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THE VENETIAN CONSTITUTION IN FLORENTINE POLITICAL THOUGHT

Two Italian cities, writes Jacob Burckhardt in his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, have been of the greatest significance for the entire history of the human race: Venice and Florence — ‘cities which cannot be compared to anything else in the world.’¹ Although Renaissance historians now may be inclined to focus their attention less exclusively on these two cities, Florence and Venice still remain primary centres of interest and attraction. In the same passage in which Burckhardt emphasized the eminence of Venice and Florence in the complex of Renaissance civilization, he stated that ‘no contrast can be imagined stronger than that which is offered us by these two’. Thus a comparison of Venice and Florence, an investigation of how they differed, has usually served to point up the particular features of each. But the two cities did not exist in separate worlds. Although the cities were different, Venetians and Florentines were in steady contact and there was a lively exchange of ideas between them. This essay will be concerned with the intellectual relations between Venetians and Florentines and particularly how Florentine political thought was influenced by the image of Venice.² But before proceeding with the story proper, the problems inherent in this topic should be indicated.

The first difficulty is that Italian cities had no written constitutions.

¹ The quotations from Burckhardt can be found in Part I: ‘The state as a work of art’ of his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*.

² A previous study devoted to a part of this subject is Renzo Pecchioli, ‘Il “mito” di Venezia e la crisi fiorentina intorno al 1500’, *Studi Storici*, vol. III (1962), pp. 451–92. See also Gaeta’s review of Pecchioli’s article in *Bollettino dell’Istituto di Storia della Società e dello Stato Veneziano*, vol. IV (1962), pp. 387–93.

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What we call their constitutions were a set of laws and regulations which established the functions and composition of councils and set forth the qualifications and duties of the magistrates. These laws and regulations issued over the course of centuries lay buried, for the most part, in folios in the chancelleries. Thus the most striking and prominent features of the government of a city-state might be quite generally known, but precise and detailed knowledge of how a government functioned was difficult to acquire.

But the influence which constitutional forms of a city-state might have had on the constitution of another is further complicated because men were inclined to reject the entire idea that one government might be or ought to be patterned after another. Each city was thought to be a unique formation; each city had its own patron saint: Venice was the city of St Mark; Florence of St John the Baptist; Milan of St Ambrose.¹ It was assumed that the patron saint held his protecting hand over the fate of the city. The institutions which had been created in earliest times when the city had acquired its patron saint were believed to be sacred. According to a legend believed in Venice since the twelfth century, St Mark had rested in the lagoons at the place where later Venice was founded, and God had shown him in his dreams that this was the place where he would be buried and at this place a city would arise and under his protection would grow to greatness and power. The towns and lands which Venice conquered surrendered to San Marco and were obliged to have the *laudes* of San Marco sung in the churches at all festival days. The older the institutions of a city the more purely were they believed to carry the imprint of the city's saintly protector. And this had an impact on politics far into the sixteenth century. After the death of the last Visconti, when the Milanese attempted to regain freedom, they named their newly established republic the 'Ambrosian Republic' and tried to revive institutions which they believed had existed in the times of Sant' Ambrogio. The Florentines, under the influence of Savonarola, believed themselves to be charged with a special mission by God and proclaimed their city the 'City of Christ'. Close association of a city's existence with an individual saint formed an obstacle to the imitation of foreign political institutions.

Yet this belief in the uniqueness of one's city did not exclude all interest in political experimentation. The norm of a perfect society at which every city ought to aim always existed. In the fifteenth century

¹ See Hans Conrad Peyer, *Stadt und Stadtpatron im mittelalterlichen Italien* (Zürich, 1955).

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the spread of a more extensive knowledge of classical political writings provided new material for attempts to transform the existing political order according to abstract principles. Nevertheless, the idea persisted that each city-state was unique. In some respects, one might even say that the revival of the ancients resulted in a secularization of previous beliefs: the figure of the patron saint was merged with that of the lawgiver, and the idealization of the classical world strengthened the view that 'return to the beginnings', to the institutions which had been established when the city was founded, was the only true way of making political changes and reforms.

When the ideas and terminology of classical political theories began to permeate the thinking of the literati and of the ruling groups the reputation of Venice as the model of a free republic began to rise. In this development political events played as much a part as changes in the intellectual climate. During the fourteenth century in a slow but irresistible process the smaller Italian city-states had been absorbed by the greater Italian powers; by the beginning of the fifteenth century only two republican city-states — Venice and Florence — had survived among Italy's great powers. But they were, as Burckhardt remarked, cities of contrast. To him, Florence was 'the city of incessant movement', whereas Venice appeared as unchanged and unchangeable. Thus, while Florence, which underwent several revolutions and frequent changes of government, could hardly serve as a model for imitation, the Venetian government seemed to approach the realization of a perfect republic.

Thus in analysing the relation between Venetian and Florentine political thinking, we must keep in mind that it was not a reciprocal relation; the connection is limited to the problem of the influence which the view of the excellence of Venetian institutions had on Florentine political thought. Because the traditional resistance against the adoption of foreign forms of government was strong, the question must be raised whether and when the discussion of Venice as a pattern for imitation reached beyond a small group and had an impact on political practice. Moreover, because Venice became the pattern of an ideal republic only in the fifteenth century and the emergence of this image was closely tied up with humanist thinking, it must be asked whether the view of the excellence of Venetian institutions represented chiefly the application of an ideal classical pattern to Venice, or whether it was based on an intimate knowledge of the functioning of Venetian institutions. Thus, an investigation of these questions is closely connected with the broader issue of the growth of realism in political thought.

I

The story of Venice as a political model begins in the fifteenth century, but Venice was regarded as a miracle inspiring a myth ever since it emerged as a community of significance.¹ And some aspects of this myth shaped the view which people held about Venice as a political pattern.

Venice was never a city like other cities. The 'churches, monasteries and houses, all built in the sea' as Comines stated,² aroused the wonder and the admiration of travellers of earlier centuries as much as it does today. Venice's extraordinary situation invited even in the fifteenth century typographical descriptions — some in prose, some in verse — which are so detailed and so precise that they could almost serve as a modern guide book.³ Visitors were astounded at the sight of canals that replaced streets, and gondolas that replaced wagons and carriages. The mosaics, the rare and precious stones in which San Marco and the other churches of Venice abounded, evoked awed comments and the envy of the citizens of other states. The ceremonies and rituals surrounding the election and the death of a Doge, the arrival of ships from the Orient, the confluence of merchants from every part of the world offered spectacles which could be seen nowhere else. From the time of its foundation it appeared that a fairytale had become reality in Venice.

The myth that Venice inspired from early times had its political aspects: the one was that Venice was the city of liberty; the other, that Venice was a city of domestic peace and stability.

Liberty (*libertas*) had a double meaning. If it was used in reference to political institutions *libertas* indicated a régime that was not tyrannical. But *libertas* could also be used to characterize the position of a city-state in relation to other city-states and then it signified independence. The Venetians believed they possessed *libertas* in both these meanings. As writers frequently mentioned, Venetian independence was celebrated in two paintings, one to be seen in the Hall of the *Consiglio Maggiore*, the other in the Hall of the Senate. Both depicted the events

¹ On the 'myth' of Venice, see Gina Fasola, 'Nascita di un mito', *Studi storici in onore di Gioacchino Volpe*, vol. I, pp. 455-79, and Franco Gaeta, 'Alcune considerazioni sul mito di Venezia', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, vol. XXIII (1961), pp. 38-75, with a detailed bibliography.

² '... de veoir tant de clochiers et de monasteres, et si grant maisonnement, et tout en l'eaue', *Mémoires*, bk. VII, ch. 18.

³ In general, see A. Medin, *La Storia della Repubblica di Venezia nella Poesia* (Milano, 1904), and, for examples, see V. Rossi, 'Jacopo d'Albizotto Guidi e il suo inedito poema su Venezia', *Nuovo Archivio Veneto*, vol. V (1893), pp. 397-451, and Sabellico, *De Venetae urbis situ*, in *Opera*, vol. II (Basle, 1560), pp. 251-78, or the rather typical, but also rather envious description in Giovanni Ridolfi's report about his travels to Venice and Milan in 1480, B.N.F., Magl. II, IV, 195, fols. 209 ff.

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of 1177 when Emperor and Pope concluded their peace in Venice and when, according to Venetian writers, the Pope conferred special privileges on the Doge, granting him political status equal to Pope and Emperor.¹ About the freedom that reigned within Venice, writers liked to refer to the statement in St Thomas Aquinas' *De regimine principum*, that of all the rulers in Northern Italy the Doge of Venice alone was not a tyrant and had only limited powers.² The notion of the stability of the Venetian government grew steadily and it had become accepted opinion in the fourteenth century. Petrarch's words in praise of Venice almost summarized the notions which in previous centuries had been formed about the 'miracolissima Venetiae civitas': 'a city rich in gold but richer in repute; strong in power but stronger in virtue; built on solid marble but more stably and solidly established on the more secure foundations of its citizens' concord, fortified and made safe by the intelligence and wisdom of its sons rather than by the sea which surrounds the city.'³

These two themes — that of Venice as an independent republic and as a model of stability and changelessness — recur almost regularly. In the fifteenth century, when political circumstances accentuated the importance of Venice, speculations about the nature of the Venetian government also became more elaborate. A crucial turn was given to these discussions by the humanists who began to identify Venice with classical models of republicanism. Members of the Venetian ruling group encouraged these efforts to present the Venetian constitution as a modern embodiment of ancient political wisdom. This was clearly in their political interests. A political myth was a precious political asset because it unified the citizens and reinforced their willingness to undergo sacrifices for their commune.⁴ When the writings — the histories and laudations — of humanists like Salutati, Bruni and Loschi extolled Florence and Milan and compared them to Athens, Sparta and Rome, Venetian patricians became understandably anxious to find

¹ 'Et illa hystoria est picta in aula civitatis Venetiarum. Ed est etiam picta in aula civitatis Senatorum', Bernardo Bembo, 'Commonplace Book', British Museum, Add. MS. 41,068A, fol. 44; Bernardo Bembo's commonplace book is chiefly a collection of excerpts from other writers.

² 'Omnes principes Italiae sunt tyranni Duce Venetiarum excepto. Qui habent regimen temperatum. Verbi sunt Sancti Thome', *ibid.*, fol. 45. The relevant passage is to be found in *De regimine principum*, IV, ch. 8, i.e. in the part written by Ptolemy of Lucca.

³ Petrarch, *Lettere senili*, bk. IV, no. 3: '... urbs auri dives sed ditior fame, potens opibus sed virtute potentior, solidis fundata marmoribus sed solidiore etiam funamento civilis concordie stabilita, salsis cincta fluctibus sed salsioribus tuta consiliis.'

⁴ For a general statement of Venetian civic spirit by a Venetian patrician, see Bernardo Giustiniani's funeral speech for Francesco Foscari in *Orazioni, Elogi e Vite . . . in lode di Dogi . . .*, ed. G. A. Molina, vol. I (Venice, 1795), pp. 21-67.

humanist writers who would do the same for Venice; they searched anxiously for a humanist who would serve as public historiographer and write the history of Venice praising the achievements of Venetian politics and the public spirit of Venetian citizens.¹ Venetian nobles and even the Venetian government were particularly interested in those humanist treatises which described the Venetian government in terms of classical political theories. The most important notion developed by humanists in the fifteenth century was that of the Venetian constitution as a realization of the classical idea of mixed government: the Doge represented the monarchical element; the Senate the aristocratic element; and the *Consiglio Maggiore* the democratic element. This concept of the Venetian constitution exerted a great influence in the development of European republicanism far into the eighteenth century.

