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Dialogue on the Government of Florence

Preface

How splendid and honourable it is to meditate on government and public administration,[1] on which our well-being, our health and our life depend – as do all the notable deeds that are performed in this earthly life below! Quite apart from the useful and relevant material they provide for many aspects of our daily lives, the subject-matter is extremely worthy and worthwhile in itself. So that even if there were no hope at all of the things we think about or design ever happening, anyone who devotes time and mental energy to contemplating them certainly deserves to be praised[2] – unless we believe that Plato, when he thought and wrote about the republic, did so in the hope that his imaginary government would be adopted and put into practice by the Athenians. They had become so licentious and insolent in his day that far from attempting to make them accept a good administration, he despaired of them ever governing themselves well again – as he wrote in one of his letters[3] – and never wanted to get involved with them or wear himself out on behalf of their republic.

[1] *governi publici*; see Glossary.
[2] A and B begin by suggesting that many people will be surprised that he chooses to write about setting up a free government in Florence, firstly because his studies and work have been in another field (that of law) and more so because he has been absent from the city for most of his adult life and so knows little of its 'humours'.
[3] Plato, Letter 7, partly edited in F. M. Cornford's edition of *The Republic*, Oxford, 1973, pp. xvii-xviii. A and B omit this reference to Plato as well as the later references to Xenophon and Aristotle

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So it is not at all reprehensible either to think or to write about the government of our city; and much less so because of the present situation.[4] For although the city may seem to have lost its freedom, because of the Medici's authority in Florence and the vast power of the Pope, nevertheless, thanks to the unexpected occurrences that happen daily in human affairs, a one-man regime could at any moment revert to its former liberty just as easily as the popular regime was transformed overnight into a one-man regime. This is all the more probable, as a family is clearly much less likely to perpetuate itself than a republic.[5] If it did change back, this meditation and discussion of mine might not be totally useless, especially since its affairs do not yet seem so corrupt or neglected that we should despair of them ever being capable of this blessing – as the recent example of Piero Soderini's period of office as Gonfalonier shows, during which the city came very close to adopting a good and praiseworthy form of government.[6] Being no more intelligent and prudent than I am, and having for most of my life been absent from my native city, I can't be criticised for being too presumptuous or arrogant if I think myself capable of showing how one should introduce a just and well-ordered government in Florence that could really be called free, something that from its earliest origins until today absolutely no citizen has known how, or been able, to do. For I am not going to include my own inventions or opinions in this discussion. Instead it will faithfully and accurately narrate the actual conversation once held

[4] 'of . . . situation' added, tr. A and B explain that since he was writing at a time when the city was 'ruled under the shadow' of the Medici family and so totally alien to open government, the undertaking might seem generally futile, not only not helpful but even incurring a risk in publication; and for himself also *reprehensible* since he would be stigmatised for his ingratitude or dissimulation (ingratitude if he said he wanted the city to be free, since this could only be achieved with the ruin of the Medici, from whom he had received many favours (see note 12 below); dissimulation if he said he admired what in fact he disliked).

[5] A and B make it plain he is justifying the relevance of his work even to those living in narrow regimes: since due to the changeability of human affairs, especially in Florence, it is easy to believe that the greatness of the Medici might before too long give way to popular government, just as the popular regime that followed the expulsion of the Medici (in 1494) was quickly changed by their return (in 1512). They interchange this passage with Guicciardini's later discussion of his debt to the Medici (see note 12 below).

[6] This reference to Piero Soderini's gonfalonierate (from 1502 to 1512) is omitted by A and B, which defend the dialogue as a well-written account, 'excusable if not praiseworthy', of the views of these leading citizens, not his own.

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by several of our wisest and most serious citizens. In order to commit it to memory by writing it down, I want to adopt the same manner and order as my father did, when he used to tell it to me. He was one of the speakers, even though – as would happen on most occasions – he preferred to listen to what the others had to say rather than give his own opinion.[7]

He thus told me several times about the occasion when he, with Piero Capponi and Pagolantonio Soderini, two citizens of great eminence and authority, went to our church[8] of S. Maria Impruneta several weeks after Piero de' Medici's expulsion in 1494 – whether to make a vow or to worship there I do not know.[9] On their return they visited Bernardo del Nero, who was by then very old and a man of great wisdom. Having been excluded from[10] public affairs on account of the great suspicion in which nearly all those in power during the Medici period were held, he was living tranquilly in his villa nearby. It is not easy to say which was stronger in my father, the pleasure he derived from remembering their discussion on this occasion, which was certainly very great, or the displeasure of thinking about Bernardo's unhappy end. Being so wise, Bernardo had, almost like an oracle, foreseen so many of the things that later happened. Perhaps because he was angered by some injury done to him by the popular regime, especially the very unfair taxes imposed on him, or because he despaired of the city – at that time deeply divided and in great confusion – ever returning to a well-ordered government, he liked to reflect on the political life of the city that had nourished him since his childhood, which he loved dearly. Or perhaps it was because it is impossible to escape one's fate. At any rate, he didn't know how to, or couldn't, block his ears sufficiently against whoever revealed to him the plans that were circulating to restore Piero de' Medici;

