrogance of the haves, the solution was for the Republic to take over the 'honor market' as completely as possible.[94] Steering political conflict in this direction can appear counterintuitive to modern political sensibilities, as we tend to think that symbolical cleavages generally call forth the most uncompromising and confrontational stances. In contrast, on questions of 'who gets what, when and how,' a path from the equilibrium of forces on the ground to a distribution of resources everyone can live with has a reasonable chance of being discovered by the political process.

This view, however, would somewhat mischaracterize the opposing poles between which Machiavelli's republican politics operates: if political competition is not to be about resources, much less is it to do with *Weltanschauungen* and ideology. In fact, any individual who wins the competition for public honors is expected by Machiavelli to perform in office in broadly the same way as his competitors, enhancing the collective interests of the republic in its foreign affairs, enforcing justice domestically, and strengthening the institutional system. What fuels the political race, in other words, has little or nothing to do with the job itself or the agenda of the candidates: it concerns, rather, the intangibles of social distinction and civic glory, a purely artificial currency that the republic can manipulate at will, to maximize the stability of the regime and its military prowess.[95]

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[94] It is the sociological link between wealth and status in premodern economies that I believe is missing in the distinction that McCormick ("Contain the Wealthy and Patrol the Magistrates," 151 n3) draws between the claim "in poststructuralist and Straussian literature […] that Machiavelli understood the *grandi* as a class that was driven by the desire for glory or honor rather than the acquisition and preservation of wealth" and McCormick's own focus on material redistribution.

[95] One may counter that Machiavelli himself witnessed substantive differences between the preferences of various social groups regarding economic policy in Quattrocento Florence. This is, in essence, Jérémie Barthas' (*cit.*, 1-37) main argument: Machiavelli favored a citizen militia over mercenary forces, Barthas claims, because the latter were financed through a system of loans that lent undue political influence to the Florentine financial oligarchy. However, I believe that such a point does not weaken my main contention: in his general, theoretical reflections on politics, Machiavelli does not portray the difference between forms of government or the prevalence of one or the other '*humor*' in terms of choices of political economy— on the contrary, he speaks of honor, reputation, envy, arrogance, etc., in other words casting the issue of domination and non-domination as, at its heart, a relational and reputational,

The arrangement Machiavelli proposes is intended to achieve two goals: to diminish the extent to which political strife spills over into the economy, disrupting industriousness and weakening trust in property rights, and to reinforce love of country, or, otherwise put, widespread commitment to the regime. The republic becomes the indispensable element, because as the entity that confers the symbolic tokens of esteem it is the guarantee for all participants that the game will proceed, that the collective suspension of disbelief (i.e. what makes a simple laurel wreath into something worth competing for) will continue to be upheld indefinitely into the future.

What made Machiavelli think that, in contrast with everything experience and psychological generalizations could teach him, such an idealistic ersatz of wealth and power would actually work in practice? For Machiavelli, the answer was simple: this political mode was possible, because it had occurred before. The Roman Republic offered the example of a polity that, for centuries, had successfully redirected its internal tensions towards a competition for glory, keeping corruption in check. Furthermore, historical time being cyclical, there was no reason to believe that what had once been achieved could not be enacted again.

There is some historical irony in the fact that a political writer who set out to debunk the utopian dreams of the philosophers and describe the unvarnished truth of power, *la verità effettuale delle cose*,[96] should in turn stake his entire positive program on the lessons to be learned from a patriotic idealization of the past, indeed from an ideologically motivated imagined community. The depiction of Rome's early days to be found in the works of Livy, as well as in Sallust,[97] Cicero, and Tacitus, was much less the ethnographic report Machiavelli wholeheartedly took it to be than a complex site of contestation in which the economic structure and political struggles of the Ancient City-State were inscribed. In the remainder of these pages, the attempt will be to discuss the influences that contributed to the formation of this classical view of the Roman past, and how in turn the adaptation of this framework to vastly different conditions in

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not a material, affair. This, in turn, emerges clearly from Barthas' *demarche* itself: the link between military policy and the public debt is extremely well-hidden in the *Discourses*, to the point where it requires Barthas' brilliant reconstruction to surface. Rhetorically, Machiavelli cannot but couch it in terms of military effectiveness and love of country.

