Machiavelli, Civic Humanism, and the Humanist Politics of Virtue

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Modern studies of Italian humanist political thought emphasize the theme of republican liberty, but this conception has been understood in anachronistic ways and exaggerated in importance. Much more central is the problem of how to encourage virtuous and prudent behavior in the ruling class. The humanist answer — a classical education in virtue and wisdom, along with the creation of new social technologies of persuasion — was comprehensively rejected by Machiavelli, whose own approach to political success truly introduced new _modi e ordini._

**KEYWORDS** Civic humanism, virtue politics, true nobility, Machiavelli, Hans Baron

The expression “civic humanism,” as is well known, was invented in the 1920s by the German historian Hans Baron.¹ It is worth noting, to give some sense of the context, that at the time Baron coined this new term he was a protégé of the great historian and statesman Friedrich Meinecke, perhaps the most influential Machiavelli scholar of the early twentieth century. Meinecke embraced Machiavelli as the inventor of the doctrine of _raison d’état_, the idea that the needs of the state dictate their own criteria for action; these criteria are rooted in the state’s natural drive to expand, and transcend individual morality. He saw this _Machiavellismus_ as a realistic tradition in modern thought, distinct from and preferable to the cosmopolitan moralism of neo-Stoic theorists like Grotius, who tried to impose conventional classical and Christian moral categories on inter-state relations (Meinecke, 1963).² Baron’s conception of “civic humanism” in its original incarnation was meant in part to further develop Meinecke’s project by finding the intellectual roots of Machiavellism in the soil of Italian humanist thought. In order to show the relevance of the humanists to Machiavelli, Baron needed to correct a common misperception of humanism that prevailed in his time (derived ultimately from Burckhardt): that the humanists were rootless literati, cosmopolitans who travelled from court to court, who had little interest in politics and no commitment to any political ideology. It was usual to dismiss them by saying that their affectation of imitating ancient authors made them unoriginal,
unserious and unread: “Having nothing to say, they said it endlessly” as one historian of the time sneered (Monnier, 1910: 228). They were epigones of long-dead masters, out of history, unpolitischen Menschen. Against this view, Baron argued principally on the basis of his studies of Leonardo Bruni — that a central current of thought within the humanist movement, civic humanism, was in fact highly patriotic and committed to a republican ideal. Civic humanism was the opposite of cosmopolitan. Civic humanists elaborated a republican political ideology that made the state, not religious authority, the font of value. The civic humanist ideology of the Quattrocento represented a reversal of a feudal, otherworldly ideology supposedly inherited from the Middle Ages. Civic humanists like Bruni, by making the republic a source of value, accomplished a moral revolution. They now placed a positive value on wealth and commerce (as against a supposed medieval bias towards agriculture and monastic poverty); they praised family life (as against clerical belittling of the married state); and they found in the defense of the city-state a justification for military virtue (as against the chivalric ethos of the Middle Ages). In general they valued participation in politics, the active life, and public service in this life, as against a medieval outlook that supposedly subordinated the temporary to the eternal and politics to the salvation of souls. They represented, therefore, an important stage in the history of secularization, at least in one sense of that word.

However, as the repetition, above, of the word supposedly implies, much of this picture has been subject to devastating criticisms in recent decades. In particular, Baron’s presentation of medieval and feudal ideology is now recognized as a caricature, and in general the humanist attitudes to the city-state he described are now seen to descend from the popular communes of the thirteenth century, not the humanism of the fifteenth. Nevertheless, the ghost of Baronian civic humanism continues to haunt modern historiography. It lives a curious half-life: its shortcomings are acknowledged, but its ideological power still works its magic on those whom the Enlightenment’s narrative of progress still enchants. At the textbook level it remains a canonical topic in the description of Renaissance political thought. Yet it seems clear that the whole category of “civic humanism” needs to be rethought, a task the present writer has undertaken in a forthcoming monograph. This essay begins with a praegustatio of that monograph, giving an alternative account of the political philosophy of Renaissance humanism. It will then turn to Machiavelli and discuss his relationship to the humanist “virtue politics” of the Quattrocento, which in my view would be better described as “neo-classical” than as civic humanist. To anticipate somewhat, this essay will argue that Machiavelli thoroughly and quite intentionally subverts neo-classical political thought in the humanist tradition. He is a Samson, determined to bring crashing down the twin columns upholding humanist political philosophy, namely virtue ethics and the humanist ideal of rule by a classically educated, meritocratic elite.