[7] According to A and B, his father preferred to listen to others, 'being the youngest of them all and not involved in the change of government that gave rise to the discussion'.

[8] *tempio*.

[9] The church possessed a miraculous painting of the Madonna, brought ceremonially into Florence at times of crisis, which made it a popular pilgrim shrine. See D. Herlihy, 'Santa Maria Impruneta: A Rural Commune in the Late Middle Ages', in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. N. Rubinstein, London, 1968, esp. p. 244. On the cult, see *Ricordo* C 124, ed. Spongano, p. 135, tr. Domandi, p. 72.

[10] *sequestrato*: 'isolated' or 'marginalised'. In fact he returned to office in 1497: see Biographical Notes.

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and so he was decapitated, not because he was author or adviser of such plans but because he did not reveal them.[11]

But to get back to the subject. I also don't think I can be accused of ingratitude because of my deep, indeed extraordinary, debt to the Medici family, having been employed and excessively honoured by two popes from that family, first Leo and then Clement, who have treated me as a person in whom they have had – and in the case of Clement more than ever have – the greatest confidence.[12] In view of these obligations, to nourish thoughts against the position[13] of their family seems unfitting. One could not and should not infer from my writing, especially since it was done for my pleasure and recreation, with no intention of publication,[14] that I am opposed to their greatness, nor that their authority displeases me. For the same reason we would not want to argue that Xenophon, a citizen of Athens and, as we must suppose, a great patriot, disliked Athenian liberty because he wrote about princely government under the name of Cyrus;[15] or that Aristotle, the teacher of Alexander the Great, to whom he was greatly indebted, was his enemy because he wrote *The Politics*.

As if men's wishes and desires cannot differ from the way they reflect on or discuss affairs, or as if from this discussion it is apparent which of two badly ordered and corrupt governments I dislike less – were I not necessarily forced to be less critical of the one that has the most hope of being reformed.[16] Therefore if a well-structured and well-ordered regime were proposed that enjoyed genuine liberty,[17] it could not be held against me if I said I preferred it to all

[11] Bernardo was decapitated on 21 August 1497 after the failure of the conspiracy to restore Piero de' Medici to Florence.

[12] B elaborates (cf. note 4) by referring to the extremely important affairs he has undertaken for Leo and Clement and the honours and payments received from them, which demonstrate their confidence in him and his extraordinary obligation to them.

[13] *grandezza*: see Glossary.

[14] A, but not B, anticipates its possible publication 'before I grow old', saying that it would only merit criticism if it made him negligent of his other work, but since this was not the case, he should be praised for sacrificing his leisure time to benefiting others rather than himself – although to tell the truth, he derived recreation and pleasure from juxtaposing the violence and bloody cruelty of war with its opposites, peace, justice, equality and civil concord.

[15] The *Cyropaedia*: see Biographical Notes under Xenophon.

[16] A explains: 'if I had not been forced by reason to avoid the government with least possibility of reform', silence about which of two bad governments he dislikes least should not have been taken to mean he did not prefer a well-organised one best of all (see note 17 below).

[17] *con la libertà honestà*.

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the others. For everyone is familiar with what philosophers write about our duty to our country and our duty to others; and since rewards and offices in political life are distinguished by degree,[18] one cannot be accused of ingratitude for taking more account of greater rather than lesser debts and obligations.[19] But leaving all these arguments and objections aside, let us begin the discussion, which I have written in the form of a dialogue in order to depart as little as possible from the truth and the actual form it took.

[18] *grado*: see Glossary.

[19] This contorted paragraph is clarified by A, which explains that apart from the difference between words and deeds (between writing about and actually changing regimes), 'my obligations to my country are greater than those to the Medici and it would be more detestable to be ungrateful to the former than the latter'. Both A and B go on to explain that since the Medici derive their authority from the papacy and not from the Florentine state, his work in their service is no evidence that he likes 'narrow' government or is unsuited to a civil way of life, for despite his wealth and wide powers, his personal life-style is extremely modest and incorruptible; nor should silence (were he not forced to break it; see above) about which of two badly governments was less displeasing be taken as evidence that he would not like a well-organised one best of all.

