

## **Spectacular Tumulto: Michele di Lando in Machiavelli's Florentine Histories**

Mauricio Suchowlansky, PhD Candidate, University of Toronto  
mauricio.suchowlansky@utoronto.ca

Those who consider it...think it wonderful that all, or the larger part, of those who in this world have done very great things, and have been excellent among the men of their era, have in their birth and origin been humble and obscure [...].

Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Life of Castruccio Castracani*<sup>1</sup>

In chapter III of his Florentine Histories, Niccolò Machiavelli writes that during the Ciompi revolt of 1378, “one Michele di Lando, a wool carder...barefoot and scantily clothed” led the plebs into the main governmental building of the Florentine Republic, the Palazzo della Signoria.<sup>2</sup> This same Michele, “resolved to stop the tumults” and to gain time in the reorganization of the government “commanded [the plebs] to seek out one ser Nuto,” who had been designated *bargello* or sheriff by the oligarchic government that preceded the revolt.<sup>3</sup> Nuto, Machiavelli continues, was dragged by the mob to the gallows, which Michele had erected in the piazza that faces the Northern side of the Palazzo, and hanged there “by one foot” and violently torn apart until nothing remained of him other than the foot.

Michele di Lando, a figure that arises out of Florence own past, and is considered by Machiavelli as naturally sagacious and prudent, goes unmentioned in the rest of Machiavelli's historical and political texts. In the Florentine Histories, on the contrary, where Machiavelli presents as his main task to recount, “in detail” the “civil discords and internal enmities” of the city, Michele arises as a hero “who have benefited their fatherland.”<sup>4</sup> That is, in a text in which heroic individuals are, to say the least, relatively few, Machiavelli's Michele stands out both as a paradigmatic figure in the local history of Florence and as an exemplar of political action.<sup>5</sup> Michele's sudden appearance, one

---

I am grateful to Professor Mark Jurdjevic for the various discussions we had on the subject of this work. I am also indebted to my colleague Thomas Leonard for his insightful commentaries and his revisions of an earlier draft of this work.

<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, “The Life of Castruccio Castracani” in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 533.

<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 127.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 127-8.

<sup>4</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 130.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 6. The literature on Machiavelli's view the Ciompi revolt and Michele di Lando's role in it has grown rapidly in the past decades. See for instance, Timothy Lukes, “Descending to Particulars: The Palazzo, the Piazza and Machiavelli's Republican New Modes and Orders,” *The Journal of Politics* 71 (2000); Marina Marietti, “Une Figure Emblematique: Michele di Lando vu par Maquiavel,” *Chroniques* 69-70 (2002); Martine Leivovici, “From Fight to Debate: Machiavelli and the Revolt of the Ciompi,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (28), 2002; and Mark Phillips, “Barefoot Boy Makes Good,” *Speculum* 59 (1984). Still, Felix Gilbert's interpretation remains the most authoritative analysis of the Histories in general and the Ciompi in particular. Felix Gilbert, “Machiavelli's *Istorie Fiorentine*: An Essay in Interpretation,” in *History: Choice and Commitment*, ed. Franklin Ford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1977). Secondary literature on the subject of Machiavelli's historiographical method and his political purposes include Marina Marietti, “Maquiavel Historiographe de Médicis,” in *Les Ecrivains et*

may argue, is due to Machiavelli's gradual interest in the local history of Florence and its figures: from his primary political writings to the project of writing a history of Florence, Machiavelli's *pensée* reveals a progressive interest in the most parochial events that shaped his *patria*. It is in the Histories that Machiavelli's references to parochial Florentine political events arises, where references to its problems and its figures increase geometrically if compared to the use of ancient exemplars as in the Prince or the Discourses.<sup>6</sup>

This historical and parochial interest is particularly coherent to task he sets himself in the *Proemio* to the Histories, where Machiavelli tells his readership that Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini's accounts of the history of Florence did a great deal to explain the events prior to Cosimo de' Medici's reign.<sup>7</sup> Still, Machiavelli makes the claim that both humanist historians, Bruni and Poggio, neglected the discords, the internal enmities of the city and their effects or consequences, as if these were unworthy of retelling on the part of his predecessors.<sup>8</sup> Either they thought these civic discords did not deserve to be included in their works of history or they went through the subject rapidly so as to avoid offending the living descendants of their predecessors.<sup>9</sup> This is "unworthy of great man," Machiavelli reproaches, "because if nothing else delights or instructs in history, it is that which is described *in detail*; if no other lesson is useful to the citizens who govern republics, it is that which shows the causes of the hatred and divisions of the city."<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli the historian then announces the theme of his narrative, that is, to give its fullest attention to the greatest episodes of civic disorder for which Florence was famous. Felix Gilbert stresses that Machiavelli's Florentine Histories provides a selective and thorough series of accounted events, though its narrative does

---

*le Pouvoir en Italie a l'epoque de la Renaissance*, ed. A. Rochon (Paris, 1974), 81-141; John Najemy, "Arti and Ordini in Machiavelli's *Istorie Fiorentine*," in *Essays Presented to Myron Gilmore*, ed. Sergio Bertelli and Gloria Ramakus (Florence, 1978); Salvatore de Maria, "Machiavelli's Ironic View of History: the *Istorie Fiorentine*," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 45 (1992); Gisela Bock, "Civil Discord in Machiavelli's *Istorie Fiorentine*," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, eds. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Mark Jurdjevic, "Machiavelli's Sketches of Francesco Valori and the Reconstruction of Florentine History," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63(2) (2002); and from the same author, "Machiavelli's Hybrid Republicanism," *English Historical Review* 122 (2007).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, and as John Najemy states, the Prince includes few examples of Florentine history, among which we can count his discussion of Friar Savonarola and Florence's relation with mercenary commanders. The rest of the comments on Florentine politics are limited to events of his own time, which make no direct reference to the Medici in a historical setting, and this is even more puzzling if one takes into account the fact that this is a work that was dedicated successively to two members of the Medici family, Giovanni and Lorenzo. The Discourses increasingly speak of parochial historical examples, yet most of them are allusions to sixteenth-century affairs, such as the rise of Cosimo de' Medici, the Pazzi conspiracy, or Florentine involvement in foreign wars and affairs such as the war against Lucca of 1430. Machiavelli's other historical texts, particularly the Decennale of 1504, merely retell the history of Florence after the fall of the Medici from 1494 to 1504, which do not account for his increasing interest in Florentine fourteenth-century history. Najemy, *Machiavelli and the Medici*, 555-7.

<sup>7</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> Nicolai Rubinstein, "Florentine Constitutionalism and Medici Ascendancy in the Fifteenth Century," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 444-6. Also, Mark Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52(4) (1999), 999.

<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 6. Emphasis is mine. Also, Phillips, 586-7.

not comprise a connected history.<sup>11</sup> His historical account is less decorous, revealing and shocking in terms of what local people felt and did for themselves if compared to those of the most famous Humanist historians and contemporary chroniclers.

Thanks to this new conception of historiography as a means to recount in detail the internal enmities and violence of Florence, Machiavelli privileges or ‘spotlights’ the year 1378, particularly the Ciompi revolt and Michele di Lando’s role in it. If one were to propose a statistical account of the third Book of the *Histories*, in which Machiavelli retells the local events between the years 1353 and 1400 in twenty-nine chapters, one comes to realize that ten complete chapters are exclusively dedicated to the year 1378 and of these ten chapters, eight retell the deeds of Michele di Lando.<sup>12</sup> Five others chapters are dedicated to recount the years 1371 and the first months of 1378, and form an introduction to the causes of the rebellion (the Papal War, the banishment of the Ghibellines on the part of the most conservative Guelph members), while six others are consecrated to the late months of 1378 to 1381 (the years during which the *Arti Minori* ruled Florence until the re-emergence of the oligarchic regime).<sup>13</sup>

Given the abovementioned dimension of Machiavelli’s historiography, two questions of fundamental value arise: first, why does Machiavelli spotlights the events of 1378 and the elsewhere relegated figure of Michele di Lando? Second, and considering the fact that Machiavelli was not expected to do any original work when the Medici commissioned him the writing of the history of Florence, how did Machiavelli expect his dedicatee, Giulio de’ Medici, to receive his detailed and prominent account of the leader of the Ciompi *tumulto*?<sup>14</sup> In other words, who is Machiavelli’s Michele di Lando and what are his political implications with regards to Florentine contemporary affairs during the Medici regime?

