

MACHIAVELLI: EMPIRE, *VIRTÙ* AND THE FINAL DOWNFALL

*Nikola Regent*¹²

Abstract: The paper examines two aspects of empire in Machiavelli's thought. First, Machiavelli's model of the empire-building state is analysed. Machiavelli's answer to a classical question of the best form of government is discussed, establishing (1) why Machiavelli prefers a republic to a principality, and (2) why he prefers the expansionistic model of the republic based on Rome over the non-expansionistic model based on Sparta and Venice. In both cases, it is argued, Machiavelli's choice is dictated by his understanding of greatness: the Roman Republic is the ultimate example because it has achieved the greatest empire the world has ever seen. Accordingly, Machiavelli develops his political ideal, the model of the expansionistic republic that should closely follow the Roman example. The crucial role of Machiavelli's reading of the ancient historians, Livy, Sallust and, particularly, Polybius, is strongly emphasised. A second thread is developed later in the paper. Following Pocock's account(s), the author examines various causes of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire that Machiavelli offers in different places in his opus, trying to find a description of the most general cause, that would encompass all others. In the final part of the paper both threads converge; a key passage from *Arte della guerra* is analysed, with important conclusions reached: (1) It is shown that Machiavelli fully realised the unavoidable final destiny that awaits his model state. (2) Machiavelli also described the 'main', most general cause for Rome's downfall; a general mechanism of this process is outlined

Several years ago, a book entitled *Machiavelli and Empire* was published.³ Despite its title, it has very little to say about Machiavelli's *model* of the expansionistic state, and virtually nothing about that state's downfall. In this paper, I want to analyse these very problems — Machiavelli's model of the empire-building state, and the limitations inherent in that model. Not much attention has been given to these aspects of Machiavelli's thought, notwithstanding his perennial popularity amongst the historians of political theory. However, there is a notable exception — J.G.A. Pocock, the most insightful of the contemporary commentators on Machiavelli, addressed these issues, both in his *Machiavellian Moment*⁴ and in the third volume of *Barbarism and*

¹ School of Politics and International Relations, Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia. E-mail: nikola.regent@anu.edu.au

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³ Mikael Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire* (Cambridge, 2004). The book is a typical example of context taking control over the subject matter.

⁴ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975).

Religion.⁵ I will advance along similar lines and, first, seek to construct a clear picture of Machiavelli's world empire, fully developing all the important consequences that proceed from that model. The crucial influence of Livy, Sallust and, especially, Polybius, on Machiavelli's understanding — and choices — will be strongly underscored. Secondly, I will study the causes Machiavelli gives for the decline and downfall of the Roman Empire, largely following Pocock; but, I will also try to complement his story, and pinpoint to the 'main', most general cause to which Machiavelli attributes Rome's ruin. These two separate threads will unite in the final section of the paper, where I will try to offer a 'solution' to both problems.

I

In the *proemio* of book I of the *Discorsi* Machiavelli clearly states his aims — he wants to induce his contemporaries to properly appreciate history: to imitate it. In the early chapters of book II he is even more specific: the *Discorsi* are written to offer advice to 'those who plan to convert a city into a great empire'.⁶ Machiavelli sees a city, a state, as a living organism,⁷ which has to grow and strengthen, and the natural way to do so is through expansion. It is also a more honourable way⁸ than to stay in limited borders and the only way to achieve greatness. And not any greatness, it is the way to achieve *Roman* greatness. 'To arrive at Roman greatness',⁹ this should be the ideal, as it was the highest, ultimate greatness¹⁰ ever achieved. It is the Roman Republic, especially in its earlier periods before corruption crept in, that should be emulated and taken for example. Those were the times when *res publica crevit*.¹¹ Livy and Sallust are unequivocal about the period when Roman virtue, which achieved world *imperium*, was greatest.

And indeed, for Machiavelli, adaptability to achieve and to maintain a great empire is the yardstick to measure and compare different sorts of government.

⁵ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3: *The First Decline and Fall* (Cambridge, 2003).

⁶ 'Quegli che disegnono che una città faccia grande imperio.' *Discorsi*, II, 3. All the quotations from Machiavelli are fully translated by me; only when translating from the *Discorsi* I sometimes (partly) relied on Leslie J. Walker's translation, revised by Brian Richardson (Harmondsworth, 1970). I used Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Firenze, 1971).

⁷ 'He is the first of the moderns who has risen to such a conception.' Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* [1860], trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (London, 1990), p. 70 (part I, ch. 6).

⁸ '...parte più onorevole...' *Discorsi*, I, 6.

⁹ '...a pervenire alla romana grandezza.' *Ibid.*

¹⁰ 'quella sua ultima grandezza...' *Ibid.*, I, 20.

¹¹ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, X, 1. (For Sallust and Livy, I used Loeb Classical Library translations by J.C. Rolfe and B.O. Foster, amending them sometimes to make the translation closer to the Latin original.)

The classical question of republic vs. principality is examined in this light. Why is a republic (of course, a well-ordered one) to be preferred to a principality? Because a well-ordered republic is better suited for expansion and achieving greatness than a principality. And, what is for Machiavelli *the highest possible aim*: a long-lasting empire which expands. In the *Discorsi* I, 20 we find the best expression of these thoughts:

For it can be seen, how two continuous successions of virtuous princes are sufficient for the conquest of the world: as were in the case of Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great. A republic should be all the more successful, having by its practice of elections not only two successions, but an infinite number of most virtuous princes who are successors to one another; and this virtuous succession may be kept up in a well-ordered republic.¹²

This passage, which is a part of one of the shortest chapters in the *Discorsi*, is heavily reliant on a passage in Livy where he discusses what would have happened if Alexander had invaded Rome.¹³ ‘The Macedonians would have had but a single Alexander, not only exposed to many dangers, but incurring them voluntarily, while there would have been many Romans equal to Alexander, whether for the glory or for the greatness of their deeds.’¹⁴ Notwithstanding that the *locus* is highly rhetorical, Machiavelli is fully endorsing the view of his favourite Roman historian. It should be understood as one of the most important passages in the whole of Machiavelli’s work: here he underlies his priorities and his political ideal.

Notice that Machiavelli included also Philip, not present in Livy’s discussion; he wants to tackle another important issue. The problem of succession is one of the main drawbacks of principalities or kingdoms. This is indeed the

¹² ‘Perché si vede, come due continove successioni di principi virtuosi sono sufficienti ad acquistare il mondo: come furano Filippo di Macedonia ed Alessandro Magno. Il che tanto più debba fare una republica, avendo per il modo dello eleggere non solamente due successioni ma infiniti principi virtuosissimi che sono l’uno dell’altro successori: la quale virtuosa successione fia sempre in ogni republica bene ordinata.’ *Ibid.*

¹³ Livy, IX, 17–19. Hörnqvist (pp. 191–2) also refers to this place in Livy, but does not make any connection with either *Discorsi*, I, 20 or III, 9 [for the latter see *infra*, pp. 755–6]; strangely, he somehow manages to establish the link with Machiavelli’s treatment of Cyrus the Great in *Il Principe*. For a recent analysis of these passages in Livy see Ruth Morello, ‘Livy’s Alexander Digression (9.17–19): Counterfactuals and Apologetics’, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 92 (2002), pp. 62–85; she lists ‘standard bibliography’ on the subject in n. 7. Her focus is largely on ‘counterfactuals’, or, as Weber would have called it, a ‘judgement of possibilities’ (assessing ‘objective historical possibilities’ is historians’ legitimate task, see his ‘Critical Studies in the Logic of the Cultural Sciences’ [1905], esp. pp. 172–3, in *Methodology of Social Sciences*, trans. Edward Shils and Henry Finch (Glencoe, 1949), pp. 113–88).