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Book I

SPEAKERS: BERNARDO DEL NERO, PIERO CAPPONI, PAGOLANTONIO SODERINI AND PIERO GUICCIARDINI.

CAPPONI It has given us the greatest pleasure to come and visit this most holy place, but the chance of seeing you has made it even greater. Your absence from the Palace and the government of the city went far beyond what was called for, in our opinion, and of all the things to happen in the revolution[20] – for such it certainly was – this seemed quite the strangest.

SODERINI It is not just we who say so, who have always loved you and revered you as a father, but all discerning people[21] universally share the same opinion.

GUICCIARDINI Everyone is comforted, however, by knowing that the results produced at present, against all logic, by the nature of revolutions, will soon be corrected. When they realise how much they need your practical wisdom,[22] the very same men who are now happy to see you removed from public affairs will, once they have laid aside their passions and unnecessary suspicions, be the first to recall you and want the city to benefit from your counsel.

[20] *mutazione di stato sì grande*, see Glossary.
[21] *tutti quelli che hanno giudicio*; B: *gusto*.
[22] *prudenzia*: see Glossary.

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BERNARDO The city is not so poor in men that it has at any time stood in need of my counsel, and especially now that my mind[23] is perhaps no less reduced and consumed by old age than my body. Not only must I not think of returning to the labours of the Palace, but if I were inside it, I would have to think of removing myself from it. I am indeed sorry that what I should have done voluntarily several years ago has been brought about by the revolution and expulsion of Piero de' Medici. This has been a source of grief to me, both on account of the affection I have always felt towards his family and much more because the experience of my long life has shown me that revolutions always do more harm than good to the city – as I could illustrate with many examples.

CAPPONI So why do you believe this revolution is harmful to the city?

BERNARDO In my experience, I tell you, changes always unsettle the city and have bad consequences.

SODERINI Yes, perhaps, when they are like the others during your lifetime, which should be called changes in personnel, or as you put it yourself 'alterations', rather than revolutions;[24] because in them either power was transferred from one citizen to another, or the authority of the ruler was increased by the civil disturbances. This was what happened in 1433 and 1434, in 1466, in 1478[25] and in all the other disturbances until this last one, which alone in your lifetime saw the mutation of one species of government into another one. When this happens and a species changes from bad to good, or from good to better, I don't see why the change mightn't be useful. If this was ever the case, it surely is now, when our city – by nature accustomed to freedom but reduced to servitude by the factionalism of its leading citizens – has recovered its natural and ancient liberty through the merits[26] of a few citizens, without bloodshed, destruction or notable scandals, only with the exile of the citizen who held it oppressed. I think you too share this opinion and, given your integrity and high-mindedness, you are no less pleased than we are, although perhaps

[23] lit. 'my counsel'.
[24] *mutazioni da uomo a uomo . . . alterazioni che mutazioni di stati.*
[25] Referring to the Medici party's exile and return in 1433 and 1434, and the Pitti and Pazzi Conspiracies in 1466 and 1478.
[26] *virtù*: see Glossary.

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because of the intimacy you have enjoyed with the Medici you think it more fitting to talk as you do.

BERNARDO I have no desire to spoil the pleasure that I know you take in seeing me, nor my very great pleasure in seeing you; on the contrary we should do all we can to increase it. So let us leave these discussions aside, since we are bound to get upset by arguing and disagreeing about matters of such importance, however amicably we do it, and instead talk of pleasanter things. Let's go, if you like, to see my estate. I will show you the many beautiful things I am planning to grow – no longer for myself but for those who will come after me. I will show you a design for a lovely building that could be constructed, though not by me, for in all the years I have laboured in politics, I have failed to earn enough readily to satisfy these desires. You will see how much pleasure I derive from agriculture and how honestly one can pass the time and profit from one's leisure. Leisure should be welcome to everyone when well used, but much more to someone who takes occasional respite after labouring long and hard in the public service.[27] Although one should take it sooner than I have done, and by choice not necessity, as seems to have happened to me, still, it's better to take it occasionally than never and in whatever way possible than not at all. Certainly I feel much more content in myself and tranquil here than I ever did when I was discharging public duties.