[96] Machiavelli, *Opere*, P 15.1.

[97] Cf. Benedetto Fontana, "Sallust and the Politics of Machiavelli," *History of Political Thought* 24, no. 1 (2003): 86–108.

Renaissance Florence pointed Machiavelli's reflections on the workings of wealth, status, politics, and corruption in a particular direction.

When Machiavelli, in the twenty-fifth chapter of the third book of the *Discourses*, expresses his wonderment for the social mores of the time of Cincinnatus he is, consciously or unconsciously, drawing on the Roman literary trope of the *laudator temporis acti*. His ancient sources in the 1st century BCE and CE felt hardly less removed than Machiavelli did from this way of life, but the pragmatic import of their appeal was markedly different. Depending on ideological persuasion, they resembled U.S. Republican politicians of the Gilded Age appealing to the log cabin, or Democrats to the antebellum plantation: whether as ideal foundation (morally all the more valuable as its material substratum receded) or as irretrievable golden age, these mythical references implied a legitimating or de-legitimating comparison with the present. Their correct interpretation in this case, though, requires some additional detail on Rome's changing social conditions.[98]

The City-State that appears in the first ten books of Livy does not have the dimensions of a Continental Empire: by the time the narration is interrupted by the lacuna, at the end of the Samnite Wars (290 BCE), Rome governs a league of central Italian towns over an area roughly two or three times the size of Sparta's Peloponnesian confederation at its height. Its ruling class, however, had already established itself in the form it will retain until Cicero's time. In particular, the senatorial order had already crystallized as a synthesis of the earlier status disputes between patricians and plebeians.[99]

The small group of families comprising the senatorial order was not distinguished by wealth: such a group in Rome can generically be identified with the equestrian order. The senatorial families were a subsection of the wealthiest Romans (and indeed in the century of dramatic territorial expansion following the victory over Carthage their wealth increased exponentially, dwarfing the rest of the citizen body's),[100] but what set them apart was their near monopoly of elected offices. Cicero's pride in being a *homo novus*, a man elected to the consulship without any ancestors belonging to the Senate, was fully justified: such cases were once-in-a-generation

[98] The following reconstruction relies mainly on Moses I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, updated ed., Sather Classical Lectures 48 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), and Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque*, chap. III.

[99] Moses I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, The Wiles Lectures (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 14–5.

[100] On the redistributive effects of the Second Punic War, see e.g. P. A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower, 225 B.C.-A.D. 14* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 283–4.

affairs. While all Roman citizens formally retained the right to elect their magistrates, the material constitution restricted the passive suffrage to the senatorial oligarchy. This group had a very finely developed sense of collective self-esteem and *esprit de corps*, believing it embodied the essence itself of the Roman State. In its self-confidence the Senate can perhaps be likened to the British aristocracy of the 18th century for its faith in the fundamental identity of the progressive destinies of the country with its own natural right to govern it. *Esprit de corps* also meant jealous stewardship of the collective prerogatives of the order against any member who were thought to aspire to supreme authority. Competition for office among the senatorial families was fierce, but the system was stable inasmuch as the Senate constantly controlled the behavior of the current office-holders.

The material basis for the Senators' wealth was largely in land. The ancient city was a consumer, not a producer entity:[101] it was the residence of the owners of real estate, and only secondarily a site of production. The slave-operated *latifundia* of the senators had accumulated as the long-term stratification of the spoils of office, for the Republic's generals were the consuls drawn from the senatorial order, and the income from military expeditions constantly increased with the fortunes of territorial expansion. The profits to be gained through proconsular administration of the provinces were similarly vast. In short, the senators reaped the profits of empire, and their wealth made them independent and 'dispensable' in the Weberian sense for politics.