¹⁴ ‘Macedones unum Alexandrum habuissent, multis casibus non solum obnoxium sed etiam offerentem se, Romani multi fuissent Alexandro vel gloria vel rerum magnitudine pares...’ *Ibid.*, IX, 18.

great drawback of any regime led by a great man, what happens after he is gone? Weber's brilliant concise remark goes to the heart of the question: 'The problem of succession has always been the Achilles heel of all purely Caesarist rule.'¹⁵ There is always a possibility of the accession of a weak and unable ruler, one of the worst dangers any state can be exposed to. A weak ruler is one who is not prepared for war. If such a ruler succeeds a virtuous and able one, he can rule peacefully for many years, 'but, after a weak one, it is impossible with another weak one to maintain any kingdom'.¹⁶ Machiavelli's classical example is Numa after Romulus; he is again closely following Livy.¹⁷ Only when Rome got rid of her kings, was she free of the dangers of succession, and free to take the path of greatness.¹⁸

We find Machiavelli reiterating similar judgements again later in the *Discorsi*. 'One can see... the cities, in which the populace is the prince, making in the shortest time excessive enlargements, and much bigger ones than those which have always been under a prince: as Rome did after the expulsion of the kings, and Athens after it freed itself of Pisistratus.'¹⁹ We clearly see the reiteration of this leading idea: a republic properly organised is a better government than a princely rule, because it is more efficient in acquiring an empire. Of course, Machiavelli always tries to look at a problem from all sides,²⁰ and he adds that if the princes are superior in constituting a state, the

¹⁵ Weber, 'Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order' [1918], p. 227, in *Political Writings*, trans. Ronald Spiers (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 130–271. For a republic, Athens after Pericles is a good example of Weber's point.

¹⁶ '...ma, dopo uno debole, non si può con un altro debole mantenere alcuno regno.' *Discorsi*, I, 19.

¹⁷ Cf. Livy, I, 21: 'Thus two successive kings, each in a different way, one by war, he other by peace, promoted the state.' ('Ita duo deinceps reges, alius alia via, ille bello, hic pace, civitatem auferunt.')

¹⁸ So that 'she managed to reach that ultimate greatness of hers in as many years as she had been under the kings.' ('...poté venire a quella sua ultima grandezza in altrettanti anni che la era stata sotto i re.') *Discorsi*, I, 20.

¹⁹ 'Vedesi... le città, dove i popoli sono principi, fare in brevissimo tempo augumenti eccessivi, e molto maggiori che quelle che sempre sono state sotto uno principe: come fece Roma dopo la cacciata de' re, ed Atene da poi che la si liberò da Pisistrato.' *Ibid.*, I, 58. Cf. a very similar passage in II, 2. Cf. also Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, VII, 3: 'But the free state, once liberty was won, waxed incredibly strong and great in a remarkably short time, such was the thirst for glory that had filled men's minds.' ('Sed civitas incredibile memoratu est adepta libertate quantum brevi creverit; tanta cupido gloriae incusserat.')

²⁰ Thus in *Discursus Florentinarum rerum post mortem iunioris Laurentii Medices* Machiavelli discusses how a republic should be constituted in a city where there is great equality between citizens, and in a city where inequality is present between them, a monarchy is more appropriate. In Florence, a republic is appropriate. Cf. Guicciardini, *Dialogo del Reggimento di Firenze*, pp. 97–100, in *Dialogo e discorsi del Reggimento di Firenze*, ed. Roberto Palmarocchi (Bari, 1932), for similar thoughts.

populace is much superior in maintaining what was constituted.²¹ It must be emphasised that Machiavelli has the habit in the *Discorsi* that, when comparing the plebs with a prince, he often thinks of the population of the early Roman Republic as compared with some ordinary, typical prince:²² the conclusions, as might be guessed, are often not positive for the prince.

Yet, Machiavelli knew that ‘a multitude is useless without a head’²³ and that great individuals are needed to organise a republic, and to lead it. As Friedrich Meinecke observed: ‘His republican ideal therefore contained a strain of monarchism, in so far as he believed that even republics could not come into existence without the help of great individual ruling personalities and organizers.’²⁴ A republic certainly cannot do without strong individuals who will take its leadership, in the same way that a principality is not able to maintain itself for too long if it is headed by a weak ruler. A big advantage for a republic is that it has a large pool of individuals from whom to choose leaders, according to necessary conditions and changes of *fortuna*, whilst a prince is only one.

Therefore it follows that a republic has a fuller life, and enjoys good fortune for a longer time, than a principality, since it is better able to adapt itself to diverse circumstances, owing to the diversity found among its citizens, than a prince can do. For a man who is accustomed to proceed in a particular way, never changes, as it was said; and it follows by necessity that, when times change, and no longer suit his way, he is ruined.²⁵

²¹ ‘E se i principi sono superiori a’ popoli nello ordinare leggi, formare vite civili, ordinare statuti ed ordini nuovi; i popoli sono tanto superiori nel mantenere le cose ordinate, ch’egli aggiungono senza dubbio alla gloria di coloro che l’ordinano.’ *Discorsi*, I, 58.

²² Guicciardini was the first to notice it, and complain, that a proper comparison requires first amongst the princes, as the Romans were amongst the peoples, *Considerazioni intorno ai Discorsi del Machiavelli*, I, 58. [The author cannot resist mentioning that he noticed it on his own, before reading Guicciardini; one should assume that some other observant readers did the same — moreover, as *Considerazioni* were published only in 1857!] That is the reason why the comparison of a republic modelled on Rome with a monarchy ruled by Philip II and Alexander is so important: two of the finest examples are compared.

²³ ‘Una moltitudine senza capo è inutile’, *Discorsi*, I, 44.

²⁴ Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: the Doctrine of Raison d’État and Its Place in Modern History* [1924], trans. Douglas Scott (New York, 1957), p. 32. One may be included to attribute the linking of monarchism with the emphasis on great personalities to Meinecke’s own background; however, cf. e.g. the classical description of Pericles’ rule in Athens given by Thucydides, II, 65, and quoted also by Plutarch, *Pericles*, IX, 1, who in XV, 2 gives his own judgement in even (theoretically) stronger terms.

²⁵ ‘Quinci nasce che una republica ha maggiore vita, ed ha più lungamente buona fortuna, che uno principato, perché la può meglio accomodarsi alla diversità de’ temporali, per la diversità de’ cittadini che sono in quella, che non può uno principe. Perché un uomo che sia consueto a procedere in uno modo, non si muta mai, come è

Again, the mentioned *locus* from Livy is crucial for Machiavelli's conclusions; Rome abounded with great men, and from its citizens, of various dispositions and talents, was able to choose those best suited to lead her as the conditions change. In contrast, the Macedonians had just *unum Alexandrum*.²⁶ Livy continues: 'If beaten in a single battle, Alexander would have been beaten in the war: the Romans, whom Caudium, whom Cannae could not break, what battle could?'²⁷ Indeed, in their most decisive war, against Hannibal — described by Livy in books XXI–XXX — the Romans had enough great men to adapt to changing circumstances: for the defence, their 'shield', Fabius Maximus, and 'sword', Marcus Marcellus; for the offence, Scipio. All this Machiavelli knows more than well; in fact, in the very same chapter of the *Discorsi*, he expressly discusses Fabius Cunctator and Scipio as two different answers to Hannibal, concluding:

And if Fabius had been a king of Rome, he might easily have lost that war; since he would not have known how to change, with his methods, as the times changed: but he was born in a republic where there were diverse citizens and diverse humours, as it had Fabius, who was best in the times fitting to sustain the war, so later had Scipio, in the times suited to win it.²⁸

The superior adaptability of the republic vis-à-vis the principality does not just follow from the point that a prince is the one on whom everything depends. In general, there are fewer virtuous men in principalities and kingdoms — a problem which moreover seems to have an internal connection with succession in most Caesarist regimes.²⁹ As Machiavelli points out in *Arte della guerra*: 'For in republics there are more excellent men than in

detto; e conviene di necessità che, quando e' si mutano i tempi disformi a quel suo modo, che rovinì.' *Discorsi*, III, 9. Compare with what Machiavelli said on *fortuna* in the famous chapter XXV of *Il Principe*: 'I conclude, then, that as the fortune changes and men stay in their inflexible moods, they are happy while there is concord between the two, and as they discord, become unhappy.' ('Concludo, adunque, che, variando la fortuna, e stando li uomini ne' loro modi ostinati, sono felici mentre concordano insieme, e, come discordano, infelici.') Julius II, *the example of inflexibility*, is mentioned also in *Discorsi*, III, 9. Men cannot act contrary to their nature, the conclusion is in both *Discorsi*, III, 9, and *Il Principe*, XXV.