The argument of here presented is twofold: in line with the works of scholars such as Gilbert, Phillips, Najemy, Jurdjevic and others, I propose that Machiavelli purposefully reworks the histories of the city in the form of what could be defined as a process of ‘reproduction and reappropriation.’ Contemporary chroniclers and historians had drawn long before the outlines of the events of the Ciompi and Michele di Lando, but Machiavelli gives Michele’s role new force, to the point that he becomes the centre, the

---

<sup>11</sup> “Events which Machiavelli believed contained valuable historical lessons,” Gilbert writes, “such as the tyranny of the Duke of Athens and the revolt of the Ciompi, are recited in great detail, whereas the happenings of intervening decades are hardly mentioned.” Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 238-9.

<sup>12</sup> Marietti, *Une Figure Emblématique*, 130. Also, Gene Brucker, “The Ciompi Revolution,” in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 314.

<sup>13</sup> Marietti, *Une Figure Emblématique*, 130-1.

<sup>14</sup> Jurdjevic, *Machiavelli’s Sketches of Francesco Valori*, 188. Machiavelli’s interest in writing the history of the city appears even more striking if one takes into account that the salary arranged for this commission was half of that he earned when he worked for the chancellery of Florence. In addition, in 1521, Piero Soderini, Gonfalonier of Justice during the republican *intermezzo*, offered Machiavelli a post as secretary of the republic of Ragusa (and a salary of two hundred gold ducats, that is, four times the pay he received for the *Histories*), which Machiavelli turned down. But he “thought matters were going so well for him in Florence that he would never consent to subject himself to a ‘foreign master’ [...]” James Atkinson and David Sices, eds. *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 267 and 331-2.

core of the Ciampi events –and the Florentine Histories in general. Michele arises as an emblematic and quasi-mythological political character, which Machiavelli presents as blended with his humble origins and natural abilities. In other words, Michele emerges as an enlarged and exemplary political figure, able to channel the ferocious deeds of the plebs, cope with the most notorious socio-political divisions of Florence, and reorganize Florence into a more sound and participatory republican regime.

Second, the republican lesson that permeates from the story of Michele di Lando is much more coherent if compared to the political contingencies of the early 1520s in Florence. The disenfranchisement of various social sectors from Florentine politics and the lack of political expertise on the part of the last Medici leaders caused the endless continuation of political factionalism that threatened the very existence of the Florentine republic. Thus, Michele di Lando, the myth and creation of Machiavelli's own political imagination, was to be understood as an exemplary figure by the contemporary Medici commissioners. Moreover, di Lando's exemplary actions are particularly coherent with those that Machiavelli presents in his more prescriptive political text, the Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence, also commissioned by Giulio di Giuliano in 1520. Overall, the new Medici rulers needed to be let in on the 'secret' that political success involved a socially accommodating perspective, which encompasses a republican lesson of political accessibility and the channelling of dissimilar interests rather than an elimination of opposition in the vain hope of social harmony and political domination.

Unlike the arguments presented by scholars of the calibre of Harvey C. Mansfield, this work offers a 'political' characterization of the Florentine Histories (and the central role Michele plays in it), hence this text should be understood as a relevant aspect of the development of Machiavelli's political thought.<sup>15</sup> For instance, Mansfield states that, "the Florentine Histories, as opposed to The Prince and the Discourses on Livy, makes so little of innovation and founding in politics and does not dwell on the 'new prince' or 'new modes and orders.'"<sup>16</sup> Mansfield perceives the text as an adjunct to Machiavelli's previous canonical texts, hence making the case that the Histories is a rework of their fundamental themes, though viewed through a parochial lens. In this way, its character as a work of history comes to be disregarded, its sources in Florentine historiographical tradition overlooked, and its novelty with regards to the other texts is relegated to the level of a naive 'historicism.'<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, to highlight the novelty of the political and

---

<sup>15</sup> Gilbert, via Jurdjevic, has called to attention this particular aspect of the writing of history on the part of Machiavelli. Jurdjevic states that "it confirms Felix Gilbert's cautious and often-forgotten reminder about the impact of politics and political survival on the pioneering historical literature of early sixteenth-century Florence: that Machiavelli and Guicciardini frequently had 'political purposes when discussing historical events and thus consciously constructed a historical myth.'" Jurdjevic, *Machiavelli's Sketches of Francesco Valori*, 186.

<sup>16</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*: XII.

<sup>17</sup> The true of the matter is that the Machiavelli of the early 1520s abandoned Cicero and Polybius' conceptual vocabulary of Roman republicanism merely because he has turned toward a parochial model of republicanism by 1520; yet, this does not mean that there are no political insights of value to be found in the Histories. It is also worth noting that scholars such as Skinner and Pocock, whose 'Cambridge School' methodology is based upon an understanding of texts as part of a given context and linguistic conventions, have thoroughly failed to consider Machiavelli's later works as part of a changing historical process that may have had an impact, that is a renewal, of his political thought. Jurdjevic's critique is particularly insightful on Skinner's failure to identify this change in Machiavelli's *pensée*. Jurdjevic, *Machiavelli's*

parochial vocabulary of this text with regards to the traditional binary view of Machiavelli's political thought does not mean that Machiavelli abandoned, or diminished, his expectations with regards to the potential of single political individuals in times of decline or corruption, as Najemy has argued.<sup>18</sup> This, I believe, is to overlook the centrality of the figure of Michele in the narrative of the text, for Michele's personal traits and actions are central to the composition of a sound republican regime, the understanding of the complexity of the sociology of Florence, and as an example of *virtù* and political concreteness.<sup>19</sup>

### **Michele di Lando in (His) Context**

Here, I attempt to show Machiavelli's use of theatricality as a device in his narrative style to 'spotlight' and isolate the relevance of certain historical events and figures. Although this inquiry will be mainly restricted to the events of the Ciompi and the emergence of Michele di Lando in Machiavelli's historiographical work, it also seeks to stress the problem of how Machiavelli's turn to study and writing of Florentine history marks a clear distinction from earlier and contemporary chronicles and historians. That is, Machiavelli's perception of this event suffers what could be defined as a process of 'reproduction and appropriation.'<sup>20</sup> Certainly, he refers to and uses the available sources in his search for historical facts and raw data. Still, Machiavelli does not feel in debt to his distinguished predecessors; he does not pay *hommage* to them.<sup>21</sup> Hence, his approach vis-à-vis the material is almost rebellious: the Florentine secretary takes into account *their* perspectives on the history of Florence –that is, the account of those who had preserved the memory of the events prior to and during Machiavelli's times. Yet, consciously and linguistically, Machiavelli reframes them in order to add up *his* personal and pedagogical account.<sup>22</sup> Detailed retelling, moreover, is a purposeful tool to appeal to the imagination of the reader: first, it portrays a perspective of a given historical event, and second it mobilizes the *ingegno* or imagination of the readership to provide a 'gift of counsel.'<sup>23</sup> Machiavelli devises a historical narrative that has, to some extent, the intended impact of a political pamphlet: not merely meant to inform but also to act as a 'wake-up call' to its readership.

---

*Hybrid Republicanism*, 1247-1253. Also, John Najemy, "Machiavelli and the Medici: The Lessons of Florentine History," *Renaissance Quarterly* 35(4) (1982), 550.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 574. For a similar account to the one here presented, see, Marietti, *Une Figure Emblematique*, 133.

<sup>19</sup> Phillips, 603-4. Marietti, *Une Figure Emblematique*, 133-4. Lukes, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Gilbert, *Machiavelli's Istorie Fiorentine*, 135. Also, Najemy, *Machiavelli and the Medici*, 554-555.

<sup>21</sup> De Grazia, 190 and 285. As Bock argues, "Machiavelli presents...a gloomy picture of the history of Florence, a city of which, a century earlier, Bruni had written not merely a glorifying history but even a *Laudatio* [...]." Bock, 182

<sup>22</sup> Moulakis claims, "Machiavelli himself, though much indebted to [the civic humanist] tradition, departs from it in such salient ways that he cannot be simply identified with it." Athanasios Moulakis, *Republican Realism in Renaissance Florence: Francesco Guicciardini's Discorso di Logrogno* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998) 41. Anglo states that the Florentine Histories "is a highly selective, idiosyncratic, and often wilfully-inaccurate narrative serving as the raw material with which Machiavelli illustrates his politico-historical preconceptions." Sydney Anglo, *Machiavelli: A Dissection* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), 166.