When viewed from this perspective, the laments of the Latin historians over corruption and decadence reflect the final crisis of the republican political system, when members of the senatorial order ceased to 'play by the rules' and attempted to attract the support of the army or of citizens of the lower orders in Rome to subvert the normal distribution of honors. Neither at the time of the ancient disputes between patricians and plebeians, nor during the middle and late republican period, including the strife over the agrarian laws and the civil wars of the 1st century BCE, was the locus of contestation the class structure.[102] This was the case simply because the conflict always occurred within the economically homogeneous ruling elite, which at most could

[101] In Finley's term, Rome was a "parasitic city:" Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, 125; for a more nuanced view, see Neville Morley, *Metropolis and Hinterland : The City of Rome and the Italian Economy, 200 B.C.-A.D. 200* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[102] McCormick, "Machiavellian Democracy" (2001), 299, agrees that modern "historical research emphasizes the oligarchic and timocratic quality of the Roman republic, the dominance of the older and better propertied families" but then asserts that Machiavelli "certainly could have anticipated contemporary assessments of power relations in Rome", which I find rather less than a foregone conclusion.

mobilize, through its web of family clienteles, an otherwise politically quiescent general citizen body. Hence, the civic struggles of Ancient Rome were about status,[103] because the active participants (the leaders of the opposing factions) could all afford to take material considerations for granted. In other words, the popular element, the 'have nots' of Roman historiography were not the *fæx Romuli*, but rather a stratum that was socially prepared to join the ruling elite as it was, without revolutionary demands. The crisis of the system was not due to radical redistributive pressures from below: what was shattered was the delicate balance of oligarchic equilibrium.

The differences with Machiavelli's Florence are readily apparent, and can be summarized briefly as follows. The ruling elites in the Italian *Comuni* were also defined through a mixture of wealth and status markers, but crucially both these factors were heteronomous when compared with the Roman case.[104] The wealth of the Florentine elite, for instance, while often being reinvested in land (which was tended by free, not slave labor), originated in commerce and banking to a much greater extent than anywhere in the Ancient world; as for status, nobility was ultimately legitimated only through supranational entities unknown to republican Rome, the Church and the Holy Roman Empire. Furthermore, the old feudal nobility of the Germanic invasions of the High Middle Ages had been displaced and co-opted by the City-States in Italy, so the negotiation of titles and family status during the Renaissance was extremely fluid.[105] Military command among the mercenaries in the *compagnie di ventura* was a profession, not a civic honor, and as such it belonged to a social group not identified with the city notables, indeed not linked to any city-State. As for the city government itself, the main trait differentiating the *Comuni* from the Ancient city-States was the political role of the corporations, the guilds.[106]

In sum, Machiavelli's idea of a publicly-controlled competition for esteem (which itself concerned only a small minority at the summit of the social pyramid even in republican Rome) could not be re-enacted in Renaissance Florence, essentially because of the international dependency of the Florentine economy and society.

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[103] Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, 68.
[104] On competing systems of social stratification in Trecento and Quattrocento Florence, see the quantitative study by John F. Padgett, "Open Elite? Social Mobility, Marriage, and Family in Florence, 1282–1494," *Renaissance Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (June 2010): 357–411.
[105] A symptom of this fluidity can be seen in Machiavelli's terminological difficulties in separating two types of *gentiluomo*, the Venetian governing oligarchy and the old rural nobility: Machiavelli, *Opere*, D I.55.4.
[106] Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, 138; on the role of the guilds, also see Gervase Rosser, "Crafts, Guilds and the Negotiation of Work in the Medieval Town," *Past & Present* 154 (February 1997): 3–31.