²⁶ Livy, IX, 18. For the full Latin original see *supra*, n. 14.

²⁷ 'Uno proelio victus Alexander bello victus esset: Romanum, quem Caudium, quem Cannae non frugerunt, quae fregisset acies?' *Ibid.*, IX, 19.

²⁸ 'E se Fabio fusse stato re di Roma, poteva facilmente perdere quella guerra; perché non arebbe saputo variare, col procedere suo, secondo che variavano i tempi: ma essendo nato in una republica dove erano diversi cittadini e diversi umori, come la ebbe Fabio, che fu ottimo ne' tempi debiti a sostenere la guerra, così ebbe poi Scipione, ne' tempi atti a vincerla.' *Discorsi*, III, 9.

²⁹ I am purposely using here Weber's terminology, for in the essay quoted above, he in fact laments that Bismarck was discouraging the formation and training of a political elite, capable of ruling the country; however, in contrast to Machiavelli, imbued with

kingdoms, because in the former, virtue is more often honoured, in kingdoms it is feared; it follows then that in one the virtuous men are nurtured, in other they are wasted.³⁰ This additional argument comes from *Bellum Catilinae* — widely read at the time³¹ — when Sallust comments on the establishment of the Republic: ‘Now at that time every man began to lift his head higher and to have his talents more in readiness. For kings are more suspicious of good [men] than of bad, to them the virtue of others is always fraught with danger.’³²

II

It should be strongly emphasised that in the *Discorsi* Machiavelli often speaks of republics in general while having only Rome on his mind, and draws general conclusions about them, which are sometimes only valid for specific Roman circumstances. Nevertheless, Machiavelli very clearly distinguished two different types of republic one can constitute: one apt to found an empire, like Rome, or one just interested in maintaining itself. Chapters I, 5 and I, 6 from the *Discorsi* are most revealing in this matter. Machiavelli there discusses how to constitute a republic and whether the guardianship of liberty³³ should be entrusted to the plebs, as in Rome, or to the nobles, as in Sparta and Venice. This is to be decided by the type of republic one wants to constitute:

Either you have in mind a republic that wants to found an empire, as Rome did; or one to which it is enough to maintain itself. In the first case, it is nec-

Livian rhetoric, Weber clearly thinks that great statesmen are very rare, and suggests for that very reason the education of (a moderately capable) elite.

³⁰ ‘Perché delle repubbliche esce più uomini eccellenti che de’ regni, perché in quelle il più delle volte si onora la virtù, ne’ regni si teme; onde ne nasce che nell’una gli uomini virtuosi si nutriscono, nell’altra si spengono.’ *Arte della guerra*, II (p. 332).

³¹ ‘Everybody has read conspiracy of Catiline written by Sallust’ (‘Ciascuno ha letto la congiura di Catilina scritta da Sallustio’), remarked Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, III, 6. How amazingly apt was his comment, even in the two following centuries, is confirmed by Peter Burke, ‘A Survey of the Popularity of Ancient Historians, 1450–1700’, *History and Theory*, 5.2 (1966), pp. 135–52. See tables 1 and 2 on pp. 136 and 137: Sallust is the most popular (i.e. the most published) historian over the whole period, *Catilina* being the first on the list, closely followed by his own *Iugurtha*! By far most popular in 1450–99 and 1500–49, Sallust is also the only historian to be among the top three during the whole period in question (p. 137).

³² ‘Sed ea tempestate coepere se quisque magis extollere magisque ingenium in promptu habere. Nam regibus boni quam mali suspiciores sunt semperque eis aliena virtus formidulosa est.’ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*, VII, 1–2.

³³ ‘...una guardia alla libertà’, *Discorsi*, I, 5.

essary to do all things as Rome did; in the second, it is possible to imitate Venice and Sparta.³⁴

Thus, Machiavelli distinguishes two models of republic: an expansionistic and a non-expansionistic one. We must point out that among most of Machiavelli's contemporaries, Venice is usually looked to as a model,³⁵ and Machiavelli's position is rather atypical.³⁶ The other great Florentine thinker, Francesco Guicciardini, in his *Dialogo del Reggimento di Firenze*, regarded Venice and Sparta as superior to Rome, and Venice superior to both.³⁷ Not Machiavelli: his model state and the ultimate example is the Roman Republic.³⁸

'For many centuries [both] Rome and Sparta were armed and free', stated Machiavelli in *Il Principe*.³⁹ But, reflecting in the *Discorsi* as to whom the guardianship of liberty should be entrusted, Machiavelli is sure that Spartan (and Venetian) liberty lasted longer:

³⁴ 'O tu ragioni d'una republica che voglia fare uno imperio, come Roma; o d'una che le basti mantenersi. Nel primo caso, gli è necessario fare ogni cosa come Roma; nel secondo, può imitare Vinegia e Sparta.' *Ibid.*

³⁵ Donato Giannotti, *Libro della repubblica di Viniziani* (drafted 1526, published 1543), Gasparo Contarini, *De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum* (sketched 1522–5, revised early 1530s, published 1543), et al. For a thorough discussion in English, see ch. 9 of Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment*: 'Giannotti and Contarini: Venice as Concept and as Myth' (pp. 272–330). From the late sixteenth century Paolo Paruta, *Discorsi Politiche* (published 1599), should be mentioned.

³⁶ As Felix Gilbert put it, Machiavelli was 'the only Florentine political thinker who was not an admirer of Venice'. 'The Venetian Constitution in Florentine Political Thought', p. 488, in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (London, 1968), pp. 463–500. See the whole article, on the influence of Venetian model in Florence. Note that besides Guicciardini, Giannotti was also a Florentine, while Contarini was a Venetian (as was Paruta, but from a later generation).

³⁷ In his early work Guicciardini idealised Sparta, but that was a hardly applicable model, as he understood even then; see my 'A "Medical Moment": Guicciardini and Lycurgus' Knife', *History of European Ideas*, 34.1 (2008), pp. 1–13. In Guicciardini's later writings Venice is recommended as model; see *Dialogo*, p. 104 ff. The strongest expression is on pp. 138–9: '... Venetian government, which, if I am not mistaken, is the finest and best government not only of our times, but also perhaps that ever a city in ancient times had.' ('... governo viniziano, el quale, se io non mi inganno, è il più bello ed migliore governo non solo de' tempi nostri, ma ancora che forse avessi mai a' tempi antichi alcuna città.') Pocock's analysis of the *Dialogo* in *The Machiavellian Moment*, ch. 8, concentrates in particular on Guicciardini's treatment of Venice. See also n. 58 *infra* for another praise of the Venetian government in Guicciardini's *Storia d'Italia*.

³⁸ Here, cf. Guicciardini's memorable *ricordo* directed against those who *a ogni parola allegano e Romani, Ricordi* (Milano, 1951), II, 110, and Gilbert's comment on Machiavelli as 'the creator of an utopia', *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in the Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton, 1965), p. 192.

