



Introduction

Reason and Experience

When the men involved in the government of the states of Renaissance Italy explained the basis of the principles by which they argued that political life and the conduct of affairs were, or should be, shaped, “reason” and “experience” were what they most frequently cited. Sometimes they were cited separately, often together. When they were coupled together, they were treated as complementary to one another – as in the declaration in a Sieneese decree of 1486 that: ‘Reason shows and experience proves [La ragione dimostra et la experientia prova].’¹ Reason and ancient and modern examples were what the Venetian Signoria told the Milanese ambassador in that year were the foundations of their thinking about relations with foreign powers.² Reason and experience were never cited as contradicting one another. Experience provided examples to back up the conclusions of reason or, more often perhaps, provided the material on which reason could be put to work.

The term ‘experience’ covered a broad field. Men used it to indicate knowledge of the affairs of their own state and of other states of their day, republics and principalities, of events within the lifetime of their fathers or grandfathers, which they might have heard of from them, and of the more distant past of their own societies and of other societies. The Bible and the works of classical authors, histories and chronicles, could all furnish “experience” that could be a guide to present action. ‘With long experience, it is known to be useful, indeed necessary counsel’ to change with the times, and it often happens ‘in forms and modes of governing cities’. ‘Reading the deeds of the Romans or of other people, or our own chronicles, we find they had now one, now another, form of government’, it was noted in Genoese legislation reforming government offices in 1506.³ Florentines debating how they could best defend their *libertà* against the armies of Pope Clement VII and Emperor Charles V in September 1529 were exhorted by various speakers to consider ‘the examples of Nineveh and many other places’, which clearly showed the efficacy of a communal appeal to God, and the ‘egregious deeds of the

¹ ASS, Consiglio Generale 240, f. 79v: 3 Mar. 1485(6).

² ASMil, ASforzesco, b. 363: Leonardo Botta to Galeazzo Maria Sforza, 16 July 1476, Venice.

³ ASG, MS 137: 19 July 1506.

ancients', who gave their lives to preserve the liberty of their states. They were also urged to remember what Rinaldo Gianfigliuzzi had advised in the early fifteenth century, when Florentine *libertà* had been in peril (the election of a small commission with extraordinary authority), and what 'the experience of the year 1512 teaches' about what would happen if the Medici returned.⁴

Experience was not regarded merely as a source of anecdotal evidence or illustrative examples: it was a commonplace that experience was the most reliable of guides. 'Of all the forms of knowledge [tute le scientie], none is so sure as experience', declared the preamble to a reform of the government of Genoa in 1442.⁵ In discussions about reforming the Sienese government in 1495, 'an infinite variety of reasons, especially experience, as the teacher of all things' were considered.⁶ Experience 'has been said by wise men to teach all things' declared the preamble to a measure reforming the rules governing elections to office in Florence in 1531.⁷

The "reason" that was coupled with experience was not generally the deduction of rules from abstract first principles, although the starting point for proposals could be a tenet of Roman law, a quotation from classical authors, or from the Bible – a dictum of Aristotle on distributive justice perhaps, as cited by Giovanni de Odone in a Genoese council in 1440,⁸ or the warning of Christ that 'Every kingdom divided against itself shall perish', invoked in Sienese legislation against plots and sedition in 1456.⁹

Simple exhortations to observe justice or to keep the peace would not by themselves do much to advance a debate in a council or explain why legislation was required; principles needed to be more directly applied to the matter in hand. *Ragione* could have, then as now, the sense of "right" as well as "reason"; it could have an ethical aspect. In a speech to the Venetian Senate in 1556, for example, 'vera ragione' was identified with 'piety, religion and the universal good of Christianity'.¹⁰ When a proposal or an argument was described as *ragionevole*, it could be considered one that was just as well as reasonable. When *ragione* was to be applied to politics and government, however, this ethical sense might not always be present, certainly not

⁴ ASF, Consulte e Pratiche 71, ff. 93v–97r: 26 Sept. 1529.

