VISIONS OF POLITICS

Volume 2: Renaissance Virtues

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1

Introduction: The reality of the Renaissance

As the title of this volume intimates, I see considerable virtue in continuing to speak about the era of the Renaissance. This commitment needs defending, however, since the concept of the Renaissance has in recent times fallen into disrepute, and a number of reasons have been given for avoiding it. One is simply that the term is too vague to be of much use. A second doubt has stemmed from the post-modern critique of meta-narratives and the teleological forms of historical writing to which they give rise. But the most widespread suspicion has arisen from the fact that the metaphor embodied in speaking of the Renaissance – the metaphor of revival and more specifically of rebirth – is so clearly an honorific one. The difficulty here is that, as soon as we reflect on the contours of early-modern European history, it becomes embarrassingly obvious that a majority of the population would have been surprised to learn about a rebirth or a recovery of anything that added any value to their lives. The most prevalent objection to employing the term is thus that it marginalises and devalues those for whom the Renaissance never happened.[1]

These are serious objections, but there is no escaping the fact that, in the period covered by the chapters that follow, there was *something* that, for *some* people, was undoubtedly reborn and restored. This is by no means to imply that we can point to a determinate moment at which (to invoke the other traditional metaphor) the dark ages ended and a new light began to dawn. There remains a marked tendency among intellectual historians to think in these terms, and to speak of 'a decisive break' and a 'rapid transformation' of Italian cultural life around the year 1400, after which we can see that 'the threshold between the Medieval and the Renaissance has been crossed'.[2] As I argue in chapter 2, however, no such moment of sudden transition can be observed in the history of moral or political thought. If there was a rebirth, it was a protracted and difficult one.

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[1] As Kelly 1999 classically argues, this category included most women. Cf. my discussion in chapter 5, section II below.

[2] Baron 1966, pp. 8, 449; Pocock 1975, p. 52.

If we are looking for origins, we probably need to direct our gaze as far back as the twelfth century, the period in which the Italian universities emerged as centres for the teaching of Roman law. As a preliminary to studying Justinian's *Codex*, students were introduced to the *Ars rhetorica*, and thus to the idea that successful forensic oratory will often depend at least as much on persuasive delivery as on legal proof. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the teaching of rhetoric began to be approached in a new way, evidently under the influence of the methods of instruction prevailing in the French cathedral schools. No longer were the manuals of ancient rhetoric examined simply as sources of practical rules; they were also used as guides to the acquisition of a better Latin style. Out of this renewed interest in the language of ancient Rome arose the first glimmerings of the humanist movement.[3] A growing number of *literati* – most of them originally trained as lawyers – began not merely to study the classics but to reacquaint themselves with the full range of the *studia humanitatis*.[4] There was a humanist circle at Arezzo in the early fourteenth century, and a further group centring on the poet and historian Albertino Mussato at Padua shortly afterwards. These were among the earliest writers to reimmerse themselves in Roman poetry, especially Horace and Virgil; in the Roman historians, especially Livy and Sallust; and in the writings of such moralists as Juvenal, Seneca and, above all, Cicero, whom they turned into the best-known and most widely cited author of classical antiquity.

Once the language and literature of ancient Rome became the objects of so much fascination, the humanists began to busy themselves about the recovery of ancient manuscripts, the editing of texts, the establishment of attributions and so forth. But some of them – above all Petrarch and his disciples – continued to pursue the broader ambition of reviving the Roman syllabus of the *studia humanitatis*, thereby giving wider currency to the study of ancient rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy. This was the rebirth of which the humanists of the *quattrocento* liked to speak. Leonardo Bruni, in the *Dialogus* he addressed to Pier Paolo Vergerio in 1401, singles out Petrarch as 'the man who restored the *studia humanitatis* at a time when they had become extinct'.[5] A generation later, we find Lorenzo Valla proclaiming in the Preface to his *Elegantiarum Latinae Linguae* that 'whereas good letters had almost died out, they are now revived and reborn in our own time'.[6]

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[3] On the early humanists as teachers of the rhetorical arts see Kristeller 1962.