³⁹ 'Stettono Roma e Sparta molti secoli armate e libere.' *Il Principe*, XII.

Therefore, it is necessary to examine which of these republics had the better choice. And if one goes after the reasons, there is something to say for either side; but, if their result is examined, the side of the Nobles would be chosen, *for the liberty of Sparta and Venice have had a longer life than did that of Rome.*⁴⁰

The second type, the non-expansionistic republic, has the advantage of particular longevity. A crucial passage which follows clearly shows that Machiavelli thought that such a republic could enjoy long life in liberty:

I firmly believe, that to set up a republic which is to last a long time, the way to set about it is to order it inside as Sparta or as Venice; to place it in strong position, and of such force that nobody will believe being able to immediately take it; and, on the other hand, not to make it so large as to appear formidable to its neighbours: and in such a way it could enjoy its state for a long time. ...if it be difficult to take it by assault, as I am presupposing, owing to its being well ordered for defence, rarely will it occur, or never, that someone makes plans to capture it. If it stays within its confines, and it is seen, by experience, that in it there is no ambition, it will never occur that someone through fear for himself makes war with it: and even more so, if in its constitution or laws there was a prohibition of expansion. And without doubt I believe that, if the balance could be maintained in this way, there would be genuine political life and real tranquillity in such a city.⁴¹

Thoroughly exploring things from all sides, Machiavelli finds the additional argument that this non-expansionistic republic may be forced by necessity to expand, and is then doomed. Such case is described in *L'Asino*, where both Venice and Sparta are targeted by Machiavelli's jest:

⁴⁰ 'Pertanto, è necessario esaminare quale di queste republiche avesse migliore elezione. E se si andasse dietro alle ragioni ci è che dire da ogni parte; ma se si esaminasse il fine loro, si piglierebbe la parte de' Nobili, per avere avuta la libertà di Sparta e di Vinegia più lunga vita che quella di Roma.' *Discorsi*, I, 5. [My emphasis.]

⁴¹ 'Crederei bene, che a fare una republica che durasse lungo tempo, fusse il modo, ordinarla dentro come Sparta o come Vinegia; porla in luogo forte, e di tale potenza che nessuno credesse poterla subito opprimere; e, dall'altra parte, non fusse sì grande, che la fusse formidabile a' vicini: e così potrebbe lungamente godersi il suo stato. ...se la è difficile a espugnarsi, come io la presuppongo, sendo bene ordinata alla difesa, rade volte accaderà, o non mai, che uno possa fare disegno di acquistarla. Se la si starà intra i termini suoi, e veggasi, per esperienza, che in lei non sia ambizione, non occorrerà mai che uno per paura di sé le faccia guerra: e tanto più sarebbe questo, se e' fussi in lei costituzione o legge che le proibisse l'ampliare. E senza dubbio credo, che, potendosi tenere la cosa bilanciata in questo modo, che e' sarebbe il vero vivere politico e la vera quiete d'una città.' *Ibid.*, I, 6. Unlike Machiavelli, Guicciardini does not allow for such a possibility, that a city 'content with its freedom and its small territory' can live in peace and survive. *Dialogo*, p. 73, is very clear, 'it must be either powerful enough to oppress others, or it must be oppressed by others' ('bisogna o che sia in modo potente che opprima gli altri, o che sia oppressa da altri').

*San Marco impetuoso ed importuno,
credendosi aver sempre il vento in poppa,
non si curò di ruinare ognuno;
né vide come la potenza troppa
era nociva, e come il me' sarebbe
tener sott'acqua la coda e la groppa.
Spesso uno ha pianto lo stato ch'egli ebbe,
e, dopo il fatto, poi s'accorge come
a sua ruina e a suo danno crebbe.
Atene e Sparta, di cui s'è gran nome
fu già nel mondo, allor sol ruinorno
quando ebber le potenze intorno dome.*⁴²

Yet, is that indeed for him the primary argument against such a republic? Sparta and Venice, far from following all the advice given by Machiavelli, still enjoyed their liberty longer than Rome. In *Arte della guerra* Machiavelli expressly stated: Sparta was free for eight hundred years, Rome was free for only four hundred;⁴³ this is a highly indicative confirmation of his earlier statement about the longer life of Spartan (and Venetian) liberty, from the beginning of the *Discorsi*, I, 5. In fact, in Germany there exist republics ordered in a way Machiavelli suggested, that in this manner 'live and have lived free for some time'.⁴⁴

But for Machiavelli, liberty is of secondary importance; what he really cares about is greatness, expansion, empire. Such an instrumental understanding of liberty is practically embedded in his peculiar understanding of historical greatness. It is outside the scope of this article to engage in further discussion of this question, and refute the arguments of those who uphold the 'priority of liberty' in Machiavelli's thought.⁴⁵ It should be enough to assert

⁴² 'San Marco impetuous and importune, / thinking that wind always blows in his sails, / did not care if he destroys everybody; / he did not see how too much power / was injurious, and how better would be / to keep under water the tail and the rump. [i.e. keeping low profile] / Often one has founded the state that he was, / and, when it's done, then he realises how / his ruin and his damage grew. / Athens and Sparta, whose great name / was once in the world, then only destroyed themselves / when the powers around they subdued.' *L'Asino*, V, lines 49–60. Same story told here in verse, Machiavelli tells us in this crucial chapter of the *Discorsi*, I, 6. On Athenian and Spartan expansion cf. also *Discorsi*, II, 3, and discussion below.

⁴³ 'Stette Roma libera quattrocento anni, ed era armata: Sparta ottocento...' *Arte della guerra*, I (p. 311).

⁴⁴ '...le repubbliche della Magna, le quali in questi modi vivano e sono vivute libere un tempo.' *Discorsi*, II, 19. Cf. *L'Asino*, V, the verses just following those quoted here.

⁴⁵ I have particularly in mind Quentin Skinner, who has been the most influential commentator of Machiavelli during the last three decades, and has been advancing such an interpretation from the *Foundations* onwards, in numerous articles (now largely available — though often substantially changed — in vol. 2 of his *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge, 2002)) and in a short introductory study, *Machiavelli* (Oxford, 1981).

concerning the *libertas et imperium* problem that the author of this work strongly supports the view that empire-building is the priority of Machiavelli's political ideal; peaceful dwelling in the liberty of a small German city-republic is certainly the last thing Machiavelli is interested in.

Machiavelli's discussion of the choice between the two types of republics, his assumptions, as well as his conclusions, are heavily influenced by Polybius' comparison of Lycurgus' constitution with that of Rome, present in the surviving part of his book VI.⁴⁶ Indeed, the whole opposition of the expansionistic versus non-expansionistic republic originates in Polybius' 'digression' on Sparta (as he calls it), and it is evident that all of this material was undoubtedly at Machiavelli's disposal.⁴⁷ Influences from all three chapters

Though nuances change over time, the main claim, on Machiavelli and the 'priority of liberty', is central to all these publications. Skinner's own specific republican sympathies strongly influence his interpretation, and in many instances — as with this key question — we get a very different Machiavelli from the one which close reading of his works reveals. While direct criticism requires much more space than we can here allow, I believe that the analysis provided in this article *inter alia* also indirectly rebuts such views, offering the reader a view much closer to *verità effettuale della cosa*. Pocock's examination of the crucial issue of *libertas* vs. *imperium* puts forward a Machiavelli remarkably different from Skinner's; yet the difference has been rarely noted, or simply disregarded (including both authors commenting each other's work), and Pocock is in general paid little heed to on this point.

⁴⁶ Polybius, VI, 48–50, cf. also 45.7–8. (All quotations are from Loeb Classical Library translation by W.R. Paton (Cambridge, Mass., 1922–7).)