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After studying over many years now some hundreds of formal treatises, histories, orations, letters, dialogues, dramas, and other works written by humanists from Petrarch to Machiavelli, the present writer has concluded that current historiography places a false emphasis on the theme of republican liberty in Renaissance political
thought. It is in my opinion an emphasis dictated by modern political interests and prejudices rather than one richly documented in Renaissance humanist, especially Latin, sources. Much more pervasive in these sources are themes related to what may be called “virtue politics” — on the analogy of “virtue ethics” — that is to say, a politics emphasizing the character and wisdom of the ruling class above questions of legitimacy of origins or the form of the regime and its laws. Its chief goal is to combat corruption, selfishness, ignorance and imprudence in rulers with a view to creating a new kind of legitimacy that can be called legitimacy of exercise. It is relatively unconcerned with the political issues that were central for the scholastics, such as the status and scope of politics in a fallen world, the correct juridical relations between church and state, the nature and extent of ecclesiastical authority, whether and how plenitude of power should be limited by consent or other means, the nature of law and justifications for coercion, the moral status of property, and the legal and constitutional conditions that need to be met for a government to be called legitimate.

Moreover, as I argued in a recent article (2010: 452–82), the whole notion of Renaissance republicanism inherited from Baron and others tends to be misconceived, largely because of inattention to the changes in meaning of the word *respublica*. This word did not acquire its modern sense of non-monarchical regime until around the middle of the fifteenth century. It did not, in other words, specify a constitutional form until Leonardo Bruni and other humanists began to use it in the 1440s as a translation for Aristotle’s virtuous popular regime. The effect of this rebranding may be grasped when Bruni’s terminology is compared with that of the medieval translator, William of Moerbeke, a collaborator of Thomas Aquinas:

1. **ARISTOTLE’S CONSTITUTIONAL SCHEME IN POLITICS III (1279A), AS TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM OF MOERBEKE IN 1268**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One</th>
<th>Regia potestas</th>
<th>Tyrannia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Few</td>
<td>Aristocratia</td>
<td>Oligarchia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many</td>
<td>Politia</td>
<td>Democratica</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2. **ARISTOTLE’S CONSTITUTIONAL SCHEME IN POLITICS III (1279A), AS TRANSLATED BY LEONARDO BRUNI**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Unum</em>: Rectae rerum publicarum</th>
<th>Transgressiones et labes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regia potestas</td>
<td>Tyrannis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimum gubernatio</td>
<td>Paucorum potestas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respublica</td>
<td>Popularis status</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Aristotelis Politicorum libri VIII interprete Leonardo Aretino* (Strassbourg 1469), [f. 118r].

In Bruni’s immensely popular translation, *respublica* becomes one of the philosopher’s three “good” constitutions, which Aristotle confusingly names *politeia*. The name was confusing because *politeia* was also the word Aristotle used to refer to
constitutional form or regime in general, i.e. the formal, constitutive characteristics of any polity, analogous to the *physis* of a living thing. We can call these two uses of *politeia* specific and generic polity, respectively. With misguided consistency Bruni also translated generic *politeia* using the word *respublica*. This was misguided because *respublica* was in key respects a poor translation for *politeia*. The Romans never used *respublica* to indicate a particular kind of constitution, for example, a non-monarchical or polyarchic constitution, still less a virtuous popular regime. Moreover, *politeia* in Greek could be a neutral analytical term, but *respublica* in Latin was freighted with positive moral connotations. It meant not only “the state” but a good or just state: a state that respects the free status of its citizens and the common good; that treats citizens as equal under law, and not, despotsically, as slaves. It was a term of praise, a “persuasive definition” in William Connolly’s sense (Connolly, 1993: 139). Its lexical opposite was tyranny, not monarchy.⁸