The notion was probably first adumbrated by Pier Paolo Vergerio in a fragment on the Venetian republic.² He characterized Venice as an aristocracy but he added that Venice was a particularly well-constructed aristocracy because its government had also some monarchical and democratic features. This concept was fully worked out only in the middle of the fifteenth century and this development is connected with the name of one of the best-known Venetian patricians of that time, Francesco Barbaro, and with his intellectual circle.³ Barbaro was the patron of the Greek scholar, George of Trebizond, whom Barbaro had brought from Crete to Venice in 1417. From Rome, in December 1451, Trebizond wrote to Barbaro that 'your ancestors who have founded your republic have certainly taken from Plato's *Laws* everything that makes the life of a republic long and happy. For it would be quite incredible that things could be so completely identical by accident.'

¹ See G. B. Picotti, 'Le Lettere di Lodovico Foscari', *L'Ateneo Veneto*, vol. XXXII (1909), pp. 21-49, particularly p. 43, and M. Foscari, *Della Letteratura Veneziana* (Venice, 1854), pp. 245-8. These writers used the letters of Lodovico Foscari, but they did not exhaust the material, concerned with the search for a public historiographer, in the codex containing Foscari's correspondence (original in Vienna; a copy in Treviso, Biblioteca Comunale, MS. 85).

² *De republica veneta fragmenta*, ed. E. A. Ciconia (Venice, 1830). A manuscript of this treatise in Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, no. 4576, Cl. Lat. XIV, cod. CCLV, shows variations; but they do not change the contents. The relevant passage runs: 'Venetorum respublica optimatum administratione regitur. Ideoque aristocratiam greco vocabulo licet appellare quae inter regium popularemque principatum media est. Hec vero et tanto est melior quod, quoniam utrique laudabilium extremorum participat, ex omni genere laudabilis recte politice simul commixta est.'

³ On Barbaro's relations with George of Trebizond, see Percy Gothein, *Francesco Barbaro* (Berlin, 1932), pp. 147-51, Deno John Geneakopolos, *Greek Scholars in Venice* (Cambridge, 1962), particularly pp. 30-1, and Giorgio Castellani, 'Giorgio da Trebisonda, maestro di eloquenza a Vicenza e a Vinegia', *Nuovo Archivio Veneto*, vol. XI (1896), pp. 123-42; the following is based on Castellani's article although I give fuller quotations from the correspondence between Barbaro and Trebizond.

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Plato said that no republic could live long and happy if it did not contain elements of all forms of government: of one-man rule, of aristocracy and of democracy.¹ George of Trebizond added that the Venetian constitution corresponded even in its details to Plato's ideal republic. Barbaro in his answer expressed his delight about George of Trebizond's discovery. He asked him to write an introduction to his translation of Plato's *Laws* in which he should point out the similarity between Plato's theories and Venice's political practice, and he promised that he would distribute this book among his Venetian compatriots and George of Trebizond would receive a rich compensation.² George of Trebizond wrote such an introduction³ and Barbaro was pleased to hear that through the Greek scholar's efforts 'as the Athenians took pride in Solon, the Spartans in Lycurgus, the Venetians could take pride in Plato as their law-giver'.⁴ George of Trebizond then dedicated the entire translation including the preface to Barbaro, but before he could harvest from his dedication the promised gain, Barbaro died. So he then composed another dedication, this time to the Doge, and this dedication finally brought him the expected benefits. The Venetian Senate decided to give him a remuneration 'which would be honourable and useful to George and to our state'.⁵ And in October 1460 George of Trebizond was appointed to the chair of humanities and rhetoric in the School of San Marco. The Venetians were proud to give their approval to a thesis which linked together Venice, Plato and

¹ 'Leges quoque Platonis, ex quibus aperte intellexi, Majores vestros, qui Republicae vestrae fundamenta jecerunt, ex his certe libris omnia, quibus Respublica diu felix esse possit, collegisse. Non est enim credibile, casu ita omnia confluisse, ut ad unguem praeceptis illius conveniant. Nullam, inquit ipse, beatam diu fore Rempublicam, nisi quae ita constituta sit, ut omnibus regendarum civitatum modis, Principis dico unius, Optimatum, Populique potestate gubernetur: quod nulli umquam sic exacte accidisse, quam vobis, perspicuum est', George of Trebizond to Barbaro, 5 December 1451, in *Francisci Barbari et aliorum ad ipsum Epistolae*, ed. M. A. Quirini (Brescia, 1743), no. 198, p. 290.

² Barbaro to Trebizond, 7 March 1452, *ibid.*, no. 199, pp. 292-5. Sections of this letter were published by Bessarion in his *In calumniatorem Platonis* (Aldus edition, 1516), fol. 87v. Bessarion wanted to demonstrate the unreliability of George of Trebizond who was now attacking Plato, but, as Barbaro's letter showed, had once admired him. Bessarion was also incensed about George of Trebizond changing the dedication of his translation of Plato's *Laws*, but for this Barbaro's death seems a sufficient explanation.

³ The preface, which only elaborates the ideas expressed in the letter to Barbaro, is preserved in Vatican Codex Lat. 5220, but has never been published; for some quotations from the preface, see M. A. Quirini, *Diatriba praeliminaris* (Brescia, 1741), p. 127.

⁴ 'Legi Praefationem tuam in leges Platonis . . . opera tua feceris, ut sicut Athenienses Solone, Lacedaemonici Lycurgo, ita nos Veneti Platone, legum nostrarum conditore, gloriarı possimus', Barbaro to Trebizond, 13 January 1452, *Epistolae*, no. 206, p. 300; a very similar observation can be found already in Barbaro's letter of 7 March 1452.

⁵ ' . . . quando presertim eiusmodi remuneratio talis esse potest que civitati nostre atque ipsi Georgio honori pariter usuique futura sit', quoted by Castellani, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

the idea of a constitution which combined all three forms of government.¹ In later years Venetians frequently referred to these ideas as containing the truth about their system of government and almost one-hundred years after George of Trebizond, Gasparo Contarini systematized this view of Venice in his famous and influential book.

The idea of a mixed government combining monarchical, aristocratic and democratic elements was, however, only one of the various notions classical writers employed in defining the nature of a good republic. Mixed government did not necessarily mean a combination of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. People ascribed to Plato the view that mixed government must contain three forms of government because he had written that a well-organized government ought to stand on the middle ground between monarchy and democracy.² Aristotle already observed that Plato, in the outline of his ideal republic, actually envisaged a mixture of democracy and oligarchy rather than a combination of all three forms of government.³ In Aristotle's own discussions of mixed government this combination of oligarchy and democracy received most attention.⁴ In other passages, however, Aristotle seems to suggest that aristocracy was superior to all other forms of government⁵ and the view of the excellence of aristocracy was reinforced by the authority of Cicero.⁶

Thus, not all humanist writers who praised Venice as a realization of the classical prescripts for an ideal republic saw in the Venetian government a combination of all three forms of government; some regarded Venice as a mixture of oligarchy and democracy, others as an aristocracy. For instance, Francesco Patrizi, who in his treatise on republics expressed his admiration for the immutability of the Venetian government, regarded Venice as excelling all other states in 'justice, power, wealth and splendour';⁷ according to Patrizi a perfect republic

¹ George of Trebizond stated this thesis also in his *Comparationes Philosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis*, in a chapter of the second book, entitled: 'Quod divinitus illud Platoni dictum est, optimam rem publicam non esse simplicem, quodque id solis Venetis contigit.'

² Plato, *Laws*, bk. III.

³ Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. II, ch. 3.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. IV, chs. 9 and 10.

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. IV, ch. 6.

⁶ Cicero's *De re publica*, with its emphasis on mixed constitution, was not known before the nineteenth century. The humanists were not concerned with the finer shadings of the classical views on constitutions, so that a modern interpretation of the classical theory — like that by Kurt von Fritz, *The Theory of the Mixed Constitution in Antiquity* (New York, 1954) — has little relevance to the ideas of the fifteenth century.

⁷ '... apud Venetos, quorum Res Publica justitia, imperio, opulentia, et civium splendore, non modo in omni Italia, verum in universo quoque terrarum orbe praeclarissima habetur', *De Institutione Reipublicae Libri IX* (Strasburg, 1608), p. 71.

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required a mixture of democracy and oligarchy.¹ But there were a great number of writers — probably the majority of those dealing with this subject — who characterized Venice as an aristocracy. Poggio Bracciolini, relying on Cicero's view that an aristocracy was the best form of government, advanced the thesis that Venice was the only truly aristocratic government that had ever existed. In Venice 'the best citizens rule and serve the well-being of the state without regard to their personal interests'.² Likewise, Sabellico in his treatise on the Venetian magistrates declared that Venice was that aristocracy which Plato had praised. Eternal harmony which reigned in Venice guaranteed that the city would withstand all the attacks of ruthless fortune.³ The most extensive and detailed account of Venice as an aristocracy was given by Francesco Negri.⁴ Like Poggio, Negri asserted that the only state in which an ideal government, namely, an aristocracy, had come to life was Venice.⁵ And Negri justified this thesis by a long praise of Venice's great men and of its political, intellectual and artistic achievements.

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

² Poggio's laudation of Venice can be found in Poggius Bracciolini, *Opera omnia*, ed. Riccardo Fubini, vol. II (Turin, 1966), pp. 919-37; see p. 925: '... et aristocratiam, quam nostri optimatum appellant, et eam Cicero in libris de legibus optimam esse ait... Talem profecto nunquam nisi apud Venetos fuisse verissime affirmarim, apud quos soli optimates civitatem regunt, obtemperantes legibus intentique omnes ad publici status utilitatem, omni rei privatae cura posthabita.' Poggio's treatise is one of the best humanist summaries of all the elements of the Venetian 'myth' — situation, government structure, public spirit; it describes as characteristic of an aristocracy that common good is placed above private interest and that the people are well treated but excluded from government. For a short account of the contents of Poggio's piece, see Ernst Walser, *Poggius Florentinus Leben und Werke* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1914), pp. 291-2; Walser explains Poggio's reasons for writing this work (see below, p. 472) 'and directs attention to the fact that a praise of Venice, composed by Poggio's son Gianfrancesco (Biblioteca Marciana, no. 4370, Cl. Lat. XI, Cod. CXXXVIII), uses extensively his father's manuscript.

³ 'Haec est Aristocratia illa, quam divinus Plato numquam statis laudatam credidit... his namque auspiciis Venetum imperium, quod late hodie terra marique patet, non solum est auctum, sed perpetua etiam ordinum concordia nullos saevientis fortunae reformidat impetus', *De Venetis magistratibus*, in *Opera*, vol. II (Basle, 1560), p. 279.

⁴ *De aristocratia*, Biblioteca Marciana, no. 2753, Cl. Lat. VI, cod. VI. On Francesco Negri, see Giovanni Mercati, *Ultimi contributi alla storia degli umanisti* (Vatican City, 1939), pp. 24-109 and the appendix, particularly 40*-58*. On the basis of a version of Negri's manuscript in the Vatican Library, Card. Mercati showed that a connection existed between Negri's treatise and the book of the Count of Porcia, *De reipublicae venetae administratione* (Treviso, 1477), and suggests that Negri elaborated Porcia's book. It is true that the organization of the two works is very similar and some connection may have existed, but this relationship does not seem to me very significant. Porcia's book is poor and empty, Negri's manuscript, even if not very penetrating or profound, full of substance.