⁴⁷ Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Polybius' Reappearance in Western Europe', in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 79–98, does not underscore the extent of the influence nor mentions this important question. The most exhaustive discussion of Polybius and Machiavelli is Gennaro Sasso's learned 'Polibio e Machiavelli: costituzione, potenza, conquista', in his *Studi su Machiavelli* (Napoli, 1967), pp. 223–80 (cf. also 'La teoria dell'anacyclosis', pp. 161–222, focused on that particular question); Sasso is focused exclusively on Polybius' book VI. He, however, is much keener to point out the differences between Polybius and Machiavelli, than the similarities — as he holds that Polybius had a static view of history, and the motif of "gratuità della scelta" between the two cities present in Polybius is 'completamente superato' by Machiavelli (p. 269), who is understood to maintain there is no real possibility of choice. This understanding goes against the analysis offered here: but, note that Machiavelli's clear statement on Spartan liberty from *Arte della guerra* is not considered by Sasso, nor that Machiavelli in fact adds the condition of non-aggressivity, thus clearly improving the Spartan model from Polybius (discussed just below). Cf. also David Armitage, 'Empire and Liberty: A Republican Dilemma', in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, ed. Martin van Gelderen, Q. Skinner (Cambridge, 2002), vol. 2, pp. 29–46, briefly mentioning Polybius' influence (pp. 34–5) on this question, but misrepresenting the issue by partial quotation: both Polybius' view, and Machiavelli's acceptance of it (in n. 6 he refers in support to Sasso, whose conclusions are, however, completely different). The issue of Polybius' most direct influence seems to be hardly noticed; thus even Pocock, who gives much attention to the choice offered in the *Discorsi* I, 5 and I, 6, and is keen to emphasise Polybius' influence on Machiavelli (see e.g. pp. 189–90) — indeed,

concerned with the issue can be noted, but Polybius' conclusion on the purpose of his digression is crucial:

It is to show from the actual evidence of facts, that for the purpose of remaining in secure possession of their own territory and maintaining their freedom the legislation of Lycurgus is amply sufficient, and to those who maintain this to be the object of political constitutions we must admit that there is not and never was any system or constitution superior to that of Lycurgus. But if anyone is ambitious of greater things, and esteems it finer and more glorious than that to be the leader of many men and to rule and lord it over many and have the eyes of all the world turned to him, it must be admitted that from this point of view the Laconian constitution is defective, while that of Rome is superior and better framed for the attainment of power, as is indeed evident from the actual course of events. For when the Lacedaemonians endeavoured to obtain supremacy in Greece, they very soon ran the risk of losing their own liberty; whereas the Romans, who had aimed merely at the subjection of Italy, in a short time brought the whole world under their sway, the abundance of supplies they had at their command conducing in no small measure to this result.⁴⁸

This is clearly the origin of Machiavelli's choice; note that Polybius earlier mentions how Lycurgus left to the Spartans 'a lasting heritage of freedom', and how he prepared them to endure hardships and be able to defend themselves from their neighbours.⁴⁹ He made, however, no provisions to curb their external, public ambitions, as he did with their internal, private ones⁵⁰ and, Machiavelli, as we saw, improves the model by adding there should be no ambition, and even better, an explicit prohibition of expansion.⁵¹ That is a viable option — plainly supported by the length of the Spartan liberty even without such an improvement — but not the one Machiavelli himself wants to choose. For he is the one 'ambitious of greater things' yearning for the 'finer and more glorious' option of world dominance; he recognises himself in these words of Polybius, and echoes them in his own account: when constituting republics *bisogna pensare alle parte più onorevole*.⁵²

As we have mentioned, Machiavelli adds that the non-expansionistic republic may be forced by *necessità* to expand, to further support the

on the whole grand issue he pursues in *The Machiavellian Moment* — clearly did not realise it.

⁴⁸ Polybius, VI, 50.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, VI, 48.4–5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, VI, 48.6–8.

⁵¹ A regulation which, as Polybius himself suggests, was lacking in the Spartan republic: 'What he [Lycurgus] left undone, therefore, was to bring to bear on the citizens some force or principle, by which, just as he had made them simple and contented in their private lives, he might make the spirit of the city as a whole likewise contented and moderate.' (VI, 48.7)

⁵² *Discorsi*, I, 6.

expansionistic option as the better choice;⁵³ but it is clear that for him this is not the decisive reason of his choice. The analysis he found in Polybius fitted perfectly with the glorious view of Roman history he acquired from Livy. Machiavelli, with his head full of Livy, is certain that the Roman ‘800 years of war’ are undoubtedly more glorious than Alexander’s mere thirteen;⁵⁴ and, moreover, he is also fully prepared to support a trade-off of a republic’s longevity (i.e. its living in liberty) for a better constitution for external expansion. Pocock, who has given due attention to the *Discorsi*, I, 5 and I, 6,⁵⁵ understands this well: ‘a republic may pursue empire at the sacrifice of its own longevity — a choice which involves a preference for a more popular sort of government’.⁵⁶

Choice of the *governo largo* of the Roman type⁵⁷ was exactly what the more conservative Guicciardini and a majority of Machiavelli’s contemporaries did not like, for in Rome such a constitution caused many tumults and disturbances, a product of animosities between the senate and the plebs.⁵⁸ While

⁵³ *Ibid.*, cf. also II, 19 and verses from *L’Asino* quoted above.

⁵⁴ Cf. Livy, IX, 18.

⁵⁵ According to him, ‘the second major hypothesis’ of the *Discorsi* is there developed. *Machiavellian Moment*, p. 196.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197. He adds that ‘the short view is more interesting than the long, and life in it more glorious’ (p. 198); though he also indicates that he probably equates importance of this with the secondary argument, ‘the Roman path... is both wiser and more glorious’ (p. 199). That the *main* reason for choice (not one of the two) is ‘ambition for greater things’ can be concluded by close reading; but the Polybian origins of the choice confirm this without any doubt. Armitage, ‘Republican Dilemma’, (though mentioning Polybius!) misunderstands the problem claiming that ‘the main reason to prefer the course of Rome was not glory but security in a world of change and ambition’ (p. 33); moreover, suggesting that this is a ‘pessimistic’ dilemma, and Machiavelli chooses Rome as ‘at least the bitter pill of servitude would be sweetened by the brief taste of glory that came with *grandezza*’ (p. 35). Geoff Kennedy, ‘The “Republican Dilemma” and the Changing Social Context of Republicanism in the Early Modern Period’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, 8.3 (2009), pp. 313–38, follows Armitage, and does not realise that choosing Rome entails a wilful sacrifice of liberty’s length (see esp. p. 315) — which could be revealed by close reading, and was, moreover, stressed by Pocock already three and a half decades ago. Most of the other commentators, including Skinner, completely disregard the issue of the key choice in question. In the *Foundations*, vol. 1, p. 160, it is just briefly referred to; afterwards it is not even mentioned, including the articles expressly concerned with Machiavelli and liberty.