The point is an important one because the idea of a *respublica*, with its reminder of a glorious Roman past, with its connotations of just government for the sake of the citizen body as a whole, of government by virtuous rulers and magistrates, of government that valued liberty and ensured it through observance of law and constitutional propriety; this Roman conception of *respublica* became a kind of linguistic marker in humanist literature. The luminous word *respublica* all by itself evoked the great idealistic project of the Renaissance — the revival of antiquity, the end of the Middle Age — as it touched on matters political. Crucially, republican thought in the Renaissance was never limited to republics in the modern sense of the word, i.e. regimes recognizing the will of the people as the ultimate source of sovereignty; nor was political participation and *vivere civile* always confined to the oligarchic regimes that came to refer to themselves as republics in the course of the fifteenth century.⁹ It is true that, by the time of Machiavelli, and particularly in Machiavelli’s own political vocabulary, the word *respublica* — thanks mostly to Bruni and Francesco Patrizi of Siena — had acquired a secondary meaning, indicating a popular form of government as opposed to princely. Machiavelli, famously, in the very first chapter of the *Prince* contrasted republics with principalities, as did many other Renaissance writers before and after him. But the classical usage of *respublica* as any virtuous state that respects the common good and citizen liberties remained current, and the word could be used to designate any type of good regime, whether kingly, aristocratic or popular. Renaissance humanists worked for many different kinds of regime and brought their neo-classical ideals of politics to bear in many different political contexts. If we are to use the term Renaissance republicanism, we should remember that it includes princely republics and aristocratic republics as well as popular ones.

This is one key point that needs to be made: that Renaissance republicanism was not regime-specific, and the neo-classical political thought of the humanists was much more interested in the virtue of governors than in the form of government. It leads directly to a second key point, namely, the centrality of virtue to humanist political thought and the relative unimportance of what Baron and others call “republican liberty.” The liberty of popular regimes is praised by some humanists, including important ones like Bruni, but this is a minority view overall, and tends to be expressed principally in propagandistic contexts.¹⁰ But all humanist political theorists are centrally concerned with the virtue of rulers and the ruling class. The theme of virtue is ubiquitous in the humanists’ ethical writings, as has long been recognized,
but it is equally pervasive in their political writings. The humanists saw virtue in the ruling class as the key to better government: it was a cure for the diseases of corruption and disloyalty to the state. It is not too much to say that humanist politics in general was a politics of virtue.

The primacy of virtue in humanist political thought had much to do, in my opinion, with problems of legitimacy in early Renaissance Italy and a broad change in strategies of legitimation employed by fifteenth century rulers. Lords and oligarchs with defective titles to rule in the fourteenth century had availed themselves of a variety of legitimation techniques: for example, managed communal elections, staged ceremonies of acclamation, loyalty oaths, the corruption and cooption of guild leadership, the acquisition of imperial and papal vicariates, the purchase of titles of nobility, invented claims to high descent, and so on. These tactics continued into the Quattrocento, but were regarded with increasing cynicism and distrust. The humanists offered to supplement legalistic forms of legitimation with a different kind of claim: the claim that a ruler was virtuous: that his rule was legitimate precisely because it was just, moderate, frugal, merciful and respected the liberties and patrimonies of citizens (Meek, 2010).

The humanists, in their roles as teachers, officials and advisors, insisted everywhere that virtue was itself both a necessary and sufficient title to rule. This claim dovetailed nicely with the humanists’ new claim that classical education was a form of training in virtue and eloquence, suitable for future statesmen (and their advisors). Eloquence was important as the trumpet of virtue: it was an instrument of persuasion; it made men want to be virtuous by praising good conduct and character and blaming bad in the most lively colors (McManamon, 1989: chapter 2, passim). In modern terms, humanist eloquence was meant as a kind of social technology, incentivizing good behavior through the use of praise and blame, as opposed to repressing bad behavior by using the legal and coercive powers of government. To use Hirschmann’s analytic framework, the humanists aimed to neutralize corrupt passions and appetites, the desire for personal gain or for revenge, by stimulating a countervailing passion: the desire for honor and admiration from the community (Hirschmann, 1977). It involved replacing the existing honor code of the aristocratic classes, derived from feudal and chivalric sources, with a new honor code (or “honor world,” to use Appiah’s evocative expression [2010: 19–22]), inspired by an idealized version of Greco-Roman antiquity. Future statesmen were to be immersed in classical history, poetry and moral philosophy: a moral universe where the highest praise and the highest rewards were lavished on public servants. The political class was to be involved in a Sallustian competition in virtue. The humanists understood that the classical ideal of virtue depended on cultivating a certain sense of self: that one is the kind of person that does not do certain things; that one’s dignity and honor within a community depends on not acting, or not being seen to act, out of self-interest, catering to one’s own appetites, but on serving the community.