[4] For the Paduan background see Billanovich 1981 and Siraisi 1973, pp. 43–58.

[5] Bruni 1952, p. 94: 'hic vir studia humanitatis, quae iam extincta erant, reparavit'.

I have little to say in the chapters that follow about the revival of classical poetry, since my principal focus of attention is on the rebirth and development of the other three elements in the *studia humanitatis*: rhetoric, history and moral philosophy. I turn to the place of classical rhetoric in Renaissance moral theory in the course of chapter 10, but I am concerned in several earlier chapters with the pivotal place occupied by the *Ars rhetorica* in the evolution of humanist political thought. As I show in chapter 2, the *dictatores* or teachers of rhetoric in the Italian law-schools were at the same time the originators of a genre of advice-books for the guidance of city magistrates, a genre that had a remarkably enduring impact on Renaissance thought. I trace the emergence of this pre-humanist literature in chapter 2, while in the first half of chapter 3 I examine in greater detail its leading themes. By the early decades of the fourteenth century we already find the *dictatores* engaged in polemics against the rival scholastic tradition of political philosophy. Coluccio Salutati was to summarise the quarrel at the end of the century when he declared that, whereas the dialectical methods of the schoolmen merely 'prove in order to teach', the humanists recognise the need for a moral theory with the power 'to persuade in order to guide'.[7] One of the distinguishing features of humanism came to be the belief that wisdom must never be disjoined from eloquence. We must always seek to teach and persuade at the same time.[8]

I am also much concerned with the role of history in Renaissance political theory, and thus with the next major element in the *studia humanitatis*. As early as the mid-thirteenth century, we already find the *dictatores* espousing a Ciceronian view of history as the light of truth and the best guide to acting prudently in public life. They particularly liked to draw their lessons from the histories of Sallust, their favourite authority on the rise and fall of republican regimes. As we shall see when we come to John Milton's political writings in chapter 11, Sallust retained his popularity throughout the Renaissance, and remains the ancient historian whom Milton quotes most frequently. Meanwhile the Italian humanists devoted themselves from an early stage to writing the history of their own times in an increasingly classical style. We already find Albertino Mussato in his *De Gestis Italicorum* meditating in the style of Sallust on the fall of the Paduan commune, while the vicissitudes of the Florentine republic later gave rise to a sequence of remarkable histories from the pens of Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini and, last and most influentially, Niccolò Machiavelli in his *Istorie Fiorentine* of the 1520s.

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[6] Valla 1543, *Praefatio*, p. 4: 'ac pene cum literis ipsis demortuae fuerint, aut hoc tempore excitentur ac reviviscant'.

[7] Emerton 1925, p. 358.

[8] For two classic discussions of this point see Gray 1963 and Seigel 1968.

Of all the elements in the *studia humanitatis*, however, the one on which I principally concentrate is the final and culminating element, the study of ancient moral and political philosophy. With the investigation of this theme, we reach the point at which it becomes not merely convenient but inescapable to speak of the distinctive contribution of Renaissance humanism to the history of moral and political thought.

The context out of which the political theory of the humanists initially arose was that of the city-republics of the *Regnum Italicum*.[9] These communities began to evolve their distinctive political systems as early as the closing decades of the eleventh century. It was then that a number of Italian cities took it upon themselves, in defiance of papal as well as imperial suzerainty, to appoint their own 'consuls' and invest them with supreme authority. This happened at Pisa in 1085 (the earliest recorded instance), at Milan, Genoa and Arezzo before 1100, and at Bologna, Padua, Florence, Siena and elsewhere by the 1140s.[10] During the second half of the twelfth century a further important development took place. The consular system was gradually replaced by a form of government centred on ruling councils chaired by officials known as *podestà*, so called because they were granted supreme power or *potestas* in executive as well as judicial affairs. Such a system was in place at Parma and Padua by the 1170s, at Milan and Piacenza by the 1180s, and at Florence, Pisa, Siena and Arezzo by the end of the century.[11] By the opening years of the thirteenth century, many of the richest communes of Lombardy and Tuscany had thus acquired the *de facto* status of independent republics, with written constitutions guaranteeing their elective and self-governing arrangements.