<sup>23</sup> It is worth noting that Ascoli's analysis is mainly concerned with The Prince and not the Histories. Albert Russell Ascoli, "Machiavelli's Gift of Counsel," in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993): 219.

More importantly and in line with Machiavelli's necessity to inform rather than to entertain or give pleasure, Najemy stresses the lack of the necessary knowledge of the political past of Florence on the part of the younger Medici patrons, especially concerning their insufficient knowledge of the history of the city.<sup>24</sup> Whatever their political appreciations, the bare facts of the historical events should be assumed to be well known by Machiavelli's readers. Hence, the meticulous narrative of the Histories with its quasi-mythical portrayal of deeds and events should neither be disregarded nor misplaced. In order to recapture the Machiavelli's capacity for blending the imaginative and pedagogical perspective and the historical account one should return to the scenes drawn by previous and contemporary chronicles and historians. As Bock claims, "...no passage of the *Istorie Fiorentine* may be used to demonstrate the author's implicit or explicit political view without examining if it was taken over from one of the sources or if it was Machiavelli's original contribution."<sup>25</sup>

The Ciompi revolt of 1378 was one of a series of violent popular protests that erupted in Europe during the late fourteenth century. The Florentine *popolo minuto*, the class of unskilled workers, and the lower sectors of the population of the city in general, suffered a series of deteriorating economic and political circumstances. Because of the war effort against the Papal States (which had already lasted for three years), a group of the most conservative aristocrats of the Parte Guelfa, the pro-papal sect, formed a peace party.<sup>26</sup> The newly formed party sought to force the government to make peace through launching a campaign against the advocates of the popular government party, the Ghibellines enemies of the Church.<sup>27</sup> The result of this endeavour was the cleansing of the Ghibellines from the Florentine electorate, which provoked a great reaction on the part of the Florentine population that had indentified with the war efforts. By early June, this faction organized a counter campaign under the leadership of Salvestro de' Medici, and passed new legislation to cripple the Guelph's sect.<sup>28</sup> The internal consequence of such a war against the Pontifical states and the constant political strife between the two sects was a sharp split between patricians and new 'bourgeois,' intensifying the already existent factional divisions among the ruling families. Hence, the first revolt happened to be led not by *minuti* workers but rather by pro-papal *grandi*, or the elite Guelf sect.<sup>29</sup> To this international aspect of the revolt, it must be added the Black plague of 1348, which had reduced the population, and, as some scholars argue, led to the fall of wool prices due to the lack fall of the economic activity in the city.<sup>30</sup> Finally, by the early 1370s, their salaries continued to decline, whereas taxes continued to increase to pay for the Florentine participation in the so-called Papal war.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Najemy, *A History of Florence: 1200-1575* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Company, 2006), 427.

<sup>25</sup> Bock, 186.

<sup>26</sup> Brucker, 315.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 315.

<sup>28</sup> Brucker, 315-6. John Najemy, *Audiant Omnes Artes: Corporate Origins of the Ciompi Revolution,* in *Il Tumulto dei Ciompi: Un Momento di Storia Fiorentina ed Europea* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1981), 60-1.

<sup>29</sup> Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 159-60.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 160.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, 588.

The defeat of the oligarchic forces of the Parte did not bring peace to Florence, but instead stimulated the participation of the lower social and economic sectors of the city, which had been previously indifferent to the fights between the two parties. The second explosion of violence emerges with the proletarian agitation of mid-July, which definitely ruled the Guelph partisans out of power and elected a new ‘democratic’ Signoria.<sup>32</sup> This worker-led government lasted only for six weeks and its downfall was precipitated by a new labour reaction by the second week of August, which is considered the third stage of the revolt. Finally, his radicalized proletarian government was resisted by a coalition of merchants and artisans, who defeated the workers and expelled them from the regime.

The Florentine republican system of the fourteenth century was largely based upon a feudal corporative order called *arte* or guild, which regrouped producers and workers by occupation.<sup>33</sup> The guilds were a key political component for the representation of Florentine citizenship, each of which appointed its own magistrate or representative before the Signoria, the council of government that represented the neighbourhoods of the city.<sup>34</sup> The guilds were divided into “greater” and “lesser,” and as such, the guilds to which belonged the lower social sectors of the Florentine society were dominated by the higher guilds. Of all major guilds, the wool guild was the most important one because of its relevance in the economy of the city and because of the number of workers that were employed in the productive line.<sup>35</sup> The craftsmen that led the most radical part of the *tumulto*, which were the core of the wool industry because of their technical qualifications, were subject to the discipline of the Wool guild (they were considered *sottoposti*), and occupied the same juridical position as the lowliest manual labourer.<sup>36</sup> The bulk of the demands of the wool carders concerned, firstly, the demand for higher wages before the representative of the Wool guild. In addition, the Ciompi and the other lesser people demanded direct participation, that is, guilds of their own, since they were included and co-opted within the guilds dominated by their employers.<sup>37</sup> Under the most radical part of the revolt, three new guilds were created, which provided wider participation to the wool workers, previously subjected to the regulations of the wool guild dominated by merchant and factory owner’s interests.<sup>38</sup>

What is the role of Michele di Lando in these events? Michele was a wool comber, hence part of the machinery of the largest industry in fourteenth-century Florence. His mother was a washer-woman, while his wife was a clerk at a pork shop. Nevertheless, Michele’s status was not the lowest; he was a supervisor placed upon the less skilled wool workers, and he had enough source of revenue so as to appear in the tax records of Florence as paying a small sum.<sup>39</sup> Michele had also been a soldier, hence a participant *prima facie* of the recent events of the Papal war; he held the prominent

---

<sup>32</sup> Brucker, 315.

<sup>33</sup> Najemy, *Audiant Omnes Artes*, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 14-15.

<sup>35</sup> Raymond de Roover, “Labour Conditions in Florence Around 1400: Theory, Policy and Reality,” in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 292-3.

<sup>36</sup> Brucker, 319.

<sup>37</sup> Bock: 194. See, also, Phillips, 588.

<sup>38</sup> Brucker, 318.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 322.

position among the soldiers, to the point that he had a group of men under his command.<sup>40</sup> Regardless of the skills or experiences that shaped Michele, he emerged as the leader of the wool workers' revolts of 1378 and he was acclaimed Gonfalonier of Justice after the abdication of the previous oligarchic officials. Michele took the position that since its implementation had been reserved to the most traditional families of the city. As several scholars point out, the government that Michele led between July and August seems to have been much more concerned with moderation and the reordering of the city under the traditional corporatist regime.<sup>41</sup>

### **Machiavelli's Michele and the Chronicles**

This succinct review of the most important aspects of the Ciompi revolt hardly tells us of the ascendancy that Machiavelli gives to Michele di Lando in the Florentine Histories. As it will be presented in the following analysis, Machiavelli's portrait of Michele largely deviates from those of the contemporary chroniclers. Indeed, by going back to the chronicles, as Machiavelli certainly did, we can recapture part of the sense that the revolt of the Ciompi and the role of Michele di Lando evolved throughout the more than one hundred years that separated Machiavelli from his sources.<sup>42</sup>

Machiavelli's account of the most virulent part of the revolt begins with the events of the end of July 1378, during which the plebs led by the Ciompi section set in motion a series of tumults resulting in "arson and robbery" throughout the city [...]. According to Machiavelli, they were driven by indignation and fear to be punished for such deeds and for others committed by the *minuti* under the leadership of the oligarchs.<sup>43</sup> Here, Machiavelli adds a creation of his own, a direct speech on the part of "one of the most daring and more experienced" plebeians.<sup>44</sup> The *Ciompo* says, "Do not let their [the patricians'] antiquity of blood, with which they reproach us, dismay you; for all men, having the same beginning, are equally ancient and have been made by nature in one mode. Strip all of us naked, you will see that we are all alike."<sup>45</sup> The discourse gives further ascendancy to the Ciompi as a collective actor, taking the central role in Machiavelli's narrative, highlighting the class character of the divisions and struggle.<sup>46</sup> The Ciompi take the leading role in the narrative, as opposed to the previous oligarchic government, representing true class-based beginning of the conflict against the traditional leaders of the corporatist feudal system.