The humanist ideal of virtue comes from classical history and philosophy and especially from what Cicero called “the Socratic philosophy” of Plato, Xenophon and Aristotle, supplemented by the teachings of the Stoics. Aristotle’s Ethics, Cicero’s De officiis and Livy’s history of Rome were the most important texts, but there were many others. Central is the idea of rational control: that the passions and appetites
in moderation are good but need to be measured out in the appropriate ratios by reason. The man ruled by reason is the man of virtue (Patrizi, 1534: f. VIIv). For Aristotle, one test of whether reason was acting correctly was whether the whole person, not just one faculty or aspect, was flourishing. The same analysis of the whole and the part applied to the city: reason, in the person of the virtuous and wise ruler, needed to serve the whole polity, doing what was appropriate for each part to flourish, not favoring any one part over another.

The humanist politics of virtue implies various subversions, both implicit and explicit, but only some of these are theoretically developed. Implicitly, the humanists reject Augustine’s view that classical virtue was too weak and benighted to provide the basis for a good polity. Explicitly subverted is the egalitarian ideology of the late medieval commune, the political ideals of guildsmen in places like Florence, Siena and Lucca. The humanists, in contrast to the egalitarianism of the Italian commune, become champions of meritocracy. This theme is mostly developed in their numerous treatises on true nobility, a genre almost synonymous with humanism (Rabil, 1991). This is a genre with a message, for it is striking that, with only one or two exceptions, the humanists are overwhelmingly on the side of virtue as the primary, or more often the only, criterion of true nobility.

For example, in this passage from Palmieri’s *Vita civile* (1982: 136–7 [Book III]), Palmieri (a disciple of Bruni) presents humanist meritocracy (the opinion of the savi) as a *via media* between the aristocratic ideal of inherited nobility and the popular egalitarian ideal:

La dignità di ciascuna è quella secondo la quale debbono esse distribuiti gli onori pubblici. Difficile cosa è nella repubblica provare di chi sia la dignità maggiore, perocchè di quella infra il popolo variamente si dissente. I nobili e potenti dicono la dignità essere posta nelle abbbondanti facoltà e nelle famiglie generose ed antiche. I popolari nell’umanità e benigna conversazione del libero e pacifico vivere. I savi dicono nell’operativa virtù. Coloro che nella città avranno a distribuire gli onori, seguitando il più approvato consiglio, quegli sempre ne’ più virtuosi conferiscono, perocchè, dovendo con quelli alla dignità corrispondere, niuna cosa sarà mai più degna fra gli uomini, che la virtù di chi per pubblica utilità si esercita. Chi per le virtù de’ passati cerca gloria, spoglia sè d’ogni merito d’onore; e misero certo è colui che consuma la fama de’ padri antichi. Dia esempio di sè, e non de’ suoi che merita onore, prepondendo sempre la nobiltà, quando sono pari virtù. I sapientissimi antichi, che sempre dilatarono gl’imperi, spese volte forestieri, lavoratori et inﬁme condizioni di uomini rilevarono a’ primi governi quando in loro conoscevano spettabili eccellenze di virtù. [. . .] Non sia alcuno che sdegni essere governato da virtuosi, benchè sieno in inﬁmo luogo e di stirpe ignota nati. 13

Bruni makes a similar point about the need to earn respect for virtue, rather than rely on the ascriptive status acquired by the virtue of one’s ancestors. In a letter to the Venetian nobleman Pietro Miani, he maintains that “legislators and teachers of republics” (humanists?) should want to create a competition in the virtues so as to *create* nobility in the hearts of their citizens.

Bruni begins by gently making fun *per ironiam* of Miani’s claim to be descended from the ancient Roman clan of the Aemilii. He then turns the tables and says,
In my view, anyone who alleges a magnificent descent and puts out images of his illustrious ancestors should be obliged by a kind of necessity to imitate the virtues of those from whom they say they are descended. Who is so dim as not to understand the utter shamefulness, who is so wicked as not to blush to degenerate from the virtue of his ancestors? Who doesn’t see how much public utility this sense of shame brings with it? Legislators and teachers of republics [rerum publicarum magistri] wish for nothing more than for an enlivening competition in the virtues to be poured into the hearts of citizens: unless I’m mistaken, it’s that which principally creates nobility. It may be permitted to hide in other men of lower and less visible station, but the fame and glory of ancestors so shines with concentrated light upon all the affairs of their successors — it sets up, as though in a mirror, such expectations — that no wicked deed they may do can be kept hidden or dark.