⁵⁷ To clarify a possible misunderstanding: Machiavelli supports a government shared between optimates and plebs, i.e. a mixed constitution; however, the ‘guardianship of liberty’ role in Rome was given to plebeians, via the tribunes magistracy. Guicciardini’s comment puts it clearly, ‘the government of Rome was mixed, not plebeian’ (‘el governo di Roma era misto, non plebeo’). *Considerazioni*, I, 5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, I, 4 and I, 6. See also the oration of the doge Lionardo Loredano in Venetian senate in *Storia d’Italia*, VIII, 10, and the *laudatio* for the *Serenissima* Guicciardini puts in his mouth: without any civil strife and discord, and no blood shed between their citi-

Machiavelli is fully aware that in the end from this antagonism ‘arose the power of Marius, and the ruin of Rome’,⁵⁹ he thinks it was beneficial, and, furthermore, necessary. ‘One might wonder whether Rome could have done the great things she did, without such enmities existing in her’?⁶⁰ Rome was able to turn outside the energy produced by these tumults; that was exactly what was needed for external expansion. If these internal animosities were removed, the Roman state would become quieter but at the expense of becoming weaker: ‘for there would be discarded the way of being able to arrive at that greatness which she reached’, and thus ‘if Rome wanted to remove the causes of the tumults, she would have also removed the causes of expansion’.⁶¹

Here, we come to one of the crucial factors needed for Machiavelli’s plans: *uno popolo numeroso ed armato per poter fare un grande imperio*.⁶² Spartans were armed,⁶³ but were not numerous enough, as they were not admitting foreigners.⁶⁴ Of course, Machiavelli strongly recommends *armi proprie* to every state, but *governo largo* is required for an expansionistic one, as it is the only one that provides enough soldiers to pursue all the wars such politics entails. The *Discorsi*, II, 3 is dedicated to that problem, for ‘without this abundance of

zens for centuries, Venetian concord excels Rome, Carthage, Athens and Sparta. (‘...la forma del governo che, temperato di tutti i modi migliori di qualunque specie di amministrazione pubblica e composta in modo a guisa di armonia, proporzionato e concordante tutto a se medesimo, è durato già tanti secoli, senza sedizione civile senza armi e senza sangue tra i suoi cittadini, inviolabile e immacolato; laude unica della nostra repubblica, e della quale non si può gloriare né Roma né Cartagine né Atene né Lacedemone.’)

⁵⁹ ‘...dove nacque la potenza di Mario, e la rovina di Roma.’ *Discorsi*, I, 5.

⁶⁰ ‘...potrebbe alcuno desiderare che Roma avesse fatti gli effetti grandi che la fece, senza che in quella fussono tali inimicizie.’ *Ibid.*, I, 6. Guicciardini thinks yes, and he specifically argues against this view: the Romans acquired their empire not *because* of, but *despite* tumults and disturbances present in their city, thanks to the exceeding excellence of their *armi proprie*. War was their trade [*bottega*] already in the time of the kings, as well as later in the republic. *Dialogo*, p. 68.

⁶¹ ‘Ma venendo lo stato romano a essere più quieto, ne seguiva questo inconveniente, ch’egli era anche più debile, perché e’ gli si troncava la via di potere venire a quella grandezza dove ei pervenne: in modo che, volendo Roma levare le cagioni de’ tumultu, levava ancora le cagioni dello ampliare.’ *Discorsi*, I, 6.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ ‘...di Sparta e di Atene: le quali essendo dua repubbliche armatissime’, *ibid.*, II, 3. ‘Stette Roma libera quattrocento anni, ed era armata: Sparta ottocento...’ *Arte della guerra*, I (p. 311).

⁶⁴ ‘...non aprire la via a’ forestieri, come gli Spartani’, *Discorsi*, I, 6; ‘Perché Licurgo, fondatore della repubblica spartana, considerando nessuna cosa potere più facilmente risolvere le sue leggi che la commistione di nuovi abitatori, fece ogni cosa perché i forestieri non avessero a conversarvi’, *ibid.*, II, 3.

men, no city will ever become great'.⁶⁵ It could be done either by force or by friendly methods; the Romans used both. Athens and Sparta, not having enough soldiers, overextended themselves, and lost; never managing to reach the heights of Roman greatness. A small republic cannot successfully occupy states that are stronger and larger than it is; that would be like a tree that has a larger branch than the trunk.⁶⁶ Thus, Machiavelli concludes: 'I believe that is necessary to follow the Roman constitution, and not that of the other republics.'⁶⁷

One thing must be emphasised: while quantity of soldiers is obviously very important, the quality is even more so. Good soldiers are the nerve of war.⁶⁸ And when Machiavelli says *popolo armato* (or, even better, *armatissimo*), he already implies that those are good, virtuous soldiers. An ideal army is made from part-time soldiers, who are to be concerned with military life and war only at the time when their state calls them. Soldiers should not be allowed to be professionals, to take war as their art (*arte*, i.e. job, profession in this sense); only the public, i.e. the commonwealth should be allowed to pursue *guerra* as its *arte*.⁶⁹

A citizen-soldier fights for glory and for his city, and when the war ends, he returns to his home; he lives from his own civilian *arte*. A professional soldier lives from war, and cares only about his own private interests. To fight for one's own city is a civic duty, and citizens should, as in the early Roman Republic, do their utmost when fighting for the greatness of their fatherland. Political status was in Rome very much connected with military service, and sacrifice was expected from individuals if circumstances required.⁷⁰ How the

⁶⁵ '...sanza questa abbondanza di uomini, mai non riuscirà di fare grande una città.' *Ibid.*, II, 3.

⁶⁶ 'Però una republica piccola non può occupare città né regni che sieno più validi né più grossi di lei; e, se pure gli occupa, gl'interviene come a quello albero che avesse più grosso il ramo che il piede, che, sostenendolo con fatica, ogni piccol vento lo fiacca.' *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ 'Credo ch'e' sia necessario seguire l'ordine romano, e non quello dell'altre republiche.' *Ibid.*, I, 6.

⁶⁸ '...il nervo della guerra, [sono] i buoni soldati.' *Ibid.*, II, 10.

⁶⁹ On the richness of the meaning of *arte della guerra*, see Pocock's explanation, *Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 199–200, who closely follows Machiavelli's account from *Arte della guerra*, I.

⁷⁰ Machiavelli highly praises individual Romans who have on their own initiative done some extraordinary sacrifice for the Republic: 'Those who in Rome particularly made these good effects, were Horatius Cocles, Scaevola, Fabricus, the two Decii, Regulus Attilius, and several others, who with their rare and virtuous examples made in Rome almost the same effect as laws and orders would have done.' ('Quegli che in Roma particolarmente feciono questi buoni effetti, furono Orazio Cocle, Scevola, Fabrizio, i dua Deci, Regolo Attilio, ed alcuni altri i quali con i loro esempli rari e virtuosi facevano in Roma quasi il medesimo effetto che si facessino le leggi e gli ordini.') *Discorsi*, III, 1.

Romans subsequently treated their citizens who surrendered at Cannae is the best example.⁷¹

In Machiavelli's well-ordered republic, founded on the Roman example, a politically virtuous citizen needs to be a virtuous soldier, and to show how valiant he is in war whenever the need arises. On this military *virtù* the greatness of the republic, and an empire will be built. It was not *fortuna*, but *virtù* that was the principal cause of the empire the Romans acquired.⁷²

III

It is not chance that rules the world. Ask the Romans, who had a continuous sequence of successes when they were guided by a certain plan, and an uninterrupted sequence of reverses when they followed another. There are general causes, moral and physical, which act in every monarchy, elevating it, maintaining it, or hurling it to the ground. All accidents are controlled by these causes. And if the chance of one battle — that is, a particular cause — has brought a state to ruin, some general cause made it necessary for that state to perish from a single battle. In a word, the main trend draws with it all particular accidents.⁷³

We have examined Machiavelli's answer to a classical question of the best form of government, and established why Machiavelli prefers a republic to a principality, and why he prefers the expansionistic model of republic based on Rome over the non-expansionistic one based on Sparta and Venice. As we have seen, Machiavelli accordingly develops his political ideal, the model of the expansionistic republic that should closely follow the ultimate Roman example. However, there are limitations inherent in that model, and they are closely connected with the decline and fall of Rome. We shall now examine this issue: to grasp Machiavelli's understanding of the Roman downfall is of particular importance as it shows the *extent* of his attachment to the Roman example as well as the price he is ready to pay to renew Roman(-like) greatness and virtue.

