

# Republicanism in the History of Political Philosophy and Today

3rd Biennial *Ideas in Politics* Conference

Prague: November 3rd-4th, 2017

## Panel 5.2 Abstracts

### ***Machiavelli against the Venice Myth: The 16th Century Dialogue on the Nature of Political Representation***

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The traditional approach towards Florentine renaissance political theory formulated by Hans Baron, Gilbert, the so-called Cambridge school and others suggests that the Florentines were forced to reflect upon their political beliefs in a substantial way due to external circumstances and thanks to their firm aspiration to save their political regime. This reflexion supposedly lead Florentines to acknowledge some key political values - freedom of speech, equality before the law, free access to magistrates, active citizenship etc. – understood as constitutive for modern democracy. Some of proponents of this traditional approach even suggest reviving Western democracies by a return to values of the classical republicanism. However, recent works of many commentators have put this optimistic view under severe criticism. Many scholars pay attention to the fact that it is impossible to understand republican Florence as a democratic regime built on citizen's equality, participation and representation. Instead of celebrating the birth of democracy, they show a wholly different picture – they depict the republican regime in Florence as a place of the triumph of oligarchy and elitist republicanism that have nothing, or almost nothing in common with democracy.

Even though it seems that we have two contradictory theories the argument of this paper claims that both of these theories are simultaneously true. In other words, Florence is a place of the birth of modern representative democracies but these democracies are encumbered with a component of elitism and oligarchy. This depreciates all attempts to revive our political culture trough reference to classical republicanism.

To support this thesis, the paper reconstructs the discussion between two main ideological opponents in the early 16th century Florence – between populist republicanism defending *governo largo* represented by Machiavelli and elitist republicanism defending *governo stretto* represented by Francesco Guicciardini. One of the key moments of this debate was the question of the nature of representative institutions. While populist republicans looked to ancient Rome, the elitists saw their desired model in institutional arrangement of oligarchic Venice. The paper provides a comparison of two proposals of constitutional arrangement of Florence as they were presented in Machiavelli's *Discursus florentinarum rerum* (1520) and in Guicciardini's writings (mainly in *Dialogo del reggimento di Firenze* written between 1521 – 1526).

What I find most striking about Guicciardini's political proposals is a surprising resemblance between his views, the so-called democratic elitism and celebration of depoliticisation in contemporary neo-republican theorist like Pettit. Machiavelli, on the other hand, in *Discursus* proposes a regime and representative institutions (*proposti* similar to the Roman tribunes of the people, interlocking class based representative councils, selection by lot, public deliberations, inclusionary *Consiglio Maggiore* etc.). The paper suggests that Machiavelli defends agonistic understanding of representation whose purpose does not consist - as contemporary proponents of the Venice myth still seem to believe - in the bypassing of social conflicts, but in their institutionalization in representative institutions. It also claims that it is actually the permanence of this agonistic conflict embedded in representative institutions that makes modern democracy possible.

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### ***Still republican - Femia and Skinner on Machiavelli***

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Prof. Quentin Skinner has been widely acclaimed for his work on Machiavelli and neo roman thought. He has also received a great deal of criticism for his work, although most of it appears to have been refuted by Prof. Skinner himself or by others. Joseph Femia put forward a renewed criticism in his 2004 book "Machiavelli revisited", disputing what he called the portrayal of Machiavelli as some sort of "communitarian democrat". Having looked into central premises of Femia's critique of Skinner, I claim that they are based on a faulty understanding of neo roman theory, and that Femia's points actually serve to strengthen our understanding of Machiavelli as a republican thinker.

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### ***On Plebeian Republican Thought***

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This paper aims to identify a democratic/plebeian strand of republican thought that begun with the political experience of the Florentine Republic's Great Council (1494–1512) —perhaps the most democratic institution in modern history— and Machiavelli's institutional innovations to empower the popolo against the corrupting tendencies of the grandi, and maintain Florence's liberty against the power of the financial elite. This plebeian republican strand, further elaborated by Condorcet and recently rediscovered by Martin Breaugh and John McCormick, stands in stark opposition to an aristocratic strand of republicanism commenced by Cicero, reinterpreted by Montesquieu, constitutionalized by Madison, and until recently enshrined as republicanism's mainstream strand by the Cambridge School.

The analysis is divided in three parts: 1) an account of the aristocratic tradition through a critical analysis of the constitutional ideas of Montesquieu and Madison, and its transformation into a liberal-aristocratic variety of republicanism of which Philip Pettit is the greatest exponent; 2) an analysis of Machiavelli's institutional proposals for Florence, seen through his political philosophy, as the origin of modern plebeian republican thought; and 3) a discussion of a recent democratic interpretation of Machiavelli by Martin Breaugh, John McCormick, and Lawrence Hamilton, and its divergence from the liberal interpretation of plebeian republicanism offered by Jeffrey Green.

I begin by briefly analyzing the most fundamental republican concepts —liberty, virtue, and corruption— and their relation to the constitutional order in Montesquieu, Madison, and Pettit. Then I provide an alternative reading of Machiavelli as primarily concerned with giving institutional form to popular power as an anti-oligarchic means to keep the republic free from domination. I show how in Machiavelli's republicanism, which is predicated upon the constitutive split of society between the few and the many —those who have the power and ability to oppress, and those who do not have power beyond their own independence and struggle to resist oppression— liberty demands more than just having a functional liberal constitutional state. For Machiavelli, the popolo needs to be armed not only with weapons, but also with powerful political institutions to veto and make law, add new fundamental institutions, punish those who conspire against liberty, and amend the constitution to revert the overgrowth of oligarchic power. Machiavelli thus inaugurates a plebeian strand of republicanism that is not only realist, partisan, agonistic, and politico-institutional, but also radical because it lays the groundwork for a republican theory of constituent power that gives the right to revise and rewrite the basic rules of the state to the assembled people as guardians of liberty.

Finally, based on the analysis of recent plebeian republican thought, I argue the radical nature of Machiavelli's conception of plebeian power has not been properly analyzed, and therefore current institutional proposals remain caught up in class-based institutions and the representation of interests, neglecting the proper institutionalization of popular constituent power. While Pettit has certainly brought the liberal-aristocratic strand of republicanism to its greatest degree of sophistication, plebeian republican thought has yet to fulfill its radical potential.