Soon afterwards the *dictatores* began to produce their advice-books for the leaders of these communities, the earliest surviving example being the anonymous *Oculus Pastoralis* of c.1220. I examine this genre from various angles in chapters 2, 3 and 4, paying as much attention to the visual as to the literary representation of the city-republics and their distinctive forms of government. I focus in particular on the greatest surviving attempt to convey their ideals in visual terms, the so-called *Buon governo* frescoes painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena in the late 1330s. I argue in chapter 3 that Lorenzetti presents us with a typically pre-humanist analysis of virtuous rule, while in chapter 4 I explore the connections he draws between the upholding of civic virtue and the attainment of glory and greatness, the highest goals for cities and citizens alike.

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[9] This was the name generally given to that area of modern Italy, extending south as far as Rome, which had originally formed part of Charlemagne's *Imperium*.

[10] Waley 1988, p. 35; Jones 1997, pp. 130–51.

[11] Waley 1988, pp. 42, 196, 201, 205, 207.

The revival of classical republicanism was a relatively short-lived spectacle in early Renaissance Italy. The central tenet of the *dictatores* was that, if you wish to live in peace and rise to glory, you must cleave to an elective system of government. By the end of the thirteenth century, however, this cardinal assumption was beginning to be widely questioned, not least because it seemed to many observers that self-government had simply proved to be a recipe for endless and debilitating civil strife. If peace and glory are your goals, they instead began to urge, it will always be safer to entrust your community to the strong government of a single *signore* or hereditary prince. These sentiments served at once to legitimise and encourage the widespread shift during this period *dal' commune al principato*, from traditional systems of elective government to the acceptance of princely rule. Such changes took place at Mantua and Verona in the 1270s, at Pisa, Piacenza and Parma by the end of the 1280s and at Ravenna, Rimini and elsewhere before the end of the century.[12]

I follow this transition in chapter 5, showing how the genre of advice-books for city magistrates mutated into the so-called mirror-for-princes literature of the high Renaissance. I sketch the evolution of this latter genre in the fifteenth century, and go on to claim that it supplies us with the context we need in order to make sense of Niccolò Machiavelli's *Il Principe* of 1513. I argue that Machiavelli's text is best viewed as a further contribution to the mirror-for-princes genre, but at the same time as a satirical attack on its fundamental assumption that princely virtue is the key to glory and greatness.

The transition from elective to hereditary systems of government in the *Regnum Italicum* was by no means universal nor uncontested. Florence and Venice clung onto their status as independent city-republics throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and in the course of that period engendered a new political literature in which the values of self-government were eloquently carried over into the age of princes.

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[12] Waley 1988, pp. 165–72.

I turn in chapter 5 to show how the humanists of *quattrocento* Florence revived the classical ideal of the 'free state' or *vivere libero* and restated it in the highest rhetorical style. I end by arguing that this background of Florentine 'civic humanism' provides us with the context that enables us to grasp what Machiavelli is doing in his *Discorsi*, his commentary on the early books of Livy's history of Rome. While the *Discorsi* are largely given over to a passionate, almost nostalgic restatement of the great tradition of Florentine republicanism, Machiavelli at the same time reiterates and develops his earlier attack on the humanist ideal of civic virtue and its role in public life.