Here Machiavelli gives entrance to his unexpected hero, as the previous, and legitimately elected, Signori abandoned the palace to the mob,

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 318.

<sup>41</sup> Najemy, *Audiant Omnes Artes*, 64-5. Phillips, 589.

<sup>42</sup> Louis Green, *Chronicle Into History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 107.

<sup>43</sup> This refers to the tumults against Messer Lapo di Castiglionchio, the leader of the Guelf party, which was believed to be the enemy of the plebeians. Machiavelli: *Florentine Histories*: 121-122. Acciaiuoli's *Chronicle* presents a similar understanding of the act. G. Scaramella, ed. "Chroniche dei Tumulto di Ciompi di Alamanno Acciaiuoli," in *Raccolta degli Storici Italiani: dal Cinquecento al Millecinquecento* (Bologna, IT: Nicola Zanichelli, 1934), 15.

<sup>44</sup> The discourse is not only Machiavelli's creation but it is similar to that presented by the so-called republican citizen before the Duke of Athens in Chapter II of the Histories. Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 70.

<sup>45</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*: 122.

<sup>46</sup> Marietti, *Une Figure Emblématique*, 132.

When the plebs entered the palace [of the Signoria], one Michele di Lando, a wool carder, had in his hand the ensign of the Gonfalonier of Justice. This man, barefoot and scantily clothed, climbed up the stairs with the whole mob behind him, and as soon as he was in the audience chamber of the Signoria, he stopped; and, turning around to the multitude he said, ‘You see: this palace is yours and this city is in your hands. What do you think should be done now?’ To which all replied that they wanted him to be Gonfalonier and lord, and to govern them and the city however seemed best to him. Michele accepted the lordship, and because he was a sagacious and prudent man who owed more to nature than to fortune, he resolved to quiet the city and stop the tumults.<sup>47</sup>

Machiavelli’s portrayal of the event follows almost literally the chronicles of Alamanno Acciaiuoli and the *Squittinatore*. Acciaiuoli writes,

Uno Michele di Lando, pettinatore overo che fusse sopra I pettinatori e sopra li scardassieri, fattore di bottega di lana, avea il gonfalone del popolo minuto in mano, cioè quello che si cavó di casa lo executore, ed era in inscarpette senza calze, con questo gonfalone in mano entró in palazzo con tutto il popolo che ’l volle seguitare, e su per le scale n’andó infino nella udienza de’priori, e quivi si fermó ritto. E a voce di popolo gli dierono la signoria, e vollono che fusse gonfaloniere di iustizia e signore.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand the *Squittinatore* stresses, “Allora si giunse uno Michele di Lando pettinatore...sanza pezzo d’arme a lato o indosso e sí fu preso e postogli in mano il confalone della giostizia ed e’ lo prese per la mani, e per salvallo per lo popolo minuto.”<sup>49</sup>

This man of humble origins, barefoot and barely clothed, is depicted, in all three narratives, as part of the mob, as one among the many scantily clothed Ciompi. The first deviation of Machiavelli’s narrative from the chroniclers is the use of a short direct speech on the part of di Lando, which gives force and enlarges his individual character, all while reminding the reader of his humble origins. Contrary to the account of the two chroniclers, whose main concern is the status of the mob, Machiavelli gives Michele the position of the addresser. Michele turns around to speak directly to the mob (he asks them what they want, and they reply that they want him to be their leader); his individual character becomes prominent over the indistinguishable collective crowd. The acceptance of such command, moreover, adds to the leading role of di Lando, which make him to be even greater to the level of a statesman.

In just a few moments, Michele’s figure shifts from that of a member of the lowest sector of Florentine society and the leader of their revolutionary group to that of a political actor and, more importantly, the leader of the Florentine government.<sup>50</sup> From his first characterization as “barefoot and scantily clothed,” and following Michele’s acceptance of the leading governmental position in Florence, Machiavelli now ‘reminds’ his readers of Michele’s main virtues: he is “a sagacious and prudent,” two individual qualities thoroughly absent from the mob.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, though, Michele’s humble origins resound in the mind of the reader: he remains a man of low origins all while he begins to show the qualities that will allow him to take the place of a reformer. Putting the common good of the city beyond any factional interest, and thus finally setting

---

<sup>47</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*: 127.

<sup>48</sup> Scaramella, 33.

<sup>49</sup> G. Scaramella, ed. “Cronaca Prima D’Anonimo,” in *Racolta degli Istorici Italiani: dal Cinquecento al Millecinquecento* (Bologna, IT: Nicola Zanichelli, 1934), 75.

<sup>50</sup> Phillips, 590.

<sup>51</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 590. Lukes, 9.

himself apart of the crowd, Michele's first governmental decision is to pacify the city: "he resolved to quiet the city and stop the tumults."<sup>52</sup>

Yet, Michele's individual and rational virtue is not enough for a solitary reformer, and he goes on to demonstrate that he can be a fox and a lion at once. The following passage in Machiavelli's text also departs from the chronicles, though in this case, it does not appear as the addition of a fictional speech, but as the employment of a detailed narrative of violence, which exaggerates certain aspects of the event. Added to this is the elevated position that Machiavelli gives to the newly elected Gonfalonier of Justice.

And to keep the people busy and to give himself some time to get in order, he commanded [the plebs] to seek out one ser Nuto who had been designated Bargello by Messer Lapo da Castiglionchio; the greater number of those around him went off on this errand. And so as to begin with justice the empire he had acquired by grace, he had it publicly commanded that no one burn or steal anything; and to frighten everyone, he had gallows erected in the piazza [...] Ser Nuto was carried by the multitude to the piazza and hung on the gallows by one foot; and as whoever was around tore off a piece from him, at a stroke there was nothing left of him but his foot.<sup>53</sup>

We come to see, first, that Michele is given a fundamental position in this event; he is the *commander* of the people, the leading figure of the act. The author explicitly portrays the poor wool comber as a man of talent, capable of mobilizing "the greater number of those around him," so as to take the command over the entire city. More importantly, Machiavelli has Nuto's arrest occasioned by di Lando, whereas the others have him arriving at the *piazza* of his own volition. The *Squittinatore's* chronicle, on the other hand, is thoroughly silent of the role of Michele as the intellectual commander of Nuto's public execution,

Uno Bargello, ch'era chiamato ser Nuto dalla Città di Castello, si era venuto a proferere al popolo grasso, che regieva prima, che e' gubernebbe la terra, d'impiccare i poveri uomini di Firenze. Non piacque a Dio che sua volontà fosse; e' fu preso dal popolo minuto e fu tutto tagliato per pezzi; il minore non fu oncie sei.<sup>54</sup>

The *Squittinatore's* account, as that of a sympathizer of the cause of the Ciompi, highlights the role that Nuto played in the collective imagination of the mob, his origins and purposes in the city; yet, he thoroughly dismisses the execution and Michele's role in it. Acciaiuoli's *Cronaca* does not even retell the event; on the contrary it focuses on the character of ser Nuto as the vicar of the oligarchy, who had been brought from Città di Castello and made sheriff of Florence "...per impiccarci tutti per la gola."<sup>55</sup>

Machiavelli writes that Michele was interested in establishing justice in the polity, for which he ordered to stop the riots and the sacking. For Machiavelli, the main goal of di Lando was to quiet the tumults and order the city: the gallows were placed in the piazza as to "frighten everyone."<sup>56</sup> In Acciaiuoli, the *Squittinatore* and Machiavelli's, we get to see that the previous regime brought Nuto to the city to get rid of the tumultuous plebeians; hence, it can be stated that di Lando employs Nuto as the symbol of the *ancien regime* of the Florentine elite. The *Bargello* fills the collective imagination of the people, as representative of the hatred the people felt toward the previous oligarchic political

---

<sup>52</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 127.

<sup>53</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 127-8.