So you should frequently counsel with paternal exhortations Faustino and Giovanni, those outstanding young sons of yours — brothers of mine in love — not so much to swell with pride about their brilliant descent as to reckon it enjoined upon them by necessity to show themselves not unlike their distinguished ancestors in integrity, piety, goodness, industry — in fine, in every form of probity both in public and private affairs, and to be zealous in the pursuit of the virtues, without which they cannot keep the rank of their ancestors.14

Similarly, Niccolò Niccoli, an interlocutor in Poggio Bracciolini’s dialogue on true nobility (Bracciolini, 2002: 37–38), stresses that virtue is the measure of nobility, not descent. Since virtue is available to everyone, nobility is within the reach of all. Poggio allows Niccoli the last word in the dialogue, which he uses to summarize his position: It is only by making honor dependent on earned nobility rather than ancestry that citizens will be motivated to act with virtue:

Virtue is within the capacity of everyone and belongs to those who embrace it. Those who are stupid, lazy, wicked and perverse, who think they have succeeded to the eminence of their ancestors, must be considered more wicked than others, because they are further from imitating the standard of their parents. [...] If people were persuaded that they could become noble through their virtue and character, that true nobility is attained by right action and not by the industry and labor of another, believe me, we would inspire them to behave more virtuously; arousing ourselves from idleness, we would not rest on the laurels of others, doing nothing praiseworthy, but we would be stimulated to pursue the honor of nobility ourselves. [...] [If those who possess ascribed nobility were to see that true nobility was in virtue] they would eagerly seek to do those act by which the virtue of the ancestors might shine forth in them.15

Thanks to humanists’ almost obsessive insistence on this theme, it came to be widely accepted among the political classes of the Italian city-states and Italian courts that a classical education was a training in virtue,16 and that virtue enhanced not only one’s personal distinction, but also buttressed one’s claims to exercise political power.

The politics of virtue thus challenged and in part undermined the whole idea of hereditary privilege — a theme that links the humanists with the republicans of the eighteenth century. Humanist views on true nobility questioned the basis of inherited social rank and therefore of a political hierarchy based on descent, and led them to
The humanists’ goal was to open up the ranks of the political elite to those who were truly virtuous, not merely noble by descent, and to force noblemen to compete for honor and power on the terrain of virtue. For some humanists, even merchants and tradesmen could and should participate in government, provided they were virtuous — government was not just for aristocrats and princes (Patrizi, 1534, XIIr-XVr). To be sure, the need for princes and elites to acquire virtue was, the central theme of the mirror-of-princes treatise, a literature that goes back to the early middle ages. What was new was the idea of meritocracy, that virtuous character was not merely desirable in a ruler, but also a condition of exercising power for a whole class of men and women. It depended on the possession of a classical education and the acceptance of classical, not clerical or chivalric, standards of virtue and vice.

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So what, then, is Machiavelli’s attitude to this tradition of thought? The claim has already been advanced at the beginning of this article that Machiavelli’s political thought cannot be seen as a continuation or a variation or even as a radicalization of humanist tradition, a view sometimes attributed to the so-called “Cambridge School.” Instead, it constituted a subversion of the central premises of the politics of virtue. This is because Machiavelli rejects the solution of the ancient Greek philosophers to political instability and infelicity, which is to empower a political elite consisting of the wise and the virtuous. For Machiavelli, a republic dominated by an elite can achieve stability and longevity but it will not be powerful, and power is the primary goal of Machiavellian political science. The grandi oppress and dispirit the common people, without whom greatness and glory is impossible for a republic. His great historical model is Rome: a “republic for expansion,” not Sparta or modern Venice, which were merely “republics for preservation.” Machiavelli also famously stated in the *Prince* that political rationality and traditional moral virtue are heteronomous: that for an individual ruler to be good morally is not necessarily good for a state. And of course he is dubious about any political philosophy that relies on the possibility of improving traditional morality; he has no more faith in human goodness than Augustine; indeed, he has even less.