⁵ Negri, *De aristocratia*, fol. 11v; '... tertiam aristocraticam appellaverunt quam nos quidem optimam merito partem vocamus: optimam inquam: et quae optimo principe digna est et quae non minus optimam urbem optimam plebem optimumque reddit imperium', and Negri continues that this form of government exists only in Venice.

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It has been mentioned that the Venetian ruling group promoted these praises of Venice because they served to strengthen the civic spirit. On the other hand most of the humanist authors composed these flattering descriptions because they wanted to gain the protection and favour of the Venetian government or of individual Venetian nobles. This purpose is evident and unconcealed in the case of Francesco Negri and it is not without significance that Negri had no qualms about calling Venice an aristocracy. Negri must have been sure that such a characterization of the Venetian government would be welcomed by the men who were in power in Venice. We can assume that whatever particular description of their constitution the Venetians believed to be most appropriate, whether they accepted the thesis that their constitution contained monarchical, aristocratic and democratic features, that it was a mixture of oligarchy and democracy or a pure aristocracy, they all regarded the aristocratic element as the prevailing one in the structure of their society.

II

The question of the influence which the image of Venice as an ideal republic exerted on politics in fifteenth-century Florence cannot be answered in clear and simple terms. As we shall see later some circles in Florence shared the high estimate of Venice by the humanists and regarded Venice as an ideal republic. But in general the praise of Venice did not shake the conviction that Venice and Florence were very different political formations. The gap between them grew wider.

Of the various humanist writers on Venice whom we discussed, Poggio alone was a Florentine. He had his personal reasons for composing a laudation of Venice. He was deeply incensed about taxes which, unjustly in his opinion, the Florentine government asked him to pay.¹ He thought of leaving Florence and settling in Venice. Disgusted with the arbitrariness and unreliability of the Florentine democracy, he painted in radiant colours the strict observations of law and justice in an aristocracy. Thus Poggio, five hundred years before Burckhardt, regarded restlessness as characteristic of Florence, stability as characteristic of Venice. The application of the terminology of ancient political science to Venice and Florence only reinforced the feeling of the distinctiveness of these two cities.

The Florentine views about the different and alien character of

¹ See Walser, *op. cit.*, pp. 290-1.

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Venice emerged clearly when adoption of Venetian forms of government became a question of practical politics. In the winter of 1465–66 and the summer of 1466, after the death of Cosimo Medici and before his son Piero had gathered the reins of government firmly in his hands, an attempt was made to limit the power of the Medici, perhaps even to deprive them of their power. The institutional changes which the opponents of the Medici tried to introduce are not known to us in detail.¹ The main features seem to have been to make the eligibility to government offices a permanent privilege of a restricted group. In the deliberations on this, one of the speakers stated that of the three forms of government only a system in which the people ruled guaranteed stability.² Florence possessed such a system; Florence was a democracy. This argument was repeated by another speaker who said that innovations were dangerous and that the changes which were now suggested would introduce an aristocracy in imitation of the Venetian republic; in the opinion of this speaker 'our republic has most brilliantly flourished under a democratic form of government'.³ The speaker saw the principal difference between aristocracy and democracy, between Venice and Florence, in the manner in which offices were filled. In Venice magistrates were elected; in Florence men were assigned to offices by lot.

It is evident, however, that in rejecting imitation of the Venetian model Florentines were guided not only by rational arguments but also by emotions. The two republics were old political enemies and regarded each other with distrust and hostility. From the diatribe against the greediness of Venice which Villani inserted in his chronicle⁴ in the fourteenth century to the anti-Venetian letter of Benedetto Dei, in which the author defended Cosimo Medici's alliance with Milan in the

¹ This episode of Florentine history has been treated in the article by Guido Pampaloni, 'Fermenti di riforme democratiche nella Firenze medicea del Quattrocento', *A.S.I.*, vol. CXIX (1961), pp. 11–62, who suggests that the plan was to create a Great Council. See also Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)*, pp. 146–7. The relevant source material has been published by Pampaloni, loc. cit., pp. 240–81, and *A.S.I.*, vol. CXX (1962), pp. 521–81.

² *A.S.I.*, vol. CXIX, p. 246: 'Civitates enim aut unus gubernat, aut pauci aut multitudo; et que ab uno aut paucis gubernantur non habere firmitudinem, sed cum a populo gubernantur, quia amore et benevolentia gubernantur.'

³ *Ibid.*, p. 261: 'Quod autem affertur novum eiusmodi est ut afferri videatur statum optimatum et imitationem quandam rei p. Venetorum. Cum autem videam, inquit, hanc rem p. nostram florentissimam esse factam populari administratione . . . ;' see also pp. 261–2 the speeches of Giovanni Pitti and Domenico Martelli. Because the expressions 'aristocrats' and 'democrats' are rather vague, they seem appropriate English terms for characterizing the opposing Florentine groups. Aristocrats are in favour of a small strictly limited ruling group of wealthy and old families, democrats aim at a broadening of this ruling group, but, of course, nobody thought of including workers or men who were in an entirely dependent position.

⁴ *Cronica*, bk. XI, ch. 90.

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fifteenth century,¹ references to this traditional enmity between Venice and Florence are frequent.

But although feelings of being different may have been the prevailing mood in the Florentine attitude towards Venice, there were factors which worked in the opposite direction. Venice and Florence alone had been left as independent and powerful republics on the Italian political scene; republicanism created an ideological bond. This aspect of the relation was usually emphasized in the speeches with which ambassadors began their diplomatic missions: there was a close relation between those two city-states because of the 'similarity in their forms of public rule and in their ways of living and conducting business'.² Nevertheless, the feeling of a certain ideological affinity was transformed into common political action only when the interests of both cities were threatened by the same enemy. It is true, however, that business ties formed bonds between individual members of the Venetian and Florentine ruling group. Of Florentines, the Medici and their circle had close friends in Venice; Cosimo took up residence in Venice when he and his family were driven out of Florence in 1433; and the Medici continued to maintain the contacts with members of the Venetian nobility which had been established in the times of their exile. Of Venetians those patricians who delighted most in the new world of humanism cultivated friendships in Medicean Florence. Francesco Barbaro was a friend of the Medici family, and especially close to Lorenzo de' Medici, Cosimo's younger brother.³ Barbaro's Florentine contacts extended to other members of the Florentine ruling group. Among the Venetian nobles who enjoyed friendship with Florentines in the second part of the fifteenth century was Bernardo Bembo; he served several terms as Venetian ambassador in Florence and belonged to the circle of Marsilio Ficino.⁴ Bembo's popularity with the Florentine ruling group was so great that a special attempt was made to prevent his recall from Florence. In later years Bembo seems to have been the chief expert in the Venetian government for Florentine affairs; he was

¹ See Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, revised edition (Princeton, 1966), p. 401.

² 'Similitudinem gubernandi publice et privatim vivendi et negotiandi . . .' from an oration at the reception of a Venetian embassy, 17 March 1472, A.S.F., Signori, Legazioni e Commissarie, Risposte Verballi d'Oratori, 2, fol. 42v, but see also *ibid.*, fol. 45v, where, on the occasion of the reception of another Venetian embassy in 1474, exactly the same thought is expressed. The repetitive use of all such formulas weakens the thesis of the importance of republican ideology in the actual conduct of foreign policy, as advanced by H. Baron, *op. cit.*, pp. 387-403.

³ Gothein, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-4.

⁴ See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, vol. II (Florence, 1937), p. 346.

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usually charged with taking care of the Florentine ambassadors who came to Venice.¹ A slightly younger Venetian aristocrat with close connections in Florence was Pietro Delfino. Lorenzo Magnifico, with whom Delfino had come in contact through his duties as general of the Camaldulensian Order, esteemed Delfino highly, and Delfino was also a particular friend of Lorenzo's brother-in-law, Bernardo Rucellai, with whom he corresponded on intellectual problems and political events. It is from Delfino that we have one of the few direct testimonies of Florentine admiration for the Venetian constitution. In a letter addressed to a Venetian friend, Delfino stated that he had heard in Florence about Poggio's treatise in praise of Venice and that he was sending to Venice a copy of this manuscript. Delfino added that he had been able to observe that the whole of Florence shared Poggio's high opinion of the Venetian system of government.² When Delfino wrote 'entire Florence' (*universa Florentia*) he doubtless meant the Florentine ruling group, the circle around Lorenzo Magnifico. One can probably say that in the fifteenth century admiration for Venice was limited to members of the Florentine aristocracy who favoured an oligarchic régime. But among them this attitude was almost traditional. Already Rinaldo degli Albizzi complained that Florence had not a government like that of Venice; and the same attitude can be observed in the strange abortive conspiracy which was undertaken in 1459 or early in 1460.³ Benedetto Dei, one of the conspirators, and our only witness of this event, was an adherent and probably an agent of the Medici. He and his companions wanted to introduce a reform which, after the Venetian model, would entrust the government of Florence to a Doge and to members of about two hundred Florentine families.

In the fifteenth century, admiration for Venice and the wish for changing the Florentine government in accordance with the pattern of the Venetian constitution was limited to the Florentine aristocrats, and even a particular group among them; they alone had access to the

¹ For instance, see the report of the Florentine ambassadors Giovanbattista Ridolfi and Paolantonio Soderini from Venice, 12 August 1491, A.S.F., M.A.P., filza XIX, fol. 619.

² 'Cum essem Florentiae proxima Quaresima, convenit me civis quidam mei studiosus ac nationi Venetae valde affectus. Is . . . pollicitus est mihi orationem quamdam Poggii in laudem Venetarum olim editam. . . . Mitto itaque illam ad te, ut intelligas, quanti fecerit homo Florentinus rempublicam nostram. Et profecto idem fere universa Florentia de nostris sentit, cuius rei sum optimus testis. . . .' Pietro Delfino to Bernardino monaco, 27 April 1487, published in Martène et Durand, *Veterum Scriptorum et monumentorum . . . amplissima collectio*, vol. III (Paris, 1724), p. 1146. On Delfino, see Josef Schnitzer, *Peter Delfin, General des Camaldulenserordens, 1444-1525* (Munich, 1926).

³ See Maria Pisani, *Un avventuriero del Quattrocento. La vita e le opere di Benedetto Dei* (Genoa, 1923), particularly pp. 102 ff.

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knowledge needed to introduce features of the Venetian constitution into the Florentine system. One may question whether the various treatises on Venice which we have discussed were widely known. Even if they were, their authors did not offer much detailed information about Venetian political life or give a concrete or realistic picture of the functioning of Venetian institutions. The intellectual aim and ambitions of the humanists were satisfied when they had identified the Venetian government with one of the categories of classical political thought. Then they might explain that this system of government was suited to realize virtues like justice, fortitude or charity, or they might assert that the Venetians were 'new Romans'.¹ In Sabellico's comparison of Roman and Venetian achievements which he inserted in his history, Venice came out best. Its constitution was better than that of the Roman republic and Venice excelled all states that had ever existed. But from these treatises the reader will not get much information about the institutions which distinguished Venice, only that Venice had a Doge, a Senate and a large council. A few arrangements of the Venetian constitution attracted attention. For instance, the combination of election and of the use of lots which the Venetians employed in filling vacancies among their magistrates is frequently described in detail.² Likewise the ceremonies surrounding the death of a Doge and the election of his successor. Special praise is given to the care with which secrecy was maintained.³

Some of these writings contain a list of magistrates. Such an enumeration forms the contents of one of Sabellico's treatises on Venice,⁴ but although Sabellico was relatively well informed, this listing gave no clear picture of the functioning of the various magistrates nor did he study the relationships which existed among them. The most extended and best-informed discussion of the Venetian government in the fifteenth century was Paolo Morosini's letter to Gregory of Heimburg.⁵ But despite many interesting details, particularly about the administration of justice and about the procedure in the various councils, Morosini did not explain how these various governmental agencies were connected with each other and how such a collection of magistrates could

¹ 'Veneti appellantur Romani novelli', Bembo, 'Commonplace Book', loc. cit., fol. 44. See also B. Accolti, *De praestantia virorum sui aevi*, in Philippi Villani *Liber de civitate Florentiae famosis civibus*, ed. G. C. Galletti (Florence, 1847), p. 119.