<sup>54</sup> Scaramella, 76.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 128.

order in Florence. Di Lando is well aware of this, since Michele only commands the crowd to go after ser Nuto: no other names are given, nor other executions are recounted.<sup>57</sup>

Machiavelli's deviation from the original narratives highlights and individualizes the role of Michele in the revolt all of which emphasize the 'nature' of the qualities of the wool carder, for he "owed more to nature than to fortune."<sup>58</sup> Michele now dominates the story in its entirety, combining physical presence with mental subtlety all consequence of his sense of mission. His high-mindedness and physical action can be seen even clearer if we return to Machiavelli's 'old' hero of *virtù*, Cesare Borgia. In his *Prince*, he praises Borgia for correcting his path, since though he obtained power over the Romagna "by fortune of his father [Pope Alexander VI]," he was a "prudent and virtuous man."<sup>59</sup> One of main differences between Borgia and di Lando resides in the way Machiavelli's heroes obtain such virtuosity; whereas Michele is virtuous 'by nature,' Borgia learnt how to make his way to become an exemplar of *virtù*. Michele's heroic individualism, as an exemplar of the conquest of virtue over adversity is much more in line with another of Machiavelli's creations, Castruccio Castracani:

Those who consider it...think it wonderful that all, or the larger part, of those who in this world have done very great things, and have been excellent among the men of their era, have in their birth and origin been humble and obscure [...].<sup>60</sup>

Michele, unlike Borgia, has no aristocratic blood, yet he can be identified with the role of the Palazzo, whose political supremacy had been traditionally reserved to the noble families of Florence. His deeds, not his origins, mark him, as much as Castruccio, as a man worth of consideration, and an exemplar of political action.

Nuto's execution happens in a public space, in this case the most symbolic piazza in Florence, the piazza della Signoria, next to the main governmental headquarters. Whether for religious processions, protests, political meetings or executions, the piazza was the centre of public life. Renaissance people, Rebhorn states, were "used to reading allegorical meanings in public spectacles, and those who staged them usually took pains to invite symbolic representations."<sup>61</sup> Despite sharing Borgia's intentions of channelling violence through a public spectacle, the source of this mechanism on the part of Michele are much more "public;" and although Borgia's spectacle is also meant for public display, its meaning remains "private" and part of the world of intrigue and mythology.<sup>62</sup> Michele's deeds, on the contrary, come to coronate his process of detachment from the revolutionary extremism of the mob, and his entrance in the world of political authority.

Following the execution of Nuto, Michele is challenged by the Eight of War, the leaders of the Florentine army during the papal war and the instrument of political power of the Parte. Whilst the Eight thought themselves the rulers of the city, Machiavelli tells

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 127. Marietti, *Une Figure Emblématique*, 133.

<sup>59</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 26-27.

<sup>60</sup> Machiavelli began this pseudo-biographical text during his stay at the city of Lucca in 1520, where he was sent by Cardinal Giulio de' Medici to resolve a case of bankruptcy. The similarity of the mythical recreation of the origins of Castruccio and Michele, though striking, lies beyond the scope of this work, and should be treated separately. Atkinson and Sices, 322-3. Machiavelli, *The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca*, 533.

<sup>61</sup> Rebhorn, 121. Trexler, 12-15.

<sup>62</sup> Lukes, 4-5.

us that Michele “sent word to them to leave the palace at once, for he wanted to show everyone that he knew how to govern Florence without their advice.”<sup>63</sup> Acciaiolì comments that the Eight of War felt “ingannati [deceived],” since they thought they deserved to be the rulers.<sup>64</sup> Acciaiolì’s remarks, as those of a man sympathetic to the old regime, are quite explicit; the Eight of War, being the remnants of the old regime still, ‘deserved’ to rule Florence. Contrary to the belief of the Eight, Michele called up a council that created a new government council, a Signoria, and added three new seats that represented the new ‘lesser’ guilds.<sup>65</sup> He also distributed favours to Salvestro de’ Medici and other ‘bourgeois’ figures that were sympathetic to his government, “not so much to compensate them for their deeds as that they might at all times defend him against envy.”<sup>66</sup> Michele, as we can see, has sided toward the moderation of the middle class and against the Parte oligarchs, whose incorrigible arrogance, obsession with petty factional quarrels and delusions of grandeur (as represented by the actions of the Eight of War) made them a threat for the republican order. At the same time, this view of the aristocratic sector of Florence as a threat to the republic is particularly at odds with Machiavelli’s ancient examples of republicanism, in which the moderate forces would always emanate from the aristocracy so as to control the irreverence of the people.<sup>67</sup> In this Florentine example, on the contrary, the figure of Michele, a member of the Florentine ‘working class,’ acts as the saviour of moderation and republican competence.<sup>68</sup> His moderate position also places him against the most radical sector of the Ciompi, which now comes to be the only serious challenge to his rule. Thus, Machiavelli seems to tell us, Michele ironically symbolizes the three classes of Florentine society: he is a true ‘noble’ character (not in origins but as a skilled political figure), a moderate republican as the middle sectors, and a humble *Ciomo*, barely clothed and barefoot, all at once.

In the end, the plebs perceived that Michele “in reforming the state had been too partisan toward the greater people,” and they decided to take up arms once again “with their usual boldness” and “presumption” after all the “dignity they had given him and the honour they had done him.”<sup>69</sup> Having failed to obtain total control of the government through legal means, the radical factions of the Ciompi then attempted to employ force against Michele’s regime. Their arrogance, much like that of the old aristocrats, is now highlighted as detrimental to the order of Florence. Michele’s response exemplifies those characteristics Machiavelli praised before: “mindful more of the rank he held than of his low condition, it appeared to him that he must check this extraordinary insolence with an extraordinary mode [...]”<sup>70</sup> Again, Machiavelli remarks the difference between the poor

---

<sup>63</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 128.

<sup>64</sup> Scaramella, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 128. Acciaiolì gives Michele no personal merit for forming the new *Signoria*. Scaramella, 34.

<sup>66</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 128.

<sup>67</sup> Lukes, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Lukes: 6. Lukes is right to notice the novelty of the role of the aristocracy in Machiavelli’s republican perspective. Nevertheless, I believe Lukes overlooks Michele’s political metamorphosis, since he is not simply a “cadre of the common people”: his origins underscore his transformation, but his political moderation represent both the revolt of the plebs and the republican moderation needed to safeguard Florence’s republic.

<sup>69</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 128-129.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*: 129.

origins of di Lando and his capacity as the reformer of the republic. Di Lando employs extraordinary methods –violence- on the envoys of the plebs, though only after the implementation of political reforms that included the lesser guilds within the republican framework had taken place.<sup>71</sup> The confrontation in Machiavelli’s account, stung by his low birth, makes Michele more noble, in the sense that di Lando holds neither the ‘will to power’ of those that ‘want to oppress’ nor the boldness and arrogance of those that ‘want not to be oppressed.’ Michele, in Machiavelli’s view, is not merely a positive or moral figure, but the characterization of a man of state, whose deeds and interests, the common good of the republic, lie ahead of any partisan or *modo privato*. Others more favoured by birth were unable to cope with their sense of ambition; Michele, on the contrary, led by his sense of “spirit, prudence, and goodness,” becomes himself the symbol of the reformed and much more popular republic, and stands alone as the defender of it against all form of subjugation.

### **Michele as an Exemplar of Political Action and the Role of the Ciompi Tumulto**

At first hand, the peak of the radicalization of the *tumulto* is presented in a derogative fashion, as led by the arrogance and ambition of those who, just weeks before, lacked guilds of their own and access to the higher spheres of Florentine politics. Yet, this revolt belongs to the history of civic discords that have shaped Florence’s beginnings, its governmental institutions and the functioning of the state –even if the Ciompi did not have access to political participation before this event. In fact, this *tumulto* appears in the Histories as an exemplar of the radicalization and the possible outcome of such uncontrollable type of *disordine*. As the people eliminated the aristocracy from the centre of power, so now the plebs are not satisfied with their political representation and are portrayed as willing to ‘take it all.’ Their radical character, added to the reactionary portrayal of the Eight of War as the representatives of the Parte, make of Michele a much more heroic (and solitary) *redentore* of a republic that is threatened to death.<sup>72</sup>

Still, the end of Michele is one of exile and oblivion. After a series of tumults and a so-called counterrevolution on the part of the *grassi*, several men were banished, “among whom was Michele di Lando.”<sup>73</sup> We are also told by the *Squittinatore*, a fervent sympathizer of the Ciompi cause, that di Lando came to be seen by the newly in charge *grandi* government as a “traditore [traitor].”<sup>74</sup> Machiavelli is quite certain that the wool comber should be recognized as a hero of his *patria*, for “had his spirit been either malign or ambitious, the republic would have lost its freedom altogether and fallen under a greater tyranny than that of the duke of Athens.”<sup>75</sup> Michele is in fact *an outcome*, a result of the Ciompi tumults, but his highest virtue allowed him avoid the use of his political

---

<sup>71</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*: 129. Phillips, 601. Acciaiuoli’s account, on the other hand, lacks the theatricality employed by Machiavelli. “Il gonfaloniere, uomo animoso con lo coltello che aveva a canto dette loro delle ferrite; poi gli fece anco mettere in prigione.” Scaramella, 38-39.