Machiavelli’s view thus represents a fundamental challenge to neo-classical political philosophy, and one that is inimical to any politics of virtue. It is his separation of political rationality from traditional morality that enforces Machiavelli’s redefinition of virtue. *Virtù* in Machiavelli’s lexicon acquires the meaning of any human quality that made for effective political power. He tends to assimilate malicious behavior to weakness; men behave badly (in a political sense) when the political system is poorly organized, when there are no routes to power for capable men: men of virtue (in his sense of the word).

Machiavelli was also hostile to the humanist goal of a virtuous, educated elite because he was a populist. He served the most populist of all Florentine regimes since the fourteenth century: the Soderini regime. It is a matter of debate just how deep was Machiavelli’s ideological commitment to democracy and popular government; it
seems to have been based less on a belief in human dignity and equality than on a more visceral hatred of aristocratic corruption and self-dealing. He remained committed to populism throughout the 1510s in great part because he believed the secret of Rome’s expansive power — its mighty empire — lay in its virtuous common people. The men who flocked in great numbers to fill her armies knew how to master fortune and were willing to sacrifice themselves for the state. They were loyal and free and masculine and not slavish. This was because Rome’s constitution had evolved in such a way as to allow her people to seek their own self-interest, security, prosperity and freedom as against that of the patrician class. The Roman res publica was thus res populi; the people identified it as their own.

Freedom, too, for Machiavelli was a word in need of redefinition. For the humanists, as for the ancient philosophers, freedom was not something natural to all men; it was an achieved character trait. It was the reward of virtue, a state of mind that supervened when reason ruled the passions and appetites; its opposite was license. Some, perhaps most men were naturally servile. The Romans, too, saw liberty as a matter of character as well as of legal status. Livy writes (23.12.9) “if I should be silent (about making war on the Romans) I may seem to be either proud or subservi- ant: the one is the mark of the man who has forgotten another’s liberty; the latter his own.” The idea that liberty was an achieved state of character was passed down to the early humanists. As Leonardo Bruni once wrote, all peoples desire freedom but not all are capable of it (Bruni, 2001–2007 [VII.48], 2: 327). For Machiavelli, by contrast, the desire for liberty was a natural passion whose embers could be found burning in all men. No man wanted to be dominated by another man, but some men had become used to servility. The same applied to states. Nevertheless, a clever statesman could inflame and exploit the embers of freedom, even in the servile, so as to enhance the power of the state. If the correct modi e ordini were instituted, the passion for liberty could be built into a bonfire of bellica virtus that would transform a city-state into a great empire. But the passion for liberty as Machiavelli saw it did not require rational control of the appetites — virtue in the classical sense — to gain force. It required tumultui: the assertion of the people’s claims by controlled dissent.

To most historians of political theory today, Machiavelli, with his consequentialist power-politics and his proto-scientific mode of analysis, separating fact from value, has inevitably seemed far more modern than the humanists. The humanists’ confidence in the ability of individuals and polities to better themselves by acquiring virtue seems by comparison all too naive, and Machiavelli was among the most effective in mocking its naïveté. Yet it would seem, taking a longer view forward in time, through early modern Utopianism and modern progressive thought, to all modern political theories that hold out hope for the betterment of the human condition via education, that the humanists, too, have some claim to be among the founders of the modern world. And if one recognizes, with Pareto, that all government means rule by an elite, and if one believes the primary function of government is to uphold justice and not to subdue other peoples or to encourage illimitable desire in one’s own citizenry, then humanist political thought might even turn out to seem preferable to the Machiavellian style of politics so often deplored, yet so ubiquitous in the modern world.
Notes