⁵ ASG, MS 136, f. 1v: 29 Dec. 1443(2).

⁶ ASS, Concistoro 771, f. 57r: 18 Mar. 1495.

⁷ ASF, Balìa 55, f. 10r: 27 Apr. 1531. For a discussion of the use of *esperienza* as an analytical tool by sixteenth-century Florentine historians, see Emanuele Cutinelli-Rendina, Jean-Jacques Marchand and Matteo Melera-Moretini, *Della storia alla politica nella Toscana del Rinascimento* (Rome, 2005), pp. 106–9.

⁸ ASG, AS 3032, 85: Council proceedings, 14 Apr. 1440.

⁹ ASS, Concistoro 2118, f. 95r: 8 Aug. 1456.

¹⁰ Eugenio Albèri, *Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al Senato*, 14 vols. (Florence, 1839–63), Ser. 2, VIII, p. 428.

uppermost. Those who cited religious or moral maxims rarely explicitly used *ragione* to deduce what actions or policies those principles would suggest should be adopted. On the other hand, those who cited *ragione* as their instrument or guide to the solution of political problems were not invoking a concept of *ragione di stato*, ‘reason of state’, in the sense of ‘the derogation from natural and divine laws to preserve regimes whose legitimacy rests only on force or on money’, as Maurizio Viroli has defined the term when used by ‘Renaissance theorists’.¹¹ This is not to say that they might not be ready to acknowledge that reason might indicate that the interests of their state or their government could best be served by employing deceit, or cruelty, for example, particularly when dealing with enemies. *Ragione* was not intrinsically amoral, although it could lead to amoral, even immoral, conclusions.

Applying *ragione* to the political problems that they were confronting, using the lessons of “experience” as their guide, the men who governed the Italian republics might ruminate on what constituted good government but did not develop systematic theories of the nature of the state. Writing of the theorizing ‘according to a logic and a mental disposition that almost arises out of the facts’ that he noted in despatches sent from Rome by the Venetian ambassador Antonio Giustinian at the turn of the century, Innocenzo Cervelli judged that this amounted only to ‘a language, a vocabulary of definitions that were certainly not political concepts’; they would only become that, he considered, with Machiavelli.¹² However, the principles and generalizations enunciated by Giustinian and his contemporaries, as they analysed the events of their day, were more than just a vocabulary; they were expressing political concepts, even if those concepts were not linked together into a coherent system. If (to adapt Sydney Anglo’s definition of ‘two wholly different kinds of intellectual history’) they amount to ‘an untidy, pragmatic and almost entirely secular jumble of notions in which abstractions count for very little’, rather than to ‘the elevated ideas of Renaissance academics and philosophers’, this ‘corresponds more closely to the ways in which’ people in the sixteenth (and one might add, the fifteenth) century ‘pondered what are now categorized as Machiavellian topics’.¹³

Often, they were dealing with subjects for which the systematic theorizing about the state of their contemporaries, including Machiavelli, would not be of much assistance. Public finance and taxation, who should hold government office and how they should be appointed, the membership and powers of civic

¹¹ Maurizio Viroli, *Dalla politica alla ragion di stato: la scienza del governo tra XIII e XVII secolo* (Rome, 1994), p. 178. Nor were they using it in another sense current in this period, to refer to law, legality.

¹² Innocenzo Cervelli, *Machiavelli e la crisi dello stato veneziano* (Naples, 1974), p. 112.

¹³ Sydney Anglo, *Machiavelli – The First Century: Studies in Enthusiasm, Hostility and Irrelevance* (Oxford, 2005), p. 2.

councils and committees, mundane matters which rarely concerned those engaged in parsing the forms of good and bad government, were at the heart of political life in the republics of Renaissance Italy.¹⁴ Inextricably linked to questions of the relationship of politics and society, they were viewed as matters that involved important principles of justice and equality and equity. For many, these were the core values of republican government, values that they believed should underpin and be expressed by the institutions and policies of their own states. These republican ideals were not lost with the fall of the Florentine republic and the establishment of the Medici duchy in the 1530s, nor did they survive only in the myth or the reality of the republic of Venice. They survived in Lucca and Genoa, which tend to be overlooked by those seeking for the republican tradition in early modern Europe, but which remained independent republican states, like Venice, until the Napoleonic era. The death throes of the Sienese republic in mid-sixteenth-century Italy also gave rise to consideration of what the Sienese valued most about their political system and institutions, as the voices of the Florentine republican exiles were fading away, their ranks thinned by death and by apostasy to the cause of the Medici duke of Florence.