<sup>72</sup> Marietti, *Une Figure Emblématique*, 137.

<sup>73</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*: 135.

<sup>74</sup> The *Squittinatore*’s political position as a sympathizer of the Ciompi cause, added to his view of Michele as a traitor even in the eyes of the aristocrats, the Ciompi’s primary enemy at the beginning of the revolt, adds strength to Machiavelli’s dramatic narrative and to the republican perspective here presented. Scaramella, 90.

<sup>75</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 130.

position for his own private ends –which is quite at odds with the attempts of either the previous oligarchic regime and that of the radical Ciompi at the third stage of the revolt. His power, though necessarily solitary, was not tyrannical. Di Lando is the man of poor origins and spectacular noble capacities: he is a man, or at least Machiavelli so believed, that could leave his mark in the history of the city, yet free of the effects tyranny and factionalism.

Machiavelli's portrayal of Michele as a mythical figure, configured as a mixture of political concreteness, humble origins and natural *virtù*, make of him a man “to be numbered among the few who have benefited their fatherland.”<sup>76</sup> He shows to be invested in the well-being of Florence, yet, Machiavelli seems to add, he is not adequately recognized or rewarded. He is ultimately expelled from Florence due to the re-emergence of the reactionary forces. This final scene in the story of Michele recalls the substantive and recurrent problem that Machiavelli highlights throughout the *Histories* and with which he begins the introductory section to Chapter III: the “natural enmities that exist between men of the people and the nobles.”<sup>77</sup> The defeat of the aristocracy as much as the defeat of the most radical Ciompi on the hands of Michele highlights the social and political development that suffers Florence: from a noble-based feudal society, to the supremacy of the *popolo*, the middle sectors.

Nevertheless, the final victory of the middle class over the plebs encounters the “egalitarian” aspect of Florence that Machiavelli also highlights in the introduction of this chapter. The gloomy ending that Machiavelli gives to the Ciompi story underscores the relevance of the role of the *minuti* in the city that was known for its republican equality. The plebs is a key component of Machiavelli's sociology, for it holds the capacity to cause breakdowns or *disordini* and as usually unable to take a primordial political role, finds in the exacerbation of violence its only justification for action and as the sole means for pseudo-political participation. This violent emergence of the plebs, a ‘novelty’ in Machiavelli's conception of the city, plays a pivotal role in Machiavelli's account of the Ciompi, since it assures a constant social disequilibrium between the two contrasting ‘humours’ of the aristocracy and the *popolo*, which in Michele story, comes to be institutionalized through the creation of a new Signoria. In other words, the plebs reassures the lead of the middle sectors to the detriment of the aristocracy by giving impulse to the *arti minori*, as in the case of the Ciompi, against the privileges of the feudal nobility.<sup>78</sup> What is more, the lesser people, once they initiate a *tumulto*, become a serious threat to all orders, including the political domination on the part of the middle sectors. In other words, the constant threat of revolt on the part of the lower sectors of Florence ‘reminds’ the *popolo* of the indispensable sense of ‘egalitarianism’ necessary for the survival of the republic.<sup>79</sup> It reminds middle sectors that should they attempt to take control of the institutions of the republic, as happened recurrently throughout the history of the city (and as Machiavelli reminds the Medici), the exclusion of the nobility from the political realm would radicalize the oppositions outside the political sphere. Thus, the conflict is expelled from the political arena and brought back into society, where the lesser people, willing to have a say in politics, is ready to revolt.

---

<sup>76</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 130.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 105.

<sup>78</sup> Marietti, *Une Figure Emblématique*, 138.

<sup>79</sup> Leibovici, 658.

### **The Medici Stato: Political Domination in the Vain Hope of Social Harmony**

After the contextual analysis of the tumults that Machiavelli ‘spotlights,’ we come to the relevance and the role of the audience for Machiavelli. I want add evidence to the argument that a great part of the rhetorical significance of the notion of Machiavelli’s characterization of Michele di Lando and the Ciompi revolt is lost once it is perceived as part of a mere historical text attached to the themes of Machiavelli’s previous political writings.<sup>80</sup> Several scholars present the case that some of Machiavelli’s major texts were not merely dedicated to members of the most powerful family in Florence but were also planned as a parochial political lesson for them to refound the republic and maintain *lo stato*.<sup>81</sup> However, some of these argumentations fail to accurately portray Machiavelli’s intended emphasis.<sup>82</sup> This perspective fails to acknowledge that Machiavelli’s direct appeal to the Medici expresses a line of thought that is consistent with the historical contingency of his *patria*. That is, Machiavelli’s account of the tumultuous events of the Ciompi and the role of Michele di Lando pertained directly to the circumstances of the Medici regime during the rule of Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici. As Machiavelli considers Florence in 1520 as “neither a principedom nor a republic,” the young Medici leaders behaved as the ‘old’ leaders of a principality.<sup>83</sup> Certainly, the position of the leading family of Florence was not determined by birth, as was the case of the old patrician Florentine families. The ruling of the Medici and the threats this leadership embodied should be considered, from which stems Machiavelli’s appeal to the leading family and his call for a new Florentine republic.

Up until the end of their regime, the house of the Medici never satisfactorily came to terms with the question of who should lead the regime and how this task should be achieved. The Medici post-1512 came to dominate both the city and the Papacy during two terms, first under the leadership of Leo X, Giovanni, and then under Clement VII, Cardinal Giulio. None of the Medici leaders actually resided in Florence but in Rome, meaning that the decisions on the political affairs during the Medici regime were taken from the centre of the ancient Roman republic. Neither Pope Leo X, who died only a year before Machiavelli was hired to write the *Histories*, nor Cardinal Giuliano seemed have been fully interested in Florentine politics. In a letter to Machiavelli, Francesco Vettori - Florentine ambassador to the Pope and close advisor to the Medici- tells Machiavelli, “on occasion, I speak twenty words with the Pope [Leo X, and] ten with Cardinal de’ Medici [...]”<sup>84</sup> Neither of the figures of the family had the capacity nor the inclination to become a new Lorenzo *il Magnifico* so as to recreate Cosimo’s take on Florentine republican

---

<sup>80</sup> Ascoli presents a similar criticism concerning the reading of the *Prince*’s “theoretically generalizable content,” that misses the “performative” utility that emerges from the text. Ascoli: 221.

<sup>81</sup> Najemy, *Machiavelli and the Medici*: 552-554. Ed King, *Rolling a Stone for the Medici: Machiavelli’s Pedagogical Service to the Medici*, PhD dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), 214-218. Ascoli: 220. Jurdjevic, *Machiavelli’s Hybrid Republicanism*, 1248-52.

<sup>82</sup> Najemy, *Machiavelli and the Medici*, 574. Najemy also stresses that “[Machiavelli’s] search had lost something of its earlier urgency and desperation, it had gained in exchange greater clarity, some ironic distance, and a new perspective that Machiavelli had not made use at the beginning.” Ibid, 554.

<sup>83</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence*, 105.