1 For the original context of Baron’s conception of civic humanism during the 1920s, see Fubini, 1992.
2 (Original edition 1924); translated into English as Meinecke, 1957.
3 Cited in Hankins, 2005, 74, 91.
6 See Hursthouse 2013. Virtue ethics counts as one of the three major approaches to ethics in modern academic philosophy.
7 See Hankins, 2003 for the reception of Bruni’s version.
8 The difference between despotism and tyranny as it came to be understood by commentators on Aristotle is that despots ruled over willing slaves, men who were naturally slavish (as in what is referred to as Asiatic despotism) whereas tyrants treated citizens who deserved respect as free men as though they were slaves.
9 See Law and Paton, 2010 for recent work highlighting the continuity of communal magistracies and assemblies under signori; for another example of vivere civile as a description of the political life in principalities, see Hankins, 2002: 382.
10 Despite Bruni’s apparent claim in the Oratio in funere Nanni Stroze that non-republican forms of government are illegitimate regimes, which Hankins has argued is an example of rhetorical insincerity; see Hankins, 2000: 159–167, and 143–178.
11 Law and Paton, 2010 has numerous examples.
12 Patrizi calls virtue an “animi habitum [...] naturae modo ac ratione consentaneum” (“a habit of mind that agrees with nature, measure and reason”). Patrizi goes on to say that virtue does not exist (or does not emerge) before the formation of civil society and civil society cannot exist without it. If all were virtuous, then institutio (both civil institutions and education) would not be needed.
13 “Public honors should be distributed according to the worthiness of the individual. It is a difficult thing in the republic to ascertain whose worthiness is greater, since people disagree about this subject. The nobles and the powerful say that worthiness consists in abundant resources and in noble and ancient families; the popular party say it consists in the common humanity and benevolent intercourse of free and peaceful living; the wise say it consists in active virtue. Those who have the task of distributing honors in the city and who follow the most approved counsel always confer honors on the most virtuous. This is because honor ought to correspond to worthiness, and nothing is more worthy among men than the virtue of those who exert themselves for public utility. Those who seek glory through the virtue of their ancestors deprive themselves of all the merit of honor, and the man who destroys the reputation of his forefathers is certainly wretched. Let him give proof of himself and not of his relatives who desire honor; let him boast of his nobility only when his own virtues equal theirs. The wisest of the ancients who greatly enlarged their empires often elevated to the first offices of state foreigners, workers and men of low condition when they recognized in them signal excellences of virtue. [...] Many historical examples follow. [...] Let no one think it beneath him to be governed by the virtuous, even if [the virtuous] were born in a low estate and of unknown parentage.” My translation.
15 “Virtus enim omnibus est in promptu. Eius efficitur propria, qui illam amplectetur. Socrordes igitur, ignavi, improbi, perversi, qui se in maiorum suorum locum putant successe, eo sordidiores quam ceteri habendi sunt, quo longius distant ab imitazione parentem. [...] Nam si persuasum erit hominibus, honestate et bonis artibus nobilem fieri
eamque veram esse nobilitatem quam sibi recte quisque agendo quesierit, non que sit alterius industria et labore parta, excitabimur, mihi crede, magis ad virtutem neque desidia confecti, nihil agentes dignum laude in aliorum gloria acquiescent. [ ... ] Quibus vero persuasum fuerit nullam, nisi propria virtute et gloria, nobilitatem possideri, inflamabuntur ardone quodam ad ea efficacinde, ex quibus elucet in eis superiorum virtus." English translation from Rabil, 1991: 89, with modifications.

16 Antonio de Ferrariis (il Galateo) in Rabil, 1991: 316–360, is particularly explicit about the connection between classical education and virtue.

17 See for example Skinner, 1978, 1: 180ff.; Skinner, 2002, 2: 196 ff.; my view is closest to that expressed in Skinner, 1981: 35ff., where the break with the humanists on the relationship of virtue and reason is emphasized. Machiavelli’s estrangement from the humanist tradition while writing his famous treatises is stressed by Robert Black, who sees a return to humanism in the 1520s (Black, 2013).


19 The belief that political thinkers in the Italian city-states advocated a model of liberty as “non-domination” (see Skinner, 2002: chapter 7) is most accurate when applied to Machiavelli and to the old guild republicanism of the late Middle Ages. In my opinion, however, it does not describe very well the typical humanist understanding of liberty (see Hankins, 2010). A telling example is Rinuccini’s De libertate (2002), who sees liberty in a Stoic optic as liberty of spirit rather than political self-rule or non-domination.

20 “Si reticeam, aut superbus aut obnoxius uidear, quorum alterum est hominis alienae libertatis obliti, alterum sua” (English translation my own).

21 Most famously in the Prince, chapter 15, where Machiavelli ridicules humanist political treatises as depicting “republics and principalities which have never been seen or known to exist.”

## Works cited


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