² For instance, by Patrizi, op. cit., p. 116.

³ For instance, see Poggio, op. cit., p. 934.

⁴ See above, p. 471, n. 3.

⁵ *De rebus ac forma reipublicae venetae Gregorio Heymburg, Germanorum doctori praeclearissimo*, published in Valentinelli, *Biblioteca Manuscripta ad S. Marci Venetiarum* (Venice, 1868-73), vol. III, pp. 231-64.

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effect a centrally directed policy. Florentine politicians who came as ambassadors to Venice were probably better equipped than literati to acquire knowledge of Venetian institutions. It is significant that alone Dei, who was close to the Medici, put his finger on the crucial issue when he intimated that the centre of the Venetian government was a council strictly limited and controlled by a finite number of patrician families.

Thus, at the end of the fifteenth century, when the French invasion and the flight of the Medici opened a new chapter in Florentine constitutional developments, all the praise which had been bestowed upon the Venetian government had not resulted in the acceptance of Venice as a model for Florence. The great majority of the citizens remained convinced that Venice and Florence were very different formations — Venice an aristocracy and Florence a democracy — and that it was best to preserve a city's ancient and original form of government. Moreover, only a few men possessed insight into the real functioning of the Venetian government; the tendency towards imitating the Venetian government can be found only in the group around the Medici. These men thought that an adoption of the Venetian constitution, perhaps with a member of the Medici family as Doge and a council limited to families loyal to the Medici, might be desirable and give to the rule of the Medici in Florence stability and permanency.

III

With the overthrow of the Medici in 1494, we enter upon a period of Florentine history in which the constitutional forms of Venice became an openly discussed and important issue of Florentine politics. In 1494 the Florentines established the Great Council after the Venetian model. And the hall in which its meetings took place was constructed according to the measurements of the hall of the Venetian *Consiglio Maggiore*. In 1502, the highest Florentine office, the Gonfalonierate of Justice, became a lifetime position: Florence became headed by a Doge. However, these two reforms, both undertaken in the Venetian pattern, ought to be sharply differentiated. The institutional innovation of 1502, the creation of the *Gonfaloniere a vita*, was, as we shall see later on, urged by the Florentine aristocrats and was in line with the interpretation that Venice was mainly an aristocracy. But the motives for the creation of the Great Council in 1494 were quite different. Through a *parlamento*, which followed the overthrow of Piero de' Medici, power had been placed in the hands of a small oligarchy, more

or less the same group which had been predominant before the revolution — only without Piero de' Medici as the head. The establishment of the Great Council on 23 December 1494 aimed at broadening the government. In this respect it was an anti-aristocratic movement. Thus, in 1494 the Venetian pattern served democratic purposes. And eight years later it served the opposite aim of an aristocratic reaction. How was it possible for the Venetian pattern to be used for different ends?

In order to answer this question we must investigate the motives which determined the adoption of the pattern of the Venetian *Consiglio Maggiore* in 1494,¹ and this in turn means an analysis of the attitude of Savonarola, who was the most powerful spokesman for the adoption of the Venetian model by Florence. Savonarola's political attitude in 1494 has aroused much discussion, for it is not easy to understand or to explain.² Savonarola was not a systematic thinker; he was a powerful preacher and his sermons, even after almost five hundred years when they are read but not heard, still have a compelling and moving force. When his sermons had a practical aim he was able and anxious to bolster his point by rational arguments taken from philosophy, theology, or history. But his arguments always remained subordinated to the purposes of his sermon. He could employ different, even contradictory, arguments, whenever his aim had changed. Savonarola did not hesitate to use a variety of rationalizations because he was a visionary to whom ideas came by inspiration. With increasing involvement in Florentine politics his approach to political problems became more sophisticated. But in the winter of 1494 his political approach was rather naive. For Savonarola there were two types of government: monarchies and republics.³ The republican form was more appropriate to Italy; Savonarola seemed unaware of the distinction which the humanists had made between aristocratic and democratic republics. If the republican government in Florence did not work, this was caused by the selfishness and viciousness of individual citizens who tended towards tyranny. These were the assumptions behind Savonarola's intervention

¹ For these events see Nicolai Rubinstein, 'Politics and Constitution in Florence at the End of the Fifteenth Century', *Italian Renaissance Studies*, ed. E. F. Jacob (London, 1960), pp. 148-83.

² On Savonarola's politics, see the two articles by Donald Weinstein, 'Savonarola, Florence, and the Millenarian Tradition', *Church History*, vol. XXVII (1958), pp. 3-17 and 'Millenarianism in a Civic Setting: the Savonarola Movement in Florence', *Millenial Dreams in Action; Essays in Comparative Studies*, ed. Sylvia L. Thrupp (The Hague, 1962), pp. 187-203.

³ The crucial sermon is the one of 14 December 1494, published in Savonarola, *Prediche Italiane ai Fiorentini*, ed. F. Cognasso, vol. I (Perugia and Venice, 1930), pp. 181-97.

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in Florentine politics in December 1494. From 14 to 21 December, with exception of the 20th, he preached daily until, on 22 and 23 December, the Florentine councils adopted a constitutional reform and established the Great Council. In Savonarola's sermons the foremost admonition was that of the need for a moral conversion: the citizens ought to place the common good above private interests. They ought to live virtuously and treat each other with love and charity. Savonarola's demand for moral reforms extended into the sphere of political reform because the existing government system gave dominating influence to a few ambitious citizens and prevented unity and harmony. Savonarola drew two practical conclusions from this situation. Firstly, he insisted on the necessity of introducing new institutions.¹ The vehemence with which he justified the need for departing from the past and for the imitation of foreign institutions indicates the strength of the resistance to deviation from the traditional concepts of Florentine politics. Savonarola's sermon of 17 December, which is chiefly devoted to this issue, is a very impressive document.² It contains a poetic description of the meeting of two women, one representing Truth, the other Tradition. Savonarola wanted to show that tradition was inferior to truth. Secondly, Savonarola recommended speed in effecting institutional reforms. This suggestion arose from the tense internal situation in Florence which was threatened by outbreaks of violence. But Savonarola seems also to have feared that delay would give those who held power an opportunity for reinforcing their position.³

In political terms one can say that Savonarola's demands were democratic. They aimed at curtailing the power of the Florentine oligarchy. But Savonarola himself hardly saw his suggestions in these political terms. To him the struggle was not one of aristocrats versus democrats, of an oligarchic régime against a more broadly based government, but of good against evil, of virtue against vice. In Savonarola's view the existing régime of a small élite was bad, not because a régime of few was inferior to a régime of many, but because the few who ruled were evil men.

Savonarola's recommendation of the Venetian model must be seen in this context. Savonarola was not interested in the question of whether Venice was an aristocracy or a democracy or a mixed government. The Venetians were no better than the Florentines. If Venice lived without internal revolutions and dissensions — and Savonarola

¹ Particularly in the sermon of 16 December, *ibid.*, pp. 215–26.

² *Ibid.*, particularly pp. 228–31.

³ Sermon of 15 December, *ibid.*, particularly p. 210.

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accepted this myth of the harmonious stability of the Venetian government — then the Venetian institutions were better than those of Florence and ought to be imitated by the Florentines.¹ Savonarola singled out the Venetian *Consiglio Maggiore* and the Venetian method of electing officials as particularly suited for adoption by Florence. Actually, he regarded the creation of a Great Council as the necessary precondition for the crucial innovation, the introduction of an elective system: the Great Council was the instrument which served to place office-holding on an elective principle. Certainly, Savonarola regarded as crucial an enlargement of the circle of citizens directly involved in the ruling of the city. If citizens had a chance to receive honours they would live more virtuously.² From Savonarola's sermons one does not get the impression that he had concrete or detailed ideas about the changes which ought to be made, and one might wonder whether he had very clear ideas about the Venetian constitution. He was not aware that these measures might work a revolutionary change replacing one social group by another. He looked upon these reforms from the point of view that they would result in moral improvement.

It is reliably reported that Savonarola's recommendation for imitating Venice was encouraged and perhaps inspired by others. If Savonarola himself had no clear notions about the political consequences involved in the establishment of a Great Council, were these others equally unaware of the implications of this suggestion?

We have little information about the exact course of events which preceded the acceptance of the law of 23 December establishing the Great Council. We know that a large number of proposals were submitted to the government but only a few of them are preserved. And their authorship cannot always be established. Thus, our knowledge of the extent and the character of the controversies which were going on in Florence is fragmentary. In the few drafts we have, the impact of Savonarola's recommendation can certainly be noticed. Emphasis is placed on the adoption of the Venetian procedure of election rather

¹ The decisive recommendation of the Venetian government was made by Savonarola in his sermon of 14 December, *ibid.*, p. 195, but see also the sermon of 21 December, *ibid.*, particularly p. 293: 'La reforma de' Veneziani sarebbe el vostro bisogno . . . e la esperienza lo dimostra che non essendo però loro migliori degli altri non s'è udito nella città loro in tanto tempo che hanno retto le dissensioni e rivoluzioni che sono state qui in te, ne' tempi passati. Però ti bisogna, Firenze, levare via questo tuo modo vecchio . . . la volontà di Dio è che tu non ti regga più come tu hai fatto insino a quei ne'tempi passati. . . .'

² *Ibid.*, p. 195: 'E così ancora credo sia bene per dare animo a ciascuno di portarsi virtuosamente, che gli artefici fussino in qualche modo beneficiati ed allettati a portarsi bene, per essere onorati.'

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than on the creation of the Great Council. Few Florentines seem to have recognized the revolutionary impact which the establishment of the Great Council would have. Although there was agreement on the principle that membership in the Great Council should be granted only to those citizens whose ancestors — father or grandfather — had been entitled to hold office, there were disagreements about the precise form in which this principle should be carried through. Very few, however, seemed to have had any clear idea of the size which the Great Council might have. An exception was Piero Capponi who, because of his courageous stand against the French, was then probably the most influential member of the Florentine ruling group. In his proposal Capponi expressed the view that the Great Council might be much larger than people seemed to think; he insisted therefore on the importance of having also a smaller council which would control the actual conduct of affairs. As pattern for such a smaller council Capponi referred to the Venetian Council of the *Pregadi*. This corresponds to our observation that precise knowledge of the Venetian constitution would be found chiefly among Florentine aristocrats; only an aristocrat like Capponi realized the crucial significance of the Council of the *Pregadi* in the Venetian aristocratic system of government.