What consequences did these different social configurations entail for the understanding of contemporary politics Machiavelli could draw from ancient authors? I believe the matter can be condensed into one salient issue, namely, what is to count as a faction. Faction was a trope of Florentine historiography at least since the time of Dino Compagni (a contemporary of Dante's),[107] and in many ways its deployment as an explanatory device rendered all divisions, such as between Guelphs and Ghibellines, Whites and Blacks, &c. purely nominalist. Factions became catchall terms to be used for any personal or family feud, but with a theological subtext, linking *discordia* and lack of unity to the pervasiveness of sin (as in Lorenzetti's famous allegorical frescoes of *malgoverno* in Siena).[108] Hence, political demands arising from factional strife tended to be interpreted according to a basic scheme, contrasting private interests with the public good.[109]

What Machiavelli saw in the Ancient historians was a different interpretation of strife, as regulated competition for honor, and as a demand for inclusion in the politically active stratum of the city. It was for this reason that he believed that not all political confrontation weakened the republican order, internally as well as externally,[110] and that his particular blend of competitive, and combative, republican patriotism was adaptable to his time.[111]

Unfortunately for Machiavelli, this novel interpretation of political faction hid more of the *realtà effettuale* of both the Roman Republic and his own time than it revealed. An instance of this cognitive dissonance appears, tellingly, not in the *Prince* or the *Discourses*, but in book III of the *Florentine Histories*, in the narrative of the *Ciompi* uprising. The members of the lesser guilds (*Arti minori*), the *plebe* who attempted to take over the city government were clearly not enacting a sedition along the traditional lines of factional strife: their spokesman was so distant

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[107] Dino Compagni, *Cronica delle cose occorrenti ne' tempi suoi*, ed. Guido Bezzola (Milano: Biblioteca universale Rizzoli, 1995); see also Mark Phillips, "The Disenchanted Witness: Participation and Alienation in Florentine Historiography," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 2 (April 1983): 192–4.

[108] On the political valence of this pictorial cycle, see Quentin Skinner, "Ambrogio Lorenzetti: The Artist as Political Philosopher," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 122 (1986): 1–56; Quentin Skinner, "Ambrogio Lorenzetti's 'Buon Governo' Frescoes: Two Old Questions, Two New Answers," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 72 (1999): 1–28; more recently, see Patrick Boucheron, *Conjurer la peur. Sienne, 1338: essai sur la force politique des images* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

[109] Maurizio Viroli, *From Politics to Reason of State: The Acquisition and Transformation of the Language of Politics, 1250-1600*, Ideas in Context (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 46–7, 89–94.

[110] Cf. Christopher Lynch, "War and Foreign Affairs in Machiavelli's Florentine Histories," *The Review of Politics* 74, no. 1 (March 2012): 1–26.

[111] I believe it is this traditional rhetorical dualism of faction that has induced commentators such as McCormick (*Machiavellian Democracy* [2011], note 23 to page 5) to view "the people" as the totality of the male adult citizenry minus the *grandi*, bypassing the more complex social stratification we discussed above following Najemy and considering the term as interchangeable with "*popolani*, *plebe*, ignobles, the multitude, and the universality."

from the customary spheres of power that in Machiavelli's narrative he even remains nameless, the quintessential subaltern. At the same time, the *Ciompi*'s attempt to participate in public affairs was in no way disinterested: their grievances were concrete, material. They could not be said to act as the street mobs of Ancient Rome, in the pay of some senatorial oligarch—they were political subjects in their own right; yet, they did not wish simply to 'play the game' of politics, competing for honors and public esteem: in their case, the outcomes of the policy process actually mattered.[112] Their demands were so far removed from the customary interplay of Florentine political life that exponents of the elite (in Machiavelli's account, through their spokesperson, Luigi Guicciardini) could conceptualize them only within a criminal-law framework, that is to say, as robbery. Frozen in this plastic juxtaposition of the two sides, the *Histories* remain ambiguous: from an analytical point of view, Machiavelli was unable to determine for himself the position of the *Ciompi* with regard to the concept of public good, which he was nonetheless reluctant to abandon.[113]