If we reflect on the political literature surveyed in the first half of this volume, we can readily isolate a number of elements that go to make up the distinctive contribution of Renaissance humanism to early-modern political thought.[13] The most important concept revived by the humanists was the classical idea of the *civitas libera* or 'free state'. Freedom in the case of a political body, the humanists argue, means the same as in the case of a natural one. A body politic, like a natural body, is free if and only if it is moved to act by its own will. But to speak of a political body as moved by its own will is to speak of its being moved by the general will of its citizen-body as a whole. It follows that, when we speak of living in a free state, what we mean is that we are living in a self-governing community, one in which the will of its citizens is recognised as the basis of law and government.

Closely associated with this ideal of the *civitas libera* in the minds of the humanists is the category of the *civis* or citizen, whose standing they like to contrast with that of the *subditus* or subject. As these terms imply, the humanists think of citizens as prescribing laws to themselves, while *subditi* are merely subject to laws imposed on them by kingly overlords. The significance of citizenship for the humanists is in turn connected with two further values of which they endlessly speak. One is the importance of living a life of *negotium*, of active participation in civic affairs, and not of *otium* or contemplative withdrawal, the value extolled in Aristotelian and scholastic thought. An early and pointed expression of this commitment can be found in a letter written by Pier Paolo Vergerio in 1394. He imagines himself as Cicero, responding to Petrarch's expressions of disgust in his *Vita Solitaria* at the fact that Cicero had devoted so much of his time to public affairs. 'It has always seemed to me', Cicero is made to retort, 'that the man who surpasses all others in his nature and way of life is the one who bestows his talents on the government of the *respublica* and in working for the benefit of everyone.'[14] The life of *negotium*, the life of those who willingly commit themselves to furthering the goals of their community, is the one that deserves the highest praise.[15]

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[13] For an interesting attempt to isolate a more extensive set of values said to be definitive of Renaissance thought see Burke 1974, pp. 245–7.

If we all have a duty as citizens to serve the public good, we need to know what talents we must cultivate if we are to pursue the life of *negotium* to the best effect. This brings the writers I am considering to the core value of which they speak, that of *virtus* or civic virtue. It is by means of *virtus*, they all agree, that good citizens can alone hope to sustain their city in war and peace, thereby bringing glory to their community as well as to themselves. As I show in chapter 8, a further note of hostility to scholasticism becomes audible at this point, since the schoolmen generally insist that lineage and wealth are no less necessary than virtue for the effective practice of citizenship. By contrast, the humanists make it one of their slogans that *virtus vera nobilitas est*, that virtue alone enables us to play our part as citizens of true nobility and worth.

One further concept that sounds throughout the political writings of the humanists is that of *libertas*, the term they use to describe the freedom of individual citizens as well as of communities. Chapters 2 and 5 trace the emergence of a neo-Roman understanding of this value, showing that it was treated as a property of citizens by contrast with slaves, and was consequently defined in terms of independence and absence of arbitrary domination by others. Among humanists of the high Renaissance, I argue that the fullest and most influential restatement of this classical vision was furnished by Machiavelli in his *Discorsi*. Having outlined in chapter 5 the intellectual context out of which his views arose, I turn in chapters 6 and 7 to scrutinise his theory of *libertà* itself. In chapter 6 I focus on his concept of *corruzione*, and hence on his analysis of how citizens are prone to undermine the conditions of their own freedom. In chapter 7 I turn to his distinctive vision of civic *virtù*, and hence to his complementary analysis of the qualities we need to cultivate if we are to uphold the *vivere libero* and our own *libertà* at the same time.

So far I have spoken of the first half of this volume, in which I concentrate on the humanist political theories of the Italian Renaissance. In the second half I trace the fortunes of these theories in northern Europe, and especially in early-modern England. I begin with the initial reception of humanist values in the opening years of the sixteenth century.

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[14] Vergerio 1934, pp. 439–40: 'ita semper visum est praestare omnibus vel genere vel vita quisquis ad administrandam rempublicam impertiendosque saluti omnium labores se accommodasset'.

[15] See Vergerio 1934, p. 439 on *negotium* and p. 444 on fleeing *solitudo*.