The final outcome of these discussions and proposals, the law of 23 December, reflected less the Venetian pattern than one might have expected after Savonarola's intervention. It is difficult to decide whether the departures from the Venetian model were due to a lack of knowledge of Venice, to recognition of the impossibility of transferring Venetian institutions to Florence, or to an unwillingness to follow foreign examples. In the law of 23 December the Florentine Great Council was called Council of the People and of the Commune and this name indicates that the Great Council was meant to be an outgrowth and continuation of traditional Florentine institutions rather than an innovation. Although, in addition to the Great Council a smaller council was established, the functions of this Florentine Council of the Eighty were much more limited than the functions of the Venetian Council of the *Pregadi*.

The establishment of the Great Council and the introduction of elections for offices failed to bring internal harmony and peace to Florence. For us, this is easily understandable because the Florentine Great Council lacked the homogeneity of its Venetian pattern: it contained both aristocrats and men of the middle classes, and conflicts between them were unavoidable. The Florentines did not see their domestic difficulties in this light. Nevertheless with increasing internal

tension views about the usefulness and applicability of the Venetian pattern began to take a new and more pronounced shape. In opposition to the dissatisfaction of the aristocrats who regarded the Great Council as the principal cause for their diminished authority, the middle classes defended the Great Council. It became to them the bulwark of Florentine democracy. In the sermons of the following years Savonarola emphasized this aspect of the Great Council.¹ In Savonarola's references to Florentine politics defence of the Great Council became his main theme, and his argument about the meaning and significance of this institution shifted. Savonarola now mentions the existence of three forms of government: of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy.² Florence, he says, is a democracy, a *vivere popolare*, and the democratic nature of the Florentine government is embodied in the Great Council.³ Savonarola continued to insist that foreign institutions, if they had shown themselves to be conducive to good life, should be studied and imitated but he mentioned as possible patterns Lucca and Siena as well as Venice.⁴ In Savonarola's defence and praise of the Great Council the notion that the Great Council was constructed after the Venetian model began to disappear. According to Savonarola Florence had become a reformed city and the centrepiece of this reform was the Great Council. But it was God who had granted Florence this remarkable institution. In Florence a perfect social order had been realized; other cities ought to look up to Florence and imitate her.⁵ Other partisans of Florentine democracy gave to these arguments a somewhat different turn. Certainly, the Great Council was the 'soul of Florence' and it was given to Florence by God. But it represented also the ancient and original form of Florentine political life: its *antico vivere popolare*.

IV

If, after 1494, the partisans of a democratic political organization began to minimize the rôle which the Venetian model had played in the

¹ 'Il Consiglio grande è la tua salute; se tu tieni saldo el consiglio, non avete paura di uomo del mondo . . .,' sermon of 18 October 1495, Savonarola, *Prediche*, vol. II, p. 426, but see also the sermons of 19 February, 21 February, and 9 March 1496, *ibid.*, vol. III, part 1, pp. 76, 133; part 2, p. 478.

² Sermon of 11 October 1495, *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 408.

³ ' . . . il reggimento tuo naturale è vivere popolare . . .,' sermon of 24 February 1496, *ibid.*, vol. III, part 1, p. 186.

⁴ See the sermon of 18 October 1495, *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 427.

⁵ ' . . . li predicatori susciteranno l'altre città e diranno a' popoli: andate a Firenze, andate a lei, che ell' ha el vero lume; pigliate da lei la forma del governo,' sermon of 19 March 1496, *ibid.*, vol. III, part 2, p. 196, but see also the sermons of 4 April and 10 April 1496, *ibid.*, pp. 486 and 580.

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introduction of the Great Council, the utterances of their opponents, of the aristocrats, show that they saw in Venice the embodiment of their political ideal: an aristocratic government.¹ When the government asked for advice on issues like the opening of new sources of revenue, or improvements in the administration of justice, speakers of the aristocrats frequently pointed to the manner in which such affairs were handled in Venice. The main concern of the aristocrats, however, was a constitution which would restore to them political control and the aristocratic plans for such a reform were modelled after Venice. This aristocratic attitude is exemplified by Bernardo Rucellai, one of the most vehement advocates of an anti-democratic revision of the Florentine constitution. Rucellai regarded the Venetian constitution as almost perfect. Its ideal character was one of the topics which was discussed in the Rucellai Gardens, where prominent Florentine politicians and literary men met and debated literary and political subjects.² It was also Rucellai who, in consultations about public matters, most frequently adduced the example of Venice. In Venice, Rucellai explained, unity and harmony existed because the citizens placed the public good before their own interests. But the exemplary organization of the political life in Venice was the result of a long development. In the early years of its existence also Venetian politics had suffered from internal conflicts and tensions. The Venetians had changed and reformed their original institutions until the present situation had been achieved. According to Rucellai the Venetian constitution was a mixed government: the Doge embodied the monarchical element, the aristocratic element was represented by the Senate. The great masses of the people, however, had no part in the government.³ The conclusions which Rucellai drew were that Florence ought not to consider the constitution of 1494 as sacrosanct and unchangeable but in need of improvement, and the most needed change was a strengthening of the influence of the Florentine aristocrats. This could be effected by the creation of a smaller council on the pattern of

¹ The developments discussed in this section are described at greater length and with documentary illustration in my book, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini; Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton, 1965), pp. 49-78.

² See my article, 'Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricellari', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. XII (1949), pp. 101-31.

³ This characterization of the Venetian system of government comes from Rucellai's *De Bello Italico* (London, 1733), pp. 17-18: 'Ea enim res Veneta est situ ipso urbis, ac legibus munita; ut admixta, particepsque earum artium, quae ad regnum, optimates, ceteramque bene institutam rempublicam pertinent; et ab intestina, externaque vi maxime tuta sit; et diurnitate imperii immota crescat ceterarum ruinis: quippe quae octingentos jam annos amplius senatori ordine, haud admissa plebe, unis moribus, neque fere mutatis legibus vivit.'

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the Venetian Council of the *Pregadi*. This council, composed exclusively of Florentine aristocrats, would handle all the important government business.

Rucellai's views were those of most of the Florentine aristocrats. From 1498 on, almost regularly, rumours went around about plans to 'hand over the government to three hundred prominent citizens'. These plans developed from rumours into issues of practical politics when, in the first years of the sixteenth century, a crisis occurred which threatened the political existence of Florence. The financial means needed for fending off the external enemy could be provided only by the aristocrats and they made a reform of the constitution in their favour a precondition of giving help. The consultations which were held pointed to the introduction of a small council which would be controlled by the aristocrats and would become a decisive factor in determining Florentine politics. But this was not the solution that was finally reached. The constitutional innovation of 1502 was the election of a *Gonfaloniere a vita*; the highest official, the head of the government, would now hold his position for his lifetime. Instead of getting a council of *Pregadi* the Florentines got a Doge.

The aristocrats agreed to this measure because they believed that the creation of the *Gonfaloniere a vita* was only a step in making the Florentine constitution similar to that of Venice and that this first reform would soon be followed by another one which would complete the process of imitation by adding the lacking middle link, a Senate. This further step was never taken and the aristocrats ascribed responsibility for this failure to the *Gonfaloniere a vita*, Piero Soderini, who did not want his powers curtailed by a council dominated by aristocrats. Thus, the aristocrats became vehement opponents of Soderini and their hostility contributed to the inglorious collapse of the Soderini régime in 1512. In the short period between Soderini's flight and the return of the Medici the aristocrats were in complete control. The first step which they undertook was to revise the constitution and to create that small aristocratically dominated council for which they had striven for the last fifteen years. The introduction of the law that established this council on 7 September 1512 referred to 'the governments of ancient and modern republics which have had a long life and ruled in peace and harmony'; obviously the modern republic to which this sentence alluded was Venice. These well-organized republics, so the law continued, possessed a Senate and the introduction of a Senate in Florence had been frequently recommended by thoughtful citizens. But only now people recognized the wisdom of this advice. This law

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was in force only a very short time, but this was the period of the closest similarity between the Venetian and Florentine constitutions.

Nevertheless, even the law of 7 September 1512 gives no clear answer to the question to what extent the notions about the ideal nature of the Venetian constitution were based on a detailed knowledge of the functioning of Venetian institutions. There are significant parallels between the development and functioning of the Venetian Council of the *Pregadi* and the Senate created by the Florentine law of 1512. In both, *Pregadi* and Senate, there were two kinds of members: those who received membership because they were holding high government posts and those who became members through election by the Great Council. In both cases, the function of the Senate was to elect ambassadors, to appoint administrators for dominated territories, and to handle government finances. But there were also differences; the Venetian *Pregadi* were elected for one year only. In Florence the senators had membership for life and fifty of them would be chosen by the three highest Florentine magistracies sitting together. The latter regulation assured aristocratic domination of this body because when the law was passed the aristocrats controlled these magistracies. The power of the Senate as the controlling factor in Florentine politics was further reinforced by the rule that the Senate would elect the Signoria and the Ten. In Venice the election of the highest officials remained in the hands of the *Consiglio Maggiore*. On the other hand, the financial power of the Venetian *Pregadi* was greater than that of the Florentine Senate. In Florence the Senate would initiate financial legislation and after approval by a two-thirds majority, the proposed financial legislation would go to the Great Council for acceptance or rejection by a simple majority. In Venice the handling of financial affairs was left entirely to the *Pregadi*. These variations in the handling of financial affairs are not without interest; they point up the differences between Venice and Florence. In Florence influence on taxation was left to the Great Council because the constitutional reform had to be passed by the Great Council, and some concession to the democratic forces was needed in order to make the reform acceptable. On the other hand, because of the strength of democratic elements in the Great Council, the aristocrats were anxious to make the Senate as powerful as possible in administrative affairs. Such compromises were unnecessary in Venice, because the *Consiglio Maggiore* was socially homogeneous and the Council of the *Pregadi* was mainly a smaller, more manageable committee of the larger council. The Florentines rightly regarded the Council of the *Pregadi* as the crucial factor in the Venetian government,

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but such a council transplanted to Florence fulfilled there an entirely different function. In Venice, the Council of the *Pregadi* represented the executive arm of the aristocratic ruling group which was fully and exclusively gathered in the *Consiglio Maggiore*; in Florence an aristocratic Senate was to wrest control from a democratic Great Council.

In Florence the idea of mixed government as it was realized in Venice was a weapon in the political struggle. Certainly, some Florentines, like Bernardo Rucellai, had information about details of the Venetian constitution. But for most of them concrete knowledge of the functioning of Venetian institutions was not really involved in their appeals to the Venetian example: it was the Venetian political myth which influenced Florentine political thought in the republican period between 1494 and 1512.

V

After 1512 no change in Florentine constitutional legislation was inspired by the Venetian example. But this did not mean that speculations about the exemplary character of the Venetian institutions ceased. On the contrary, political theorizing and speculation were even intensified,¹ and the pattern of Venice continued to play a crucial rôle in political deliberations. This was natural. If the overthrow of the Medici in 1494 had opened the door to political experimentation, their return in 1512 necessarily strengthened this trend. With two breaks in political continuity tradition lost its hold over the minds of men: they became more interested in foreign patterns and more willing to accept them.

Nevertheless, for a number of years after 1512 political speculation evolved in rather narrow channels because power was in the hands of the Medici and political behaviour and action were determined by this fact. The middle classes and the bulk of the population were dissatisfied with the situation, but stunned by the slaughter of Prato and humiliated by the unheroic collapse of the Soderini régime, they remained in grumbling silence. Their dissatisfaction found its expression chiefly in rumours reviving Savonarola's prophecies of a complete change and reform. The aristocrats were busy jockeying for positions of influence with the Medici. Moreover, in 1513, the coming of the younger Lorenzo de' Medici to Florence revealed an entirely new possibility: the establishment of an absolutist ruler in Florence. Most of the aristocrats were

¹ The political literature of this period has been carefully treated by Rudolf von Albertini, *Das florentinische Staatsbewusstsein im Uebergang von der Republik zum Prinzipat* (Berne, 1955); see also the third chapter of my book on *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*. Footnotes will be limited to indicating the provenance of passages particularly relevant to our problem.