The distinction from Montesquieu quoted above is indeed very useful if one wants to systemise the various reflections that Machiavelli offers as causes of the decline and downfall of the Roman Empire. Here, I do not want

⁷¹ See Livy, XXII, 59–61.

⁷² '...quanto possa più la virtù che la fortuna loro [i Romani] ad acquistare quello imperio...' *Discorsi*, II, 1. Plutarch in his *De fortuna Romanorum* (*Moralia*, 316C–326C) holds that the Romans owed their success more to fortune than to virtue, and the very intention of this chapter in the *Discorsi* is to refute his view: 'Molti hanno avuta opinione, ed in tra' quali Plutarco, gravissimo scrittore, che 'l popolo romano nello acquistare lo imperio fosse più favorito dalla fortuna che dalla virtù.' Indeed, Plutarch, being a Greek, at the end of the essay — in clear contrast to Livy's Alexandrian digression — ascribes the death of Alexander to Roman fortune (ch. 13 / *Moralia*, 326A–C).

⁷³ Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline* [1734], trans. David Lowenthal (Ithaca, 1965), XVIII (p. 169).

to deal with any particular cause (in Montesquieu's sense), but with more and less general causes. Analysing a cause of decline, Pocock very aptly observed that 'no reader of Machiavelli would be surprised to find him giving other causes for decline in other places, since he often makes such general statements in particular contexts'.⁷⁴ I will try to put these causes in some sort of (hierarchical) order, and identify the main trend and the less general ones, that follow in its train, relying largely on Pocock's account(s), but also seeking to complement it with another important cause which was either not fully developed or not emphasised enough by him.

Let us first turn to the collapse of the Republic, i.e. to the decline. In *The Machiavellian Moment* Pocock found two principal causes to which Machiavelli attributes the ruin of the Roman Republic.⁷⁵ First is the resurgence of the Agrarian Law, connected with the Gracchi, and the hatred that it aroused between plebs and patricians, second is the prolongation of the military commands. The first draws on the *Discorsi*, I, 37, the second on III, 24 and the more extensive account in book I of *Arte della guerra*. In the chapter on Machiavelli in *Barbarism and Religion*⁷⁶ Pocock follows his earlier writing. However, while he earlier denied that Machiavelli ever 'quite arrived at the point of uniting the two explanations',⁷⁷ a more careful reading of the *Discorsi*, I, 37 some three decades later persuaded Pocock that Machiavelli did in fact establish the link.⁷⁸ Thus, we now have the 'Gracchan explanation' united with the kernel of the 'Tacitean narrative', ending with Caesar as *il primo tiranno* that 'emerged to rule Rome with his now mercenary army'.⁷⁹

The Republic is brought down, but the Empire is still there, standing. As the *Discorsi* lack 'a Tacitean dimension',⁸⁰ Pocock turns towards *Il Principe*. The problem of mercenaries is far from over, as now soldiers are allowed to take war as their profession, *arte*, and are choosing emperors as it fits their temporary interests. This is the story we well know from *Arte della guerra*; Pocock follows what he wrote in *The Machiavellian Moment*.⁸¹ Professionalisation of the soldiery that started under the proconsuls reaches its peak under the

⁷⁴ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3, p. 221.

⁷⁵ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 211.

⁷⁶ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3, ch. 10.

⁷⁷ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 211. Harrington observed that, says Pocock, but does not indicate the place.

⁷⁸ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3, pp. 212–14.

⁷⁹ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, p. 211. Pocock here offered a union of the two explanations, which Machiavelli 'did not' establish — and it fits perfectly with what he now realised Machiavelli did establish!

⁸⁰ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3, p. 214.

⁸¹ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 199–201.

emperors. 'From these things resulted, first, the division of the empire, and in the end, its ruin.'⁸²

However, there is also the question of barbarians, and their role in the fall, in which Pocock is naturally interested, so he finds another of Machiavelli's 'general statements':

And if the first cause of the ruin of the Roman Empire is considered, it will be found out it was solely that she started hiring Gothic mercenaries; because from that beginning the forces of the Roman Empire started to weaken; and all the virtue that was taken away from her, was given to them.⁸³

There is more on the barbarians; however, towards the end of the chapter, Pocock presents us 'Machiavelli's most macrohistorical reflections on the rise and fall of the great empires'.⁸⁴ The account in *Barbarism and Religion*⁸⁵ closely follows the analysis that Pocock offered already in *The Machiavellian Moment*.⁸⁶ These are some of the most insightful passages in contemporary Machiavellian scholarship, though they do require a reader with a lot of concentration. Pocock combines three chapters from the beginning of book II of the *Discorsi*, to reach some important conclusions. Chapter 2, where Machiavelli tells how Rome wiped out all other republics, is combined with the passages from *proemio* about the cyclical movement of *virtù* through history (Assyria-Media-Persia-Rome), and chapter 5, where we find out about *montanari* who survive a general natural cataclysm:

Since military (and consequently civic) virtue is both emulative and competitive, the loss of virtue in the other peoples helped cause the decline of virtue in the Romans themselves... the amount of *virtù* in the world at any one time is finite, and when it is all used up through corruption there will be some kind of cataclysm, after which a few uncorrupted barbarian survivors will emerge from the mountain and begin again.⁸⁷

⁸² 'Dalle quali cose procedé, prima, la divisione dello Imperio e, in ultimo, la rovina di quello.' *Arte della guerra*, I (p. 308). Quoted in Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3, pp. 216–17.

⁸³ 'E, se si considerassi la prima ruina dello Imperio romano, si troverà essere suto solo cominciare a soldare e Goti; perché da quello principio cominciorno a enervare le forze dello Imperio romano; e tutta quella virtù che si levava da lui si dava a loro.' *Il Principe*, XIII. Quoted in Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3, p. 220.

⁸⁴ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3, p. 224.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 224–6.

⁸⁶ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 216–18.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 217. A short, two sentence restatement of the process is also present in Pocock's 'Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Ancients and Moderns', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 2.3 (1978), pp. 93–109; on p. 102 Pocock refers to the pages from *The Machiavellian Moment* analysed here and the *Discorsi*, II, 5.

From here, Pocock concludes, it follows that *virtù* has become cannibal, ‘Shakespeare’s “universal wolf” that “last eats up himself”’.⁸⁸ *Barbarism and Religion* repeats the same story, all the mentioned elements from the *Discorsi* are present,⁸⁹ and Pocock once again concludes that the ‘Roman *virtù* cannibalised that of the world’.⁹⁰ This problem knows ‘no final solution’, he adds, though he calls it afterwards, more mildly, only ‘a possibly insoluble problem’.⁹¹ It is the general problem of the relation between *libertas* and *impe-rium*, traceable in historical narratives from Polybius onwards; and later in the volume we read a sort of summary:

Liberty achieves empire, but is corrupted by it, and empire cannot be retained once it has destroyed the liberty that once conquered and no longer defends it; yet this self-destructive *libertas* remains intensely admired, under the name of *virtus*, as one of the highest achievements of human nature.⁹²

IV

In this final section, I would like to unite both threads that I have pursued so far in the paper. They converge on a very important place in Machiavelli’s *opus*, on which I will now focus. Nevertheless, as each of the threads tried to tackle a different question, two different answers will spring from the one same source. To summarise these two aspects:

(1) While fully agreeing that Machiavelli ‘privileges multicausality’,⁹³ I also believe that ‘the main trend’, the most general cause for the downfall of the Roman Empire, can be identified, and I shall offer an explanation of Machiavelli that encompasses all the others. Obviously, Pocock’s ‘most macrohistorical reflections on the rise and fall of the great empires’ have similar pretensions, though he does not expressly state it.⁹⁴ However, his are indirect constructions (if full of insight!), based on Machiavelli’s idea of the cyclical movement of *virtù* through history, from Assyria to Rome; whereas

⁸⁸ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 217–18. [The lines Pocock refers to are from *Troilus and Cressida*, Act I, Scene III.]