Chapter 8 considers Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* of 1516, which I take to be one of the earliest and most original attempts to introduce a classical understanding of civic virtue and self-government into English political thought. In chapter 9 I turn away from humanist theories of freedom and citizenship to the contrasting understanding of these concepts espoused by the schoolmen of the early sixteenth century. I concentrate on the figures of Jacques Almain and John Mair, for whom the securing of liberty was connected not with the cultivation of civic virtue but with the maintenance of natural rights. Arguing in contractarian terms wholly foreign to humanism, they envisage civil associations essentially as devices for ensuring that the rights we possess in the pre-political state of nature are more effectively upheld. I argue in chapters 6 and 7 that, because of the powerful hold still exercised by this analysis over modern political philosophy, several features of the rival neo-Roman theory have been misleadingly dismissed as confused. One of my aims in this group of chapters is to contrast these two models of freedom, and at the same time to rescue the neo-Roman model from a number of misunderstandings propagated by its scholastic critics and their modern counterparts.

I turn in chapters 10, 11 and 12 to consider the fortunes of humanist political theory in early-modern England. Chapter 10 looks at the reception of classical rhetoric in Tudor England and the subsequent growth of hostility to the humanist ideal of a union between reason and eloquence. Chapters 11 and 12 follow the rise and temporary triumph in English political theory of the neo-Roman understanding of political liberty. I illustrate the neglected but enormously powerful impact of this theory in helping to destabilise the Stuart monarchy, and later in helping to legitimise the 'free state' briefly established after the execution of Charles I in 1649.

With chapter 13 I move from the seventeenth to the early eighteenth century. I investigate the process by which the distinctive preoccupations of Renaissance humanism, above all as articulated in the political theory of Machiavelli, were adopted and developed by the so-called neo-Harringtonian opponents of the later Stuart monarchy.[16] I also show how it came about that, in the early decades of the eighteenth century, these neo-classical ideals were pressed into service as part of Lord Bolingbroke's campaign to unseat the whig oligarchy. What emerges is the remarkable extent to which the spirit of Machiavelli's *Discorsi* haunts the party politics of Augustan England.

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[16] For the coinage of the term see Pocock 1975, pp. 423–61.

I bring this volume to a close with a chapter on the acquisition of the concept of the state as the master noun of our political discourse. According to the humanist vision of politics, the most basic aim of any ruler, as Machiavelli expressed it, must always be *mantenere lo stato*, to maintain his state or standing as a prince.[17] This eventually yielded place to the much more abstract idea that there is an independent apparatus, that of the state, which every ruler has a duty to maintain. This is the momentous transition I attempt to outline in chapter 14. I conclude with the figure of Thomas Hobbes, the earliest and greatest philosopher to argue with complete self-consciousness that the person standing at the heart of politics is not the person of the ruler but the purely artificial person of the state.

Mention of Hobbes brings me, finally, to the connections between this volume and volume 3 of the present work. Hobbes is the most formidable enemy of the values I take to be definitive of Renaissance political thought. His theory of the covenant collapses any distinction between subjects and citizens. His claim that in covenanting we specifically give up our right to govern ourselves undermines the need for an active and virtuous citizenship. His theory of freedom repudiates the claim that anyone living in conditions of domination and dependence must have been deprived of their liberty. His theory of state sovereignty challenges the fundamental humanist contention that sovereignty in a free state must remain the possession of the citizen-body as a whole.

What swings into view at this juncture is one of the deepest divisions in modern European political thought. On one side stands the neo-Roman theory of freedom and self-government, the theory most influentially formulated by the humanists of the Renaissance. On the other side stands the modern theory of the state as the bearer of uncontrollable sovereignty, the theory developed by the defenders of absolutism in the seventeenth century and definitively articulated in the philosophy of Hobbes. Having devoted the present volume to the first of these visions of politics, my principal aim in volume 3 will be to show how Hobbes attempted to obliterate and replace it.

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[17] Machiavelli 1960, pp. 16, 25–6, 73–4, 80.