GUICCIARDINI Come on, for the love of God, give up this talk of leisure, since we are all sure your practical wisdom[28] is just as valuable to you in your retirement as it was when you were employed. Let us continue our earlier conversation. Far from being upsetting, it is bound to be extremely enjoyable, as a discussion – I won't say between friends, rather between father and sons, for this is how we regard our relationship. Speaking for myself, I don't know what greater pleasure I could have than hearing a man of great age and remarkable wisdom talking about public and civil affairs, especially since he has learnt these things not from books of philosophy but from his own experience and deeds, which is the true way to learn. I have always wanted such an occasion; and I think Piero Capponi and Pagolantonio feel just the same, for despite knowing more than I do, I'm sure they think they have a lot to learn from you.

[27] lit. 'in honourable undertakings', *faccende onorevoli.*
[28] *prudenzia.*

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CAPPONI You've taken the words from my mouth, Piero, because nothing would please me more. I don't know what we could talk about that would be more useful and worthy of noble minds, not just now, in view of the present situation and near future, but always. And what better teacher could we have than Bernardo! Because of his perfect natural judgement and his extraordinary experience, due to his age and constant involvement in these affairs, I think he knows – to say the least – as much as any philosopher who has ever lived. Although Pagolantonio is silent, I can read from his face what he desires. So if you've ever wanted to please us and improve us with your teaching – as you often have done – I shall be bold enough to ask you, in the name of us all, to do today what Piero Guicciardini has asked you to do. And if at intervals we contradict you, it won't be to disagree with you, whom we consider our teacher and father, but to give you the chance of clarifying relevant topics. Agriculture, gardens and buildings can wait for another time; instead we beseech you again to tell us why you don't think the revolution that has taken place is helpful and what your views about the government of our city are.

SODERINI Come on, Bernardo, don't let your children down over such a serious matter, when you have always tried to satisfy them in matters that are less important!

BERNARDO I am happy to have this discussion with you – but as much to learn from you as to teach you, because what little I understand about these things I know only by experience, which none of you lack, having been involved for a considerable number of years now in affairs of state. Apart from this and your natural aptitude, you have the advantage of being well read. Thanks to this, you are able to learn from the dead what happened in many past eras, whereas I can only converse with the living and see nothing other than the events of my own time. So I tell you that, as you know, I have enjoyed a very long friendship with the Medici and I am infinitely indebted to that family. Not being of noble birth nor surrounded by relations, like you three, I have received favours from them and have been elevated and made equal to all those who would normally have preceded me in being awarded political offices and honours in the city.[29] Therefore if I were to say that the fall of Piero did not displease me,

[29] *onori*: see Glossary.

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I would not be telling the truth; and if I had said so, I think I could be accused of being too ungrateful. But you know that I have been much more upset by the behaviour that caused this collapse. Foreseeing the outcome and believing it to be harmful not just to him and his friends but also – if I am not mistaken – to the city, I attempted to remedy the situation by giving advice, criticising him and getting angry with him. However, the disposition of the heavens and destiny were more potent than my counsel and that of a few others who always gave him good advice. So despite the love I have felt and feel for this family, if I believed – God be my witness – that this revolution was in any way useful to the city, I would have welcomed it as much as anyone else, because I was first a Florentine and indebted to my native city before I was a friend or obliged to the Medici. I know too that when Florence is in a bad way, neither the Medici, nor whoever else may be in charge, will fare other than badly, whereas Florence can certainly be great without the Medici. I don't want to provide other evidence of what I think about this, since I am talking to people who I'm sure know me well enough by now. In order not to protract our conversation more than is necessary, I initially want to convince you with only the weapons you use yourselves. Don't your philosophers – if Marsilio Ficino, with whom I have occasionally talked, has told me the truth – say that of the three types of government, of the one, the few and the many, the best of all is the government of the one, the next best that of the few, and the worst of all the government of the many?[30] So I don't know how you will justify yourselves with your books, since you reject the government they praise most and choose the one least praised by them.

CAPPONI It's up to the others who are well read to reply, since I have practically no learning apart from a bit of astrology picked up

[30] This definition derives from Aristotle, *The Politics*, III, 7, 1279a–1279b. Savonarola, following Aquinas, accepted government of the one as the best form except in Florence, where government of the many was preferable. *Trattato circa el reggimento e governo della città di Firenze*, bk. I, chs. 1–3, bk. II, ch. 1, Florence, 1498, ed. L. Firpo, Turin, 1963, tr. R. N. Watkins, 'Treatise on the Constitution and Government of the City of Florence', in *Humanism and Liberty: Writings on Freedom in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, Columbia, S.C., 1978, pp. 231–41. Cf. Ficino, 'In librum Platonis de regno' to Federigo of Urbino, *Opera*, Basel, 1561, repr. Turin, 1959, I, pp. 290–1; B. Scala, *Apologia contra vituperatores Florentiae*, Florence, 1496, fos. a6r-v.

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