<sup>84</sup> Atkinson and Sices: 261.

politics. These failures of leadership provided Machiavelli with the opportunity he needed to show off his qualities as educator before the ‘elders,’ Giulio and Leo X.<sup>85</sup>

In previous years to Machiavelli’s work for Cardinal Giulio, and also prior to the death of the two young leaders of the clan, Giovanni and Lorenzo, the Medici state seemed to have followed a path closer to that of the tyrannical period of Walter de Brienne than Machiavelli ‘spotlights’ in chapter II of the Histories than that of a republic.<sup>86</sup> For instance, Gilbert points out that, after a conspiracy attempt to overthrow the regime, Pope Leo called a *Balia*, which elected twenty *Accoppiatori* that then nominated the Gonfalonier and other members of the *Signoria*. Gilbert tells us, “from these lists of candidates for offices, the names of all those who might be unfriendly to the new regime were removed.”<sup>87</sup> Widespread and persistent discontent arose concerning the ruling of the family with the implementation of such policies. The result of such unhappiness was not a change in the *ordini* on the part of the Medici –to provide wider political access- but rather a reduction of the number of participants in some of the key political institutions of the Florentine government, which, as expected, were entrusted to loyal *compare* of the family.<sup>88</sup> The resurrection of certain Medicean institutions, such as the *acoppiatori*, the *Cento* and the *Seventy* shows that the new patrons had a different political aim, the appropriation of power, and the co-optation of political participation.<sup>89</sup> This political aim on the part of the Medicean leaders could be resumed by Machiavelli’s introductory lines to Chapter VII, a chapter mostly dedicated to recount the deeds of the fifteenth century Medicean stato, “Those who hope that a republic can be united are very much deceived in this hope.”<sup>90</sup>

After the deaths of the young Lorenzo and Giuliano and Leo, as Machiavelli ironically emphasizes in the Histories, the fate of the family came to be in the hands of a bastard child and member of the curia.<sup>91</sup> Unlike his predecessors, however, Giulio was

---

<sup>85</sup> “If [Machiavelli] could show a way to incorporate the prudence of Cosimo, the noble vision and sense of national responsibility of Lorenzo the Magnificent, and the common touch of Salvestro de Medici, in his curriculum for the pope’s nephew, he had every reason to expect that the pontiff and his cousin would be grateful to him.” Though speaking of the pedagogical counsel Machiavelli offers in his Prince, King’s argument also summarizes the state of affairs *circa* 1520. King, 215.

<sup>86</sup> In his account of the tyranny of Walter de Brienne that ended in the riots of 1348, Machiavelli depicts this regime as a ‘tyranny’ and makes Walter himself explain the reasons of its failure. Walter gives his vision of politics in an indirect speech, in which he states that “only united cities are free.” This position is directly opposed to another speech that Machiavelli puts in the mouth of an ‘anonymous republican citizen,’ who warns Walter of the dangers of the elimination of opposition as a mistaken means to achieve social harmony and political domination. Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 90 and 93-5.

<sup>87</sup> Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 134.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 247

<sup>89</sup> Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 426. The *Accoppiatori*, a group of decision-makers created by Cosimo, were in charge of choosing the names of candidates to be elected to office, mostly those who were reliable friends of the regime. The system of election was denominated *a la mano* –by hand. The *Cento* included the most influential men in the regime –*Medici compari*, who took over the responsibilities previously given to the Council of the People and the *Commune*. The *Seventy*, a committee created by Lorenzo *il Magnifico*, was a pseudo executive council, which had to approve the legislation discussed and proposed by the *Signoria*. Miles Unger, *Magnifico: The Brilliant Life and Violent Times of Lorenzo de’ Medici* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 455-456.

<sup>90</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* : 276.

<sup>91</sup> One of Machiavelli’s logical and ironic conclusions in his Discourse on the Remodelling the Government of Florence is that both Leo and Giulio “will cease to be,” or they will eventually die, and that salvation

open to the discussion of the reopening of the offices that had been previously reduced by Lorenzo. Still, Giulio continued with certain policies initiated by Lorenzo, which forcefully kept the anti-Mediceans out of Florentine public affairs and trusted central functions to some ‘Medici creatures’ that were not even Florentine by birth.<sup>92</sup> Najemy states that, “for Florentines, who still thought of the inhabitants of the territories as their subjects, seeing the republic, or what was left of it, in the hands of Medici clients was intolerable, and their accumulating resentment now waited for an opportunity to erupt.”<sup>93</sup> All of this comes to provide evidence that even though he was open to counsel, Giulio did not intend to provide a truly republican regime to Florence that would allow political access to a larger cohort of Florentine citizens. Rather, he continued to restrain access to political institutions, which occasioned a greater factional differentiation between those individuals who were loyal to the Medici and those who were not. These aspects of the Medicean *stato*, added to “[Lorenzo’s] death has brought things to the point where new types of government must be considered.”<sup>94</sup> With the malfunctioning Medicean rule symbolized by the political disenfranchisement policy implemented throughout the entire regime, the slow but steady corruption of the system, and the lack of political knowledge on the part of the Medici, the state of affairs of the city could be succinctly defined by Machiavelli’s first and shocking argument in the Discourse. “The reason why Florence throughout her history has frequently varied her methods of government is that she has never been either a republic or a principedom [...]”<sup>95</sup>

#### **Machiavelli’s ‘New’ Republicanism: The *Discourse* and the Michele di Lando**

This Discourse proposes a constitutional reform for Florence, and, though not explicitly, expresses a line of thought similar to the abovementioned treatment of the Ciompi and the figure of Michele di Lando.<sup>96</sup> This text, with its particularity of being prescriptive in nature, presents counsel on constitutional reform; most importantly, perhaps, is the fact it was commissioned by the leaders of the city, reason for which Machiavelli believed, more at this time of his life than ever, that the Medici were willing to listen to him. In other words, the Discourse, the ‘other’ text the Medici commissioned to Machiavelli in 1520, “grew out of Machiavelli’s long sought-after reconciliation with the Medici and his return to Florence [and it] spoke directly to the world as it was in Machiavelli’s eyes.”<sup>97</sup>

The template Machiavelli creates for the government of Florence emphasizes the collective terms of institutions and structures of Florence. Moreover, and unlike the argument he presents in the Discourses, here Machiavelli abandons the conceptual vocabulary of binary opposition between the nobles and the *popolo* and the consequent

---

only occurs through ‘historical memory.’ Machiavelli, *Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence*, 111, 114.

<sup>92</sup> Najemy, *A History of Florence*: 434.

<sup>93</sup> Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 434.

<sup>94</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence*, 103.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

<sup>96</sup> In line with some of the assumptions here presented, Jurđjević argues that the Discourse represents a change in Machiavelli’s concept of republicanism: “his thinking had changed in significant ways leading him to revise a number of critical assumptions from *Il Principe* and the *Discorsi*.” Jurđjević, *Machiavelli’s Hybrid Republicanism*, 1248.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 1248-9.

affirmation that the *popolo* is a better guardian of republican institutions.<sup>98</sup> Rather than proposing a set of institutions based on the political enfranchisement of the people as a ‘check’ on the constant desire for acquisition and power on the part of the nobility, Machiavelli here argues for a complex set of interlocking institutions that seek to enlarge the distribution of political authority throughout the three collective voices of Florence: the nobles, the middle sectors and the *minuti*.<sup>99</sup>

Prior to the bulk of the discussion on the reform, Machiavelli reminds his reader that one of the problems that the republic of Piero Soderini suffered was that fact it never satisfied “all the parties among the citizens.”<sup>100</sup> In addition to this, Machiavelli, speaking of the functions of Soderini, recalls a subject that he had already referred to in his mythological account of Michele di Lando. “[The republic] was so defective and remote from a true republic that a Gonfalonier for life, if he was intelligent and wicked, easily could have make himself prince; if he was good and weak [as Soderini], he could easily be driven out, with the ruin of the whole government.”<sup>101</sup> If we are to recall the two times Machiavelli designates Michele as *virtuoso* –the first time during the second stage of the revolt and the second after the revolt of the radical Ciompi during his rule, we come to see that Michele achieves success in both instances because he actually holds the fundamental qualities of a political leader. On the one hand, he is sagacious and prudent (yet not wicked) and on the other, he is good and thumotic (yet not weak).<sup>102</sup>

Moreover, Machiavelli’s Michele’s goodness of virtue is much more coherent if compared to Machiavelli’s appeal to the reformation of the republican institutions of the city. Even though Michele never attempted the wholesale abolition of all major institutions of the republican tradition as Machiavelli recommends in the Discourse, he does reform them in such a way that neither he remains as the irreplaceable individual political figure nor does he ever attempt to over-empower or over-represent a particular social group.<sup>103</sup> His reforms took into account the tripartite division of the city, and understood power as a broad social manifestation coherent with the corresponding expansion of the social composition of the state. In the Discourse, likewise, Machiavelli recommends the implementation of a hierarchy of councils, each of which meant to

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 1253.