⁸⁹ Yet, here Pocock says that ‘Machiavelli did not believe that only a few mountaineers survived the fall of the empire’, without further elaborating that statement. *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3, p. 225. Machiavelli never said that — in the *Discorsi*, II, 5 he speaks only about natural cataclysms — however, Pocock seems to have implied it in *The Machiavellian Moment*.

⁹⁰ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3, pp. 225–6.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 226, 419.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 419.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁹⁴ With so much material analysed in *Barbarism and Religion*, the reader probably does not get that impression. However, similar the conclusion of ch. 7 of *The Machiavellian Moment* — a book which is not on empire’s downfall — by its very structure leaves a much stronger impression of its importance.

we shall see that Machiavelli expressly described the general mechanism of the process that led to the actual final destruction of the ultimate example, Rome.

(2) There are limitations to Machiavelli's conceptions, and his ideal of the great state that is constituted for the conquest of the world. And he is fully aware of them.

Despite his claim that *The Machiavellian Moment* is confined to *Il Principe* and the *Discorsi*, Pocock did dedicate substantial attention to *Arte della guerra* — unlike most other commentators — and the superiority of his insight over theirs is partly due to that reason. It is certainly strange why so little consideration is given to this book,⁹⁵ the only one Machiavelli published during his lifetime. And yet it hides some treasures, like the 'digression on military virtue'⁹⁶ that Fabrizio Colonna makes in book II.⁹⁷ Indeed, that very *locus* is of utmost interest for our discussion.

Martial virtue, such as the early Romans possessed, is the key factor in achieving a universal empire, and war is the spring from which this *virtù* flows. Thus, it is clear that the number of valiant men is very much dependent on the number of existing states. Of the 'men excellent in war', says Machiavelli, by far the largest part was in Europe; in Africa there was a small part, and an even smaller one in Asia. It is because Africa and Asia had a few states, and Europe had many — 'some kingdoms and an infinity of republics'.⁹⁸

Men become excellent and show their virtue according to the way they are used and led by their prince, republic or king. It is understandable then, that where there are many states, there are many valiant men; where there are few, few ...in Europe there are countless excellent men and many more would there be, if those who perished due to malignity of time were added, because the world was more virtuous where there were more States that

⁹⁵ Now and then a military historian writes on the topic, usually to criticise Machiavelli's ideas on the usefulness of firearms.

⁹⁶ It is called so in the Contents of the English translation of Ellis Farnsworth, revised by Neal Wood, *The Art of War* (Indianapolis, 1965).

⁹⁷ Sydney Anglo, *Machiavelli: A Dissection* (London, 1969), pp. 138–41, analyses these passages; however, his main concern is the 'bizarre equation of military *virtù* with lavish effusion of blood'. Neal Wood, 'Machiavelli's Concept of *Virtù* Reconsidered', *Political Studies*, 15.2 (1967), pp. 159–72, at pp. 167–9, is the exception — he identified the passage as being a major *locus* for understanding the *virtù* concept. Yet, not long afterwards, he was answered by I. Hannaford in another issue of *Political Studies* [20.2 (1972), pp.185–9], attacking him for putting too much emphasis on the relation of *virtù* to war!

⁹⁸ '...degli uomini eccellenti in guerra ne sono stati nominati assai in Europa, pochi in Africa e meno in Asia. Questo nasce perché queste due ultime parti del mondo hanno avuto uno principato o due, e poche repubbliche; ma l'Europa solamente ha avuto qualche regno e infinite repubbliche.' *Arte della guerra*, II (p. 332).

favoured virtue either by necessity or because of some other human passion.⁹⁹

If there are more states, there is more war, and, accordingly, more virtue. With his usual thoroughness, Machiavelli develops the conclusion which follows from this view:¹⁰⁰ 'If, then, it is true that, where there are more states [*imperi*], there are more valiant men, it necessarily follows that, if they are destroyed, the virtue will be destroyed hand in hand, for there will be no cause to make men virtuous.'¹⁰¹ Thus, when Rome subdued the entire world around her,¹⁰² she was left as a sole source of virtue. Under these circumstances, virtue almost disappeared in corrupted Rome, and 'the Empire who destroyed other's virtue, but did not know to maintain its own'¹⁰³ became the prey of the Scythians.

Machiavelli here gives the most general account of the causes of the fall of Rome; indeed, it does encompass all the others that he offered in various places.¹⁰⁴ Regarding the other aspect, these passages from *Arte della guerra*

⁹⁹ 'Gli uomini diventono eccellenti e mostrano la loro virtù, secondo che sono adoperati e tirati innanzi dal principe loro, o republica o re che si sia. Conviene pertanto che, dove è assai potestadi, vi surga assai valenti uomini; dove ne è poche, pochi. ...in Europa sono gli uomini eccellenti senza numero e tanti più sarebbero, se insieme con quegli si nominassono gli altri che sono stati dalla malignità del tempo spenti perché il mondo è stato più virtuoso dove sono stati più Stati che abbiano favorita la virtù o per necessità o per altra umana passione.' *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ The conclusion we are just about to reach makes Mark Hulliung's claim that Machiavelli is 'irresponsible' and 'unwilling to face the full implications of his thought' regarding the choice between Rome and Sparta (i.e. an expansionistic and a non-expansionistic republic) look rather ridiculous. *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton, 1983), p. 59.

¹⁰¹ 'Sendo adunque vero che, dove sia più imperii, surga più uomini valenti, seguita di necessità che, spegnendosi quelli, si spenga di mano in mano la virtù, venendo meno la cagione che fa gli uomini virtuosi.' *Arte della guerra*, II (p. 332).

¹⁰² '...all the republics and principalities of Europe and Africa and a major part of those in Asia...' ('...tutte le repubbliche e i principati d'Europa e d'Affrica e in maggior parte quelli dell'Asia...') *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ '...quello Imperio il quale aveva la virtù d'altri spenta e non saputo mantenere la sua.' *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Of course, the *proemio* of book II of the *Discorsi*, analysed by Pocock, does describe a most general process, the cycle of *virtù* through history; that is based on Machiavelli's idea that 'the human things are always in movement, either go up, or go down' ('cose umane sempre in moto, o le salgano, o le scendano'). But, that is just Machiavelli's general philosophy of man; and the conclusions to which Pocock arrived, he established in conjunction with other, more 'practical' passages from the *Discorsi*. A very similar view of the nature of human affairs, which Pocock does not mention, is expounded in *Istorie fiorentine*, V, 1. Interesting, a 'less general' cause, not discussed by Pocock, is mentioned there, the dangerous effect of idle philosophers on well-ordered cities: '... the letters come after the arms, in provinces and cities first the captains are born, then the philosophers. Because once good and ordered arms bring victories, and

are even more revealing, as they show that Machiavelli understood that his ideal, the state founded to build a world empire, eventually leads to its own downfall. At the very end, after the last enemy is conquered, the virtue is gone: it is not needed any more. Yet, Machiavelli is firmly convinced in his ideal: there is greatness in the process itself.

Nikola Regent

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

victories peace, it is not possible to worse corrupt the strength of martial souls then with the idleness of letters, nor can idleness with any greater or more dangerous deceit enter into well-ordered cities.' ('...le lettere vengono dietro alle armi, nelle provincie e nelle città prima i capitani e che filosofi nascono. Perché avendo le buone e ordinate armi partorito vittorie, e le vittorie quiete, non si può la fortezza degli armati animi con più onesto ozio che quello delle lettere corrompere, né può l'ozio con maggiore e più pericoloso inganno che con questo nelle città bene institute entrare.') This account fits perfectly into the more general cause described in *Arte della guerra*.