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horrified by the possibility of such a development and concentrated in their thinking on proving that an absolutist régime was not feasible in Florence and on suggesting stop-gap measures, such as the formation of a small advisory committee which they hoped might restrain Lorenzo.

But with the death of Lorenzo in 1519, yet another change in the political scene took place. The death of the last legitimate male descendant of Lorenzo il Magnifico unavoidably aroused discussions about the political future of Florence. Moreover, the two senior members of the Medici family, Pope Leo X and Cardinal Giulio, gave indications that they intended to liberalize the government system. We have a few of the blue-prints for a Florentine constitution which were now drawn up. In all of them the example of Venice played an important rôle. Guicciardini wrote that the Venetian government 'is the most beautiful and best government that any city, not only in our times but also in the classical world, ever possessed; the reason is that it embodies all three forms of government: those of one, of a few and of many'.¹ The views about the value of the Venetian constitution which had been formed in the fifteenth century were now taken as generally recognized truth.

But when these ideas were applied to the elaboration of a constitutional programme for Florence we find few references to details of the Venetian institutions and frequent statements that particular Venetian arrangements were not suited for Florence. Alessandro de' Pazzi referred to the Venetian council of the Ten, but he had doubts that such an institution would be appropriate for Florence.² Guicciardini was acquainted with the procedure followed by the Venetians in electing a Doge but he rejected it for Florence because it invited bargaining and compromises. Moreover, in Guicciardini's opinion the minimum age which the Venetians had set for becoming a Doge was too low.³ For all these writers the crucial feature of a mixed government and the most important institution in Venice was a Senate. And they regarded the creation of such a body to be the most needed reform in Florence. But in details they all deviated from the Venetian pattern.

Thus these projects again raised the question whether a fuller discussion of Venetian institutions did not take place in Florence,

¹ '... [il governo viniziano] è el piú bello ed el migliore governo non solo de' tempi nostri, ma ancora che forse avessi mai a' tempi antichi alcuna città, perché partecipa di tutte le spezie de' governi, di uno, di pochi e di molti. . . .' Francesco Guicciardini, *Dialogo e Discorsi del Reggimento di Firenze*, ed. R. Palmarocchi (Bari, 1932), p. 138; this passage comes from the *Dialogo del Reggimento di Firenze*.

² *A.S.I.*, vol. I (1842), p. 430.

³ Guicciardini, *op. cit.*, pp. 131, 147.

because imitation of the details of the Venetian pattern was considered unfeasible, or whether precise knowledge of the working of the Venetian constitution was lacking.

An observation by Guicciardini in his dialogue on the *Reggimento di Firenze* is suggestive in this context. Guicciardini maintained that the members of the Venetian *Consiglio Maggiore* were called nobles for reasons of prestige, but that in fact they were private citizens. If in Florence those who were members of the Great Council and as such entitled to hold office were called nobles, it would appear that there was no difference between the Venetian and the Florentine system: 'The government of Venice is as democratic as ours and ours is no less aristocratic than is theirs.'¹ This remark indicates that Guicciardini was unaware of the caste character of the Venetian nobility which excluded shop owners and craftsmen; and its hereditary character impeded the ascent of new men into its ranks. Because the Venetian *Consiglio Maggiore* was limited to a hereditary ruling group there was more truth behind the characterization of Florence as democratic and Venice as aristocratic than Guicciardini assumed. The somewhat vague character of the knowledge which Florentines possessed about Venice is underlined by the fact that whenever in Guicciardini's dialogue observations were made about Venice, the speakers sought confirmation for the correctness of their statements from Paolantonio Soderini, the one participant in the dialogue who had been Florentine ambassador in Venice.² Information gathered on diplomatic missions seems to have been the best source that was available for information about the Venetian government. This suggests that, even in this period, Venice interested Florentines because of the idea of Venice as a realization of mixed government rather than of their having concrete knowledge of Venetian institutions.

This can be seen from the writings of Machiavelli, the only Florentine political thinker who was not an admirer of Venice. The harshness of his judgments about Venice has been frequently remarked upon.³ It is true that Machiavelli rejected Venice as an ideal pattern. But he did not deny the Venetian constitution all merits. Machiavelli recognized that among modern republics Venice stood out.⁴ He praised the

¹ '... se noi chiamassimo gentiluomini e' nostri, e questo nome appresso a noi non si dessi se non a chi è abile agli uffici, troveresti che el governo di Vinegia è popolare come el nostro e che el nostro non è manco governo di ottimati che sia el loro. Pagolantonio è stato due volte imbasciadore a Vinegia, e credo dirá el medesimo che dico io,' *ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

² For example, see previous note.

³ See Federico Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance* (London, 1958), pp. 81-2.

⁴ *Discorsi*, I, ch. 34; *Istorie fiorentine*, bk. I, ch. 28.

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Venetian speed in handling emergency situations;¹ he lauded the Venetian efficiency in administering justice² and the continuity of government.³ But there were features for which he had less admiration.⁴ His main objection to Venice was that the Venetian constitution, although fitting for people who were willing to live in peaceful isolation,⁵ was unsuited for expansion and for the conquest of an empire. Briefly, Venice offered Machiavelli an example for his favourite thesis of the deficiency of the military organization in the Italian city-states. The neglect of military power was particularly inexcusable in Venice because the Venetians were greedy and ambitious.⁶ It was inevitable that they would suffer defeat and whenever this happened they became abject and lacked the courage which might have saved them.⁷ They relied on their money, not on power.⁸ It was natural that Machiavelli, as a democrat, was anxious to destroy the image of aristocratic Venice as an ideal republic. Beyond this, he does not seem to have had much further interest in Venice. His remarks on the Venetian nobility are still more misleading than those of Guicciardini.⁹ But although Machiavelli repudiated Venice as a pattern for Florence, his outline of a Florentine constitution¹⁰ contained the same basic elements as the drafts of his contemporaries. His ideal republic had three parts: Gonfalonier of Justice, Senate, Great Council, and he thought that Senators should be elected for life. If Machiavelli, who made no use of the Venetian pattern, outlined the same fundamental structure as the admirers of Venice, it seems a justified conclusion that general notions about an ideal government rather than detailed knowledge of Venice determined the character of the political projects of this period.

VI

In 1527 another change of régime took place in Florence. Again the Medici were driven out of the city; again a discussion began on the

¹ *Discorsi*, I, ch. 34.

² *Discorsi*, I, ch. 49.

³ *Discorsi*, I, ch. 50.

⁴ See, for instance, *Discorsi*, I, ch. 36, Machiavelli's criticism of the Venetian prohibition to hold lower offices after having held offices of higher rank.

⁵ *Discorsi*, I, ch. 5.

⁶ *Istorie fiorentine*, bk. I, ch. 29.

⁷ *Discorsi*, III, ch. 31.

⁸ *Discorsi*, II, ch. 10.

⁹ *Discorsi*, I, ch. 6.

¹⁰ I mean the *Discursus florentinarum rerum post mortem junioris Laurentii Medices*; for the separation of the concept of mixed government from the idea of Venice in Machiavelli's thought, see also Giorgio Cadoni, 'Libertà, repubblica e governo misto in Machiavelli', *Rivista Internazionale di Filosofia del Diritto*, vol. XXXIX (1962), pp. 462-84.

form of government which Florence ought to take; and again Venice was adduced as an example which Florence ought to imitate. But the allusions to Venice in the constitutional projects which were then suggested were more detailed than previously and revealed a much more intimate knowledge of the working of Venetian institutions. The reason was that, between the discussions at the beginning of the twenties and the revolution of 1527, a work had been written that provided a detailed analysis of the Venetian government. This work is Donato Giannotti's dialogue *Della Repubblica de' Veneziani*.¹ Although the manuscript was printed only in 1540, it circulated freely in Florence in 1527-28.² Giannotti's dialogue represents the climax of Florentine political thinking on Venice in the Renaissance period.

Giannotti wrote his dialogue while he was living for some months in Padua and Venice. He departed from Florence at the end of 1525 accompanying Giovanni Borgherini whom Giannotti made one of the main speakers of the dialogue. Giannotti returned to Florence in November or December 1526 but he left again in February 1527, this time as chancellor of Alessandro de'Pazzi who had been made Florentine ambassador at Venice. Giannotti came back to Florence in the summer of 1527 and by then the manuscript of his dialogue on the Venetian Republic was completed. Changes which Giannotti made before its publication in 1540 are insignificant.³

When Giannotti started out for northern Italy in 1525 he was thirty-three years old and had been a lecturer on poetry, rhetoric and Greek at the Studio in Pisa. He belonged to the circle around the philosopher Francesco Cattani da Diacceto who was the teacher and mentor of many young men of prominent Florentine families. There is every reason to assume that the purpose of Giannotti's treatise on Venice was to gain for the author standing and reputation in the world of letters. Many features of the work reveal and emphasize his familiarity with

¹ On Giannotti, see Roberto Ridolfi, 'Sommaro della vita di Donato Giannotti', in *Opuscoli* (Florence, 1942), pp. 55-164, and for some important additions to the factual account of Giannotti's life Randolph Starn, 'Additions to the correspondence of Donato Giannotti: a list and sampling of fifty-four unpublished letters', *Rinascimento*, vol. XV (1964), pp. 101-22; Starn's article contains a bibliography. For an analysis of Giannotti's thought, see Albertini, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-66; p. 148, note 3, gives a succinct, although somewhat oversimplified statement on the rôle of Venice in Florentine sixteenth-century thought. For the factual course of events, see Cecil Roth, *The Last Florentine Republic* (London, 1925). I use the edition of Donato Giannotti, *Opere*, ed. G. Rosini (Pisa, 1819).

² Ridolfi, *op. cit.*, p. 84; the source is *Lettere di Busini a Varchi*, ed. Milanese (Florence, 1861), p. 30.

³ For a justification of the statements made in the text, see my article 'The date of the composition of Contarini's and Giannotti's books on Venice' *Studies in the Renaissance*, vol. XIV (1967), pp. 172-84.

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humanist ideas. He chose the dialogue form which was regarded to have been the classical vehicle for conveying knowledge. The description of the harmonious setting in which the conversation took place — a secluded room in Pietro Bembo's house in Padua — and the introductory reflections on *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* are meant to evoke the atmosphere of a Platonic or Ciceronian dialogue. Giannotti justified the choice of his topic — the analysis of an existing government — by the example of Aristotle who treated similar subjects; as usual in humanist writings, Rome forms the ideal norm for politics. There are many admiring remarks about the leading humanists of Padua as mirrors of knowledge and behaviour. Bembo appears as a great intellectual figure to whom people come from all parts of the world. Leonicus, the famous teacher of Greek philosophy in Padua, is mentioned as one of the chief sources of information about Venice. And the main speaker in the dialogue who explains the functioning of the Venetian government is that somewhat elusive but widely admired Venetian patrician and humanist, Trifone Gabriele.¹ In the same year of 1526 in which Giannotti began to write his work on Venice two books appeared which might have provided stimulus for the undertaking: a contemporary and friend of Giannotti, Antonio Brucioli, who had been forced to flee from Florence in 1522 because of his involvement in a conspiracy against the Medici, published his *Dialoghi* which discussed political themes and outlined the scheme of an ideal republic,² and Pietro Paolo Vergerio, then a lawyer in Venice, published in April 1526 a dialogue, *De republica Veneta*, in which the speakers were Bembo and Leonicus, the two great Paduan humanists whom Giannotti admiringly mentioned.³

But if Brucioli's and Vergerio's Dialogues provided a stimulus for Giannotti, the utopian and idealizing character of their treatises must also have aroused Giannotti's opposition. For, despite the humanist appearance of this dialogue Giannotti presented a much more concrete and realistic treatment of political problems than the humanists. Giannotti was quite aware of this difference between his approach and theirs, and he was openly critical of their methods. To Giannotti it seemed a lack of judgment to pretend that Venice was superior in all

¹ On this circle in Padua, see V. Cian, *Un Decennio della vita di M. Pietro Bembo* (Turin, 1885).