Another central question confronting those who governed the Italian republics was that of their position within the ‘community of Italian powers’.¹⁵ For Lucca, Genoa and Siena, this generally was seen as the problem of how to enjoy the protection of those who were more powerful than they were, often a prince, while preserving their independence. In the sixteenth century, preserving their independence became a pressing concern of the Florentines too, and even the Venetians were forced to reconsider how their republic could survive in an Italy dominated by the Habsburgs and their contest with the Valois. In dealing with these problems, in which the very survival of their republics as independent entities was at stake, men had to think about what they valued most in their system of government, what compromises could be made, what might have to be sacrificed if they were to achieve peace and security.

At such times, and on other occasions, too, it might be felt that a fundamental reform of the institutions of government was necessary or desirable. This might require contemplation of the basis of the political system, of the relation between political institutions and the social structures of the state. Such reforms in the republics were not generally the work of a “lawgiver” – the figure beloved of the theorists – but of a commission, although in the sixteenth century representatives of the emperor or the king of France or Spain

¹⁴ The relation of the practical political principles examined in this study to contemporary works of political theory is discussed in Chapter 8.

¹⁵ See Chapter 7 for the significance of this phrase.

sometimes undertook the task of reforming the government of a republic. The concern of these external “lawgivers” could, of course, be establishing the control of another power over the republic, as much as providing orderly government for a troubled polity, but their work and the reasoning they advanced can provide valuable insights into how outsiders understood republican government and how it worked.

Government records are the main sources that have been examined to find expressions of the political principles on which their proponents said that the political practices of Renaissance Italian republics were, or should be, based. Preambles to legislation, and the records of council proceedings, and diplomatic instructions and reports have proved the most fruitful major classes of material, while papers concerning or advocating reforms have a particular interest. Differences in the types of record that proved most useful for each individual republic reflect the different structures and ethos of their governments, as well as their political fortunes.

Florence was the most politically articulate republic, partly because of the repeated stimulus of political change and conflict manifested in, and expressed through, changes to the republic’s political institutions and procedures. Such was the dominance of the Medici family and their allies over the political life of Florence from the time of the return of Cosimo de’ Medici from exile in 1434 that the radical institutional changes after the expulsion of the Medici in 1494 are often presented as a return to republican government after a period of effective *signoria*. The two decades after the return of the Medici in 1512 were troubled by conflict among three ideas of how the state should be governed: a broadly based republican regime, one based on a Great Council of over a thousand members, a more exclusive aristocratic republic, with effective power in the hands of a few dozen families, or a more or less overt Medici principate. This period brought forth reflections by the Florentines on the dilemmas they were facing, and how they might be resolved, that are regarded as being of critical importance in the development of European political thought.

The Florentines were acutely aware of the potential implications of changes to the ways in which appointments to offices were made, or taxes were assessed. Passions could run high over seemingly arcane questions such as how the names of those eligible for certain offices should be extracted from the electoral purses. Yet, paradoxically, until the institution of the Great Council in 1494 after the expulsion of the Medici, no open debate was permitted in the major legislative councils in Florence. Speeches could be made only in favour of proposals, and only in favour of proposals emanating from the executive committees. Only in the informal *Consulte* and *Pratiche*, when office-holders and selected citizens were assembled to advise the executive councils – but with no powers to direct their decisions – was there anything like open debate.

Hence the importance of the records of their deliberations, especially for periods when the dominance of the Medici was under challenge, or they were in exile.¹⁶

Venice was the most politically stable