<sup>99</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence*, 107-11. As part of his attempt to call the attention of his readership, Machiavelli states that with the implementation of such reforms, their “power is not only preserved but is increased, your friends continue to be honored and safe, and the whole body of citizens has evident reasons for being satisfied.” Ibid, 107.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>101</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence*, 103. Compare to Machiavelli’s final comment on Michele di Lando. Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 130.

<sup>102</sup> Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 127 and 130.

<sup>103</sup> Machiavelli’s advice to abolish of the old republican institutions does refer to the old traditional structures of Florence, but to the republican government that had taken between 1498 and 1512; hence, it would be anachronistic to consider Michele’s reforms through the lens of this critique. Also, it is worth noting that this is one of the main problems of Najemy and Jurdjevic’s account of Machiavelli’s ‘mature’ republican thought: both authors provide a thorough account of the ‘new’ republicanism of the Discourse, especially if compared to his republican analysis of the Roman institutions in the Discourses. Nevertheless, they fail to recognize the gravity of Michele as a central character and as a reformer in the narrative of the Histories –none of the authors actually discusses or mentions Michele in their works. Jurdjevic, *Machiavelli’s Hybrid Republicanism*, 1248-55. Najemy, *Machiavelli and the Medici*, 565. See also, J.G. A. Pocock *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 333.

represent a particular sector of the sociology of Florence: a small council of sixty-five members that would represent the aristocracy, one of one hundred that would represent that larger middle class sectors, and an even larger council of one thousand members that would represent the lower citizens of Florence.<sup>104</sup>

Michele, the symbol of the second stage of the most ‘proletarian’ revolt, becomes, as the Gonfalonier of Justice, the moderate leader that allows the Florentine middle class to obtain pre-eminence over the Signoria. Much like in the prescriptive account of republican reform as presented in the Discourse, Michele of the Histories ‘reads’ the discords that Machiavelli underscores at the beginning of the chapter, and reforms the feudal system in such a way that minimizes the role of the feudal nobility, and ‘reminds’ the middle sectors of the danger of political domination and co-optation. Michele opens the republic to a larger participatory regime, all while putting an end to the most radical and violent sectors that represent the third stage of the Ciompi. Nevertheless, this is not to be mistaken by a naïve sense of ‘egalitarianism;’ much to the contrary, Michele, as the reforms Machiavelli provides in the Discourse, perceives that some citizens have ambitious spirits and think they deserve to outrank the others.<sup>105</sup> In both the Florentine Histories and the Discourse, Machiavelli refrains from cataloguing one particular social sector as the ‘guardian of liberty,’ but understands all three to be driven by political desires.<sup>106</sup> Hence, the main aspect of the reforms in both texts is the necessity to give equal voice to the nobles and the middle sectors, with the added that also the plebs, as Machiavelli exemplifies with his account of the Ciompi, play a fundamental role.

### **Conclusion**

For Machiavelli, then, the republican impetus need only be recognized and protected from individual domination of particular societal elements and their interactions; Michele di Lando, as represented in his metamorphosis, has come to appreciate this complexity and gravity of social divisions and public affairs.<sup>107</sup> Michele’s ‘new modes and orders’ bring about a republican consciousness of complexity and sophistication of political affairs, which perceives political participation as a means to facilitate political accessibility; the danger of unmitigated factionalism, then, does not stem from the existence of competing interest but from their prosecution. Machiavelli was urging the Medici to accomplish precisely that, to reject the city’s defective traditions and establish a pure republic, all under the tutelage of his republican hero, Michele di Lando.

### **Bibliography**

---

<sup>104</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence*, 107-111.

<sup>105</sup> Machiavelli, *Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence*, 107-8. Bock: 199. This is particularly explicit in the behaviour of the Parte prior to the emergence of Michele and which resolved in the Ciompi revolt, and in the belief of the Eight of War (the Parte’s old political tool) that they deserved to govern the city. Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 128.

<sup>106</sup> “By the *Discursus*, Machiavelli sees the people and the nobility equally in terms of positive liberty: their desires are equally political, the problems they pose are identical and the solutions are identical — realising a form of government that gives them each their voice and role in the common enterprise of governing.” Jurdjevic, *Machiavelli’s Hybrid Republicanism*. Also Marietti, *Une Figure Emblématique*, 138. Lukes, 10. Compare to Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 17-19.

<sup>107</sup> Najemy, Lukes and other authors, I believe, fail to recognize the ‘republican’ virtù characterized and his actions: neither does he banish the oligarchs from the political scene, nor does he co-opt the people through violent means. He is a ‘facilitator’ to the extent that his actions provide political access without prosecution and order without recourse to open domination. Lukes, 11. Najemy, *Machiavelli and the Medici*, 565..

- Anglo, Sydney. *Machiavelli: A Dissection*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969.
- Ascoli, Albert Russell. "Machiavelli's Gift of Counsel." In *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn, 219-247. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Atkinson, James and David Sices, eds. *Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996.
- Bock, Gisela. "Civil Discord in Machiavelli's *Istorie Fiorentine*." In *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli, 181-201. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Brucker, Gene. "The Ciompi Revolution." In *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein, 314-356. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- De Grazia, Sebastian. *Machiavelli in Hell*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1989.
- De Roover, Raymond. "Labour Conditions in Florence Around 1400: Theory, Policy and Reality." In *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein, 277-313. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- Gilbert, Felix. *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965.
- ". "Machiavelli's *Istorie Fiorentine*: An Essay in Interpretation." In *History, Choice and Commitment*, ed. Franklin L. Ford, 83-95. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977.
- Green, Louis. *Chronicle into History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.
- Jurdjevic, Mark. "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (4) (1999): 994-1020.
- ". "Machiavelli's Hybrid Republicanism" *English Historical Review* CXXII (2007): 1228-1257.
- ". "Machiavelli Sketches of Francesco Valori and the Reconstruction of Florentine History" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2002): 185-206.
- King, Ed. "Rolling a Stone for the Medici: Machiavelli Pedagogical Service to the Medici Family." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Berkeley, CA: 2005.
- Leivovici, Martine. "From Fight to Debate: Machiavelli and the Revolt of the Ciompi." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28 (2002): 647-661.

- Lukes, Timothy. "Descending to the Particulars: The Palazzo, The Piazza, and Machiavelli's Republican Modes and Orders" *The Journal of Politics* 71 (2) (2009): 1-13.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. "A Discourse on Remodelling the Government of Florence." In *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, ed. Allan Gilbert, 101-115. Durham: Duke University Press: 1989.
- , *Discourses on Livy*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. and Nathan Tarcov. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- , *Florentine Histories*. Translated by Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- , "The Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca." In *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others Volume II*, ed. Allan Gilbert, 533-562. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989.
- , *The Prince*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Marietti, Marina. "Une Figure Emblematique: Michele di Lando Vu par Maquiavel," *Croniques* 69-70 (2002): 129-138.
- Moulakis, Athanasios. *Republican Realism in Renaissance Florence: Francesco Guicciardini's Discorso di Logrognò*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998.
- Najemy, John. *A History of Florence: 1200-1575*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Company, 2006.
- , "Audiant Omnes Artes: Corporate Origins of the Ciompi Revolution." In *Il Tumulto dei Ciompi: Un Momento di Storia Fiorentina ed Europea*, 59-93. Florence: Leo Olschki Editore, 1979.
- , "Machiavelli and the Medici: The Lessons of Florentine History." *Renaissance Quarterly* 35(4): 551-576.
- Phillips, Mark. "Barefoot Boy Makes Good: A Study of Machiavelli's Historiography." *Speculum* 59 (1984): 585-605.
- Pocock, J. G. A. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Rebhorn, Wayne. *Foxes and Lions: Machiavelli's Confidence Man*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Scaramella, G. ed. "Cronaca Prima D'Anonimo," in *Racolta degli Istorici Italiani: dal Cinquecento al Millecinquecento*. Bologna, IT: Nicola Zanichelli, 1934.

----- "Croniche dei Tumulto di Ciompi di Alamanno Acciaiuoli," in *Racolta degli Storici Italiani: dal Cinquecento al Millecinquecento*. Bologna, IT: Nicola Zanichelli, 1934.

Trexler, Richard. *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*. New York, NY: Academic Press, 1980.

Unger, Miles. *Magnifico: the Brilliant Life and Violent Times of Lorenzo de' Medici*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2009.