² See Albertini, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–83.

³ Vergerio's treatise is a praise of the Doge as example of a perfect prince, but the statement at the end of the book might have had some influence on Giannotti's plans: 'Alterum librum excudet paulopost, in quo de legibus Venetis et Magistratibus copiosa disputatio futura est.'

respects. The Venetian institutions might be better than those of any other city-state but in military deeds Venice was not the equal of Rome.¹

Giannotti found the humanist histories of Venice of little practical use. Leonicus and the Venetian patrician, Marcantonio Michiel, had placed documents and old chronicles at his disposal. He studied them carefully and found that they contained 'interesting facts worth considering'² which the polished humanist histories did not mention, but which were more revealing than the published historical accounts. The sources which he used seemed to show the impossibility of the story that Venice had received its definite constitutional form at the time of its foundation, and so he gave a description of the gradual development of Venetian institutions which, even if it is not our view, shows a remarkable historical sense.³

Giannotti was critical of all previous descriptions of the Venetian system of government, and his particular target was Sabellico's treatise on the Venetian Magistrates. In Giannotti's opinion a pure listing of the existing magistrates was of little use. A state is like a natural body; in order to understand how it functioned it is necessary not only to describe its various parts but to show 'how they hang together and are dependent upon each other'.⁴ In carrying out this plan Giannotti discovered the importance of features in the Venetian administrative system to which insufficient attention has been given previously.

Not all sections of Giannotti's work are new or original, however. Frequently he is descriptive rather than analytical. He explained that because his book was addressed to non-Venetians, he had to describe Venice's external features, its situation, its canals and streets, its means of transportation. And although Giannotti's picture of life in Venice is pleasant enough, these topics had been frequently treated before. Like others before him he was attracted by the picturesque and complicated procedure for the election of a Doge. But the lengthy details of this description, though they might show the reader Giannotti's familiarity with Venetian customs, contributed little to an understanding of the functioning of Venetian institutions. Giannotti gives a rather traditional

¹ Giannotti, *Della Repubblica de' Veneziani*, p. 19.

² *Ibid.*, p. 76: '... cose degne d'essere intese e considerate.'

³ *Ibid.*, p. 53. A valuable discussion of Giannotti's sources can be found in Giuseppe Sanesi, *La Vita e le Opere di Donato Giannotti* (Pistoia, 1899), pp. 91-102. Michiel was the possessor of a manuscript of the Dandolo chronicle, which he annotated on the basis of documentary material. (It is the *Cronica Andreae Dandoli Ducis*, Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, no. 3746, Cl. Lat. X, cod. CXXXX, and Michiel's annotations are published in the Muratori edition of Dandolo.)

⁴ Giannotti, *Della Repubblica de' Veneziani*, p. 21: '... come l'uno sia collegato con l'altro, che dipendenza abbia questo da quello.'

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outline of the Venetian government which he says resembles a pyramid with the *Consiglio Maggiore* as the broad base, the Senate and the *Collegium* as the narrower superstructure, and the Doge as the apex. Giannotti emphasized, however, that this outline must be filled out with details if it is to be true to life. And this is where the originality of Giannotti's approach is revealed.¹ Instead of describing in succession the nature and function of the various parts of this pyramid, Giannotti asked what the main tasks of government are and then he investigated the rôle which these institutions have in fulfilling them. This method directs attention to the importance of two features of the Venetian government. The one is the Council of the *Pregadi*. In contrast to the larger *Consiglio Maggiore*, the *Pregadi* is a deliberative body. In this council both general policy and particular measures are discussed and voted on. But because the important officials have to present and justify their proposals and recommendations in the *Pregadi*, this council serves also as a place where the capacity of individuals for political leadership can be tested and gauged. Thus the procedure in the *Pregadi* guarantees that only men who are equal to their tasks are selected for responsible positions.

The other crucial element in the Venetian administration are the *savi* who usually act together with the Council of the Doge. They meet every day; they discuss whatever new business has come up and decide upon the questions which have to be brought before the *Pregadi*; and they supervise the work of the other government agencies. They remain in office for six months, but all do not leave office at the same time; only half of them are replaced every three months so that continuity in administration is assured.

Thus, in Giannotti's hands the customary survey of Venetian institutions becomes an analysis of decision-making and leadership-selection in an aristocracy. The intellectual roots of his realistic approach are not difficult to establish. When Giannotti discussed what he considered to be the principal functions of government he characterized them as the election of magistrates, the introduction of legislation, the conduct of foreign affairs and war, and the organization of the judiciary. According to Aristotle the right to decide on these matters constitutes the criterion for determining the character of a government.² Thus Giannotti not only referred to Aristotle in justification of his subject, but, as could be expected from a lecturer in Greek, he applied concepts from Aristotle's *Politics*.

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-51.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. IV, ch. 11.

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Giannotti's knowledge of Aristotle assisted him in presenting a concrete and realistic analysis of the Venetian government, but his political realism was rooted in the Florentine political situation in which he had grown up. The régime which the Medici had established after their return in 1512 demonstrated that constitutional forms did not always indicate, and might even conceal, the locus of real power. In the decade before Giannotti's dialogue, Machiavelli had approached the study of politics with the intention of revealing the true driving forces behind the external façade, and Giannotti was a friend and admirer of Machiavelli.

But Giannotti was not a disciple who followed blindly the precepts of the master. The differences between Giannotti's and Machiavelli's views on Venice bring Giannotti's ideas into stronger relief. Machiavelli would never have chosen the Venetian government as the subject of a special treatise. Moreover, to Machiavelli, the aristocratic character of the Venetian system which Giannotti emphasized excluded the possibility that such a republic could function satisfactorily and serve as a model for others. Nor did Giannotti share Machiavelli's stress on power and on the struggle for greater power as the one and only significant factor in politics. Giannotti believed that a state could remain securely in possession of a relatively limited territory;¹ whereas Machiavelli's contempt for the mercenary system formed an integral part of his views on the rôle of power in politics, like views cannot be found in Giannotti's dialogue. The most significant difference between the two is that Giannotti upheld the tradition that the administration of justice is the principal task of government.

Giannotti's dialogue contains a long exposition of the Venetian judicial system.² He placed particular emphasis on two aspects of the Venetian administration of justice: that it provided possibilities of appeal to financially weak and politically powerless people, and that extensive precautions were taken for securing impartiality. The lack of political interference was presented as a striking feature of the Venetian administration of justice. Evidently Giannotti was concerned with the question of how harmony and internal stability were to be obtained in a society in which power was concentrated in the hands of a small group of nobles. To Giannotti the solution seemed to be that the main need of those who did not belong to the ruling group was legal protection and security; since the Venetian government fulfilled this need the population was content and loyal. Clearly the sections on the Venetian

¹ Giannotti, *Della Repubblica de' Veneziani*, p. 17.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 180-214.

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judicial administration, which to the mind of the modern reader seem disproportionately detailed, were written with the Florentine situation in mind. Giannotti was aware of the conflicts between aristocrats and democrats in Florence, and he explained how and why these tensions had been overcome in the Venetian republic. Giannotti did not propound that Venice had a mixed government; indeed, this concept is not mentioned in his dialogue. But he was certainly aware of Aristotle's view that a good republic represented a mixture of oligarchic and democratic elements. Giannotti's discussion of the Venetian judicial system implies that an oligarchy could function only if the democratic elements of the social body were kept satisfied.

We have said that with his dialogue on Venice Giannotti wanted to establish his position in the literary world. But the political interest which permeates the book is so intense that Giannotti must have had a political aim connected with the Florentine political situation in the years the manuscript was written. This was a peculiar time of Florentine history. The Medici rulers, Leo X and Clement VII, soon abandoned their plans for liberalizing their régime after the death of the younger Lorenzo. Clement VII sent Alessandro and Ippolito, two fourteen-year old boys, to Florence with the obvious intent of making them rulers of the city. Because of the youth of these two boys Florentine affairs were directed from Rome by the Pope, and Florentine pride was hurt by the city's inability to decide upon its own fate. The prospect of the permanent establishment of a Medici dynasty in Florence horrified almost all groups of the population. The masses of the population followed the Savonarolan tradition of identifying the Medici régime with tyranny. The aristocrats resented their loss of political control; and some of the aristocratic families who were closely connected with the Medici began to turn away from them. Ippolito and Alessandro were of illegitimate birth and some of the relatives of the Medici were unwilling to accept bastards as heads of their family.

In the years of the composition of Giannotti's dialogue this opposition became more evident because the entire political scene had become fluid. It was obvious that Francis I would seek revenge for his defeat at Pavia; in the spring of 1526 the League of Cognac, which united the Pope and the French King against Charles V, was concluded. However, the campaign against the Spaniards soon ran into difficulties, and it was realized that, as a result of the war against Charles V, the position of the Pope might be weakened and opportunities might arise for the overthrow of the Medici régime in Florence. Although Venice was a partner in the League of Cognac, its government was very reluctant to

take decisive action against Charles V, and many Florentines who were opposed to the Medici assembled in Venice. Giovanni Borgherini was a speaker in Giannotti's dialogue because he had been Giannotti's companion and patron on his travels to northern Italy in 1526; in the same year Borgherini became the son-in-law of Niccolò Capponi, the recognized leader of the Florentine anti-Medicean aristocrats.¹ Another Florentine who at this time resided with his family in Venice was Lorenzo Strozzi.² He was in close contact with Borgherini and became a friend of Giannotti. Lorenzo Strozzi was a near relation of the Medici; his wife, a daughter of Bernardo Rucellai, was a niece of Lorenzo il Magnifico, and his brother Filippo was married to a sister of the younger Lorenzo. Lorenzo Strozzi had always opposed the Medicean tendency towards absolutism and in 1526 his hostility against Clement VII was increased by the treatment which his brother Filippo received

¹ It is strange that this relationship between Giovanni Borgherini and Niccolò Capponi seems never to have been noticed; this relationship gave particular weight to the recommendation which Borgherini wrote to Capponi on behalf of Giannotti in July 1527 (see Ridolfi, *op. cit.*, p. 82).