The conceptual problems that manifested themselves with respect to the historical analysis of the previous factional history of Florence were not divorced from the forces that doomed the republican experiment of Machiavelli's time. Like the *popolo grasso* of 1378, the elites of 1512 and 1530 voted with their wallets. The wealth of Florence depended on peace, and the guarantee of property rights, not only at home, but in all the lands with which the Florentine bankers and merchants did business.[114] In the medium term, it became clear that this peace could only be secured through the Medici, the Church, and Spain: the republican system was ultimately incompatible with these desiderata. In Machiavelli's terms, the Florentine body politic was corrupt, and unable to sustain a free way of life. But the 'market for esteem' could take many forms, and high politics had become too costly an adventure to sustain, for those who did not

[112] On the historiographical debate regarding the Ciompi, see Samuel Cohn Jr., "Rivolte popolari e classi sociali in Toscana nel Rinascimento," *Studi Storici* 20, no. 4 (October 1979): 747–758; on the differences between urban and rural unrest, see Samuel K. Cohn Jr., "Le rivolte contadine nello Stato di Firenze nel primo Rinascimento," trans. Valentina Rao, *Studi Storici* 41, no. 4 (October 2000): 1121–1150.

[113] For alternative takes on Machiavelli's discussion of the *Ciompi*, see Timothy J. Lukes, "Descending to the Particulars: The Palazzo, The Piazza, and Machiavelli's Republican Modes and Orders," *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 2 (March 2009): 520–532; Mark Phillips, "Barefoot Boy Makes Good: A Study of Machiavelli's Historiography," *Speculum* 59, no. 3 (July 1984): 585–605; Del Lucchese, "Crisis and Power:" 90-6, insists on the different treatment of social conflict in the *Discourses* and *Histories*.

[114] Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), chap. 1; on the importance of networks of trust and the esprit de corps of the Florentine banking sector, see John F. Padgett and Paul D. McLean, "Economic Credit in Renaissance Florence," *The Journal of Modern History* 83, no. 1 (March 2011): 1–47.

dispose of a world empire to bankroll their politicians. If the patrician Gino Capponi in response to an earlier crisis had been rumored to remark that "the only thing worse than living under the Ciompi would be the loss of the city's liberty to a foreign tyrant,"[115] by Machiavelli's time elite preferences had moved against even this patriotic proviso.

By way of a conclusion, it is worth remarking briefly on the central role of the notion of status in my analysis. Status has appeared in many guises: as a key component of premodern notions of *patrimonio*; as a social perception, motivating relations of esteem and respect; as a social capital resource, whether embodied in a network of high-placed acquaintances, a personal following, a public reputation, or a ledger of favors on which to draw; hence as influence, as the ability to affect the lives of others, shield them from hardships, adjudicate their disputes— in a word, patronage. Status enjoys a two-way relationship with public office: the latter bestows the former, but typically the societal ties status engenders render its holders uniquely advantaged in seeking and holding office. Therefore, there is typically a feedback loop between the two, at the heart of the reproduction of social stratification.

Machiavelli, on the basis of a correct observation that the intangibles of honor and reputation can rouse individuals to political action, believed it possible to manipulate the allocation of status in the interests of a conflictual, but not redistributively-oriented politics. However, the fact that reputational goods were at the basis of political conflict did not imply that they were available for public power to redistribute as it pleased. The voluntarism of Machiavelli's proposal, the public creation of reputational values by fiat, ran into the problem of the credibility of the issuer. The Florentine *Grandi* did not ultimately need the Republic to validate their social status; when their interests became threatened, they seceded from the polity.

Historically, esteem-based politics proved to be a dead end for anti-elitism. Democratic politics developed once a different type of social relation to wealth, non-embedded, anonymous, not shackled to status, had begun to take root.[116]

[115] Najemy, "Politics," 129.
[116] See Brennan & Pettit, *Economy of Esteem*, 6-10 on the historical hiatus of esteem in political and economic thought, and ibid., 289-321, on the intricacies of deploying a market-based conception of esteem for public policy.