² For Lorenzo Strozzi's political views, the life which he wrote of his brother Filippo and Francesco Zeffi's *Vita di Lorenzo Strozzi* are of interest, see *Le Vite degli Uomini Illustri della Casa Strozzi*, ed. Pietro Stromboli (Florence, 1892). Machiavelli's *Arte della Guerra* was dedicated to Lorenzo Strozzi, and he remained a loyal friend of Giannotti also after 1530, as Giannotti's correspondence shows. On Lorenzo Strozzi's close relations to the Borgherini, see the letter of Ulisse da Fano to Lorenzo Strozzi, 27 June 1519, A.S.F., Ugucione-Gherardi, CCXX, fol. 162. On Lorenzo Strozzi's close relations to the branch of the Medici from which Lorenzino came, see Strozzi's letter to the father of Lorenzino, Pierfrancesco, published in L. A. Ferrai, *Lorenzino de' Medici e la Società Cortigiana del Cinquecento* (Milan, 1891), p. 441; Lorenzo Strozzi was Lorenzino's *procuratore* still in 1531, see *Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivio Mediceo avanti il Principato, Inventario*, vol. III (Rome, 1957), p. 268. Pierfrancesco Borgherini, the older brother of Giovanni Borgherini, was in friendly relations with Giovanni delle Bande Nere, see the letter in A.S.F., M.A.P., filza CXXII, fol. 141. About the doings of the two Medici boys, Lorenzino and Cosimo, in Venice in 1527, some information can be gained from the letters of Giovanfrancesco Zeffi, who was in charge of them, *ibid.*, filza CXVIII. Giovanfrancesco Zeffi wrote on 12 June and 7 July 1527 two letters to Ruberto Bonsi in Florence, describing the structure of the Venetian government (A.S.F., Carte Stroz., seconda serie, XCV, fols. 222-7; they are not lost as Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 109, n. 41, assumes. Roth also confuses the author of these letters Giovanfrancesco Zeffi, who was the companion of the two Medici boys, with Francesco Zeffi, the tutor of the children of Lorenzo Strozzi and author of Lorenzo Strozzi's Life.) In the first letter, Zeffi explains that 'trovandomi in questa magnifica città, capo d'una repubblica la quale per li suoi buoni governi più centinaia di anni è stato non solo immobile ma sempre è in augmento proceduto', he believed that knowledge about Venice might be useful for the 'reforma di una vera repubblica' which was going on in Florence. The description of Venice which Zeffi gave is brief and uninteresting, but as an expression of the tendencies of the group to which Zeffi belonged, even if in a subordinate position, the existence of these letters is characteristic. For other Florentines acquainted with Giannotti, and in Venice simultaneously with him, see Michele Lupo Gentile, 'Studi sulla storiografia fiorentina alla corte di Cosimo I de' Medici', *Annali della R. Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, vol. XIX (1906), particularly the essay on Segni; the anti-Medicean tendency emerges clearly from the material published by Gentile.

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at the hands of the Pope. Lorenzo Strozzi's animosity against the branch of the Medici family headed by Clement VII showed itself in his great intimacy with members of other branches of the Medici family. If the two bastards, Alessandro and Ippolito, had not been put forward by Clement VII, two other boys, descendants of the younger branch of the Medici family, namely Lorenzino, the son of Pierfrancesco de'Medici, and Cosimo, the son of Giovanni delle Bande Nere, would have been heads of the Medici family. These two boys were also in Venice at that time and they were solemnly welcomed as persons of high standing by the Venetian government. Alessandro de'Pazzi, the Florentine ambassador to Venice whom Giannotti served as chancellor in 1527, was another nephew of Lorenzo il Magnifico and he too was a pronounced adherent of Florentine freedom.¹ There is no proof that these Florentines, who were closely connected with each other, were actively preparing an overthrow of the régime of Clement VII. But they would not have regarded such an event as a cause for regret.

This group of Florentine aristocrats formed the circle in which Giannotti moved. These men must have discussed what ought to happen in Florence if the régime of Clement VII was overthrown, and Giannotti must have written his dialogue with these considerations in mind. All these men were aristocrats and their traditional interest was the establishment of an aristocratic republic. Because the bulk of the Florentine population was disgruntled with the Medici régime it would applaud any change of régime. But an aristocratic *coup d'état* could result in the creation of a stable government only if some satisfaction could be given to the democratic elements of the population. Giannotti's dialogue showed that in Venice an aristocratic régime managed to keep the masses of the population satisfied; that constituted its relevance for the Florentine political situation.

While Giannotti was still in Venice the victorious progress of the troops of Charles V resulted in the hoped-for collapse of the Medici régime in Florence. Niccolò Capponi, Borgherini's father-in-law, now became Gonfalonier as leader of the aristocratic opposition against the Medici, and Giannotti, on the recommendation of Borgherini, became First Secretary of the Ten, occupying the post which Machiavelli had held under Soderini.

¹ See above, p. 487. His speech congratulating Cardinal Giulio de'Medici in 1521 on restoring liberty to Florence was believed to have been lost, but it is in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, and I am preparing its publication. Alessandro de'Pazzi broke with the Florentine republicans when the radicals gained the upper hand in Florence.

For Capponi and his aristocratic friends the problem of the constitution which Florence ought to receive was posed anew, and Giannotti's knowledge of the Venetian institutions gave him an important influence in these deliberations. On Capponi's request he composed a paper explaining the institutional changes and innovations which he regarded as desirable and necessary.¹ It is not surprising that in Giannotti's project the example of Venice played a pivotal rôle, but memoranda which others composed also referred to Venice and showed that their authors were acquainted with Giannotti's dialogue.² All these projects envisaged a mixed government in which the Senate would hold the key position. Great emphasis was placed on a feature of the Venetian government which Giannotti had stressed: namely, that the Gonfalonier, like the Doge, should act together with a small body of officials who would control and supervise the entire administration, take care of the conduct of current affairs, and give continuity to the government. Giannotti in his dialogue on Venice had indicated that Venice drew most of its political strength from the unified control and direction of policy by a small body of high officials, and this idea was now accepted as an essential feature of constitutional reform in Florence.

All these memoranda of the years 1527-28 aimed at limitation of the power of the Great Council in favour of the patrician ruling group. But none of them was written in a situation in which the shaping of Florentine institutions was entirely in the hands of the aristocrats. Although the overthrow of the Medici régime had been planned as an aristocratic *coup d'état*, as such it had failed. A decisive factor in forcing the withdrawal of the Medici from Florence had been

¹ Giannotti, *Opere*, vol. III (Pisa, 1819), pp. 27-47. For an analysis of this *Discorso sopra il fermare il governo di Firenze*, see Albertini, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-15. However, I cannot agree with Albertini's view that this project was written in 1527; there seems to me no possible doubt that Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 109, n. 44, is right in placing this project in the year 1528; to the arguments adduced by Roth a strong further argument can be added. Giannotti speaks of 'pratica nuovamente ordinata', and the law, reorganizing the *pratica*, was issued on 18 August 1528.

² In addition to Giannotti's project, there were two projects by Niccolò Guicciardini, published by Albertini, *op. cit.*, pp. 377-99, and analysed by him on pp. 117-21. Furthermore, a memorandum, entitled *Modo di riordinare la città di Firenze ed i suoi magistrati*, can be found in B.N.F., Carte di Machiavelli, Cassetta 6, no. 80; this memorandum breaks off without ending, it is certainly not by Machiavelli, it shows strong Venetian influence and is close to Giannotti, but shows also differences from him. In any case, this memorandum emphasized a strong executive with fifteen *procuratori* at the top of the pyramid. A further constitutional project can be found in Carte Strozzi., seconda serie, XCV, fols. 82-7; it is more traditional than the other memoranda, maintains the Signoria, of which, however, only one-third should be changed every two months; the author wants to abolish the Gonfalonier and suggests a senate with life membership. Then there are the two letters by Zeffi, see above, p. 496, n. 2. A 'Parere' by Ceccotto Tosinighi in Carte Strozzi., seconda serie, XCV, fol. 22, does not seem to me to belong to this period; it might be from 1502 or 1512.

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a widespread popular movement, and the democratic forces were not content to leave all powers to the aristocrats. Thus the situation which developed in 1527 was very similar to that after the overthrow of the Medici in 1494. The democratic elements forced the aristocrats in power to grant a reopening of the Great Council, and the constitution which had existed before 1512 was again put in force. Thus the aristocrats began again their old struggle for a strengthening of their position in the government, and the memoranda which recommended to the Florentines an imitation of the Venetian pattern were written for this purpose. But this campaign for an aristocratic reform of the Florentine constitution was in vain. The powers of the Gonfalonier, Niccolò Capponi, were not enlarged but curtailed. And in April 1529, Capponi was deposed. In the years of the last Florentine republic the influence of the radical faction of the middle classes steadily increased until they completely ruled the city.

The victory of these radicals was probably unavoidable. Under progressively mounting pressure from without, the appeal of those who called upon the Florentines to unite as equals was stronger than the voices of those who stressed the social differences in Florentine society.

In contrast to the defenders of the aristocratic position who composed elaborate constitutional projects placing the aristocrats firmly into the centre of power, the democrats did not and could not express their views in detailed constitutional schemes. The economic, social and intellectual eminence of the upper group in an Italian city-state prevented an elaborate rationalization of democratic thought. The democrats appealed to tradition, and their strength lay in the emotions which such an appeal aroused. Thus, with the democrats gaining the upper hand in Florence the last Florentine republic returned to its beginnings, to the traditions of medieval Florence. It emphasized the legal and economic equality among its citizens; it recreated the old citizen militia; it fought as a Guelph city with the French king against the Ghibelline emperor, and Florence was again proclaimed to be the City of San Giovanni and of Christ. The heroism with which the last Florentine republic conducted its futile resistance against the return of the Medici came from the revival of the spirit of the medieval commune.

We might see behind the victory of the Medici the beginning of a new development: the city-state giving way to the territorial state. But to many contemporaries the defeat of the Florentine republic was the end. When in 1538 Giannotti prepared his dialogue *Della Repubblica de' Veneziani* for the printer, the work had lost the political aim and

meaning which it had possessed when he wrote it: 'Because we cannot discuss our own affairs, we discuss the affairs of others.'¹ At the same time Francesco Guicciardini was writing his *History of Italy*, in which he described the events of 1494 that had led to the establishment of the Great Council.² All the arguments which we saw at work — for and against the imitation of foreign institutions, for and against the suitability of the Venetian constitution as a model — are set forth in two brilliantly constructed invented speeches. Yet there is no indication about the value of these arguments; it is as if Guicciardini wanted to convey to the reader how little practical importance these arguments had had. But in a study of the influence of the Venetian constitution on Florentine political thought it might be best to leave the last word to a Venetian. From 1528 to 1529, the Venetian ambassador in Florence was Antonio Suriano. Giannotti was among his close friends, and there can be no doubt that Suriano had real insight into Florentine affairs. But when he came to describe the Florentine situation in his final report before the *Pregadi*, Suriano saw only differences between Venice and Florence; the weakness of Florentine politics seemed to him so deeply ingrained that he saw no chance of Florence ever becoming a stable republic. Florence is, said Suriano with a certain contempt, a democracy in which people who do not understand the art of government rule. 'Rarely have such democratic republics had a long life'.³

¹ '... poichè non possiamo ragionare de' fatti nostri, ragioneremo di quelli d'altri . . .', Giannotti to Benedetto Varchi, 10 June 1538, *Opere*, vol. II, p. 200.

² *Storia d'Italia*, bk. II, ch. 2.

³ 'Lo che procede dall' esser questo governo popolare, mentre la plebe, la quale attende alle arti meccaniche, non può saper il modo del vero governo; e però rare repubbliche popolari si vede essere state diuturne,' *Le Relazioni degli Ambasciatori Veneti*, ed. E. Albéri, serie 2, vol. V (Florence, 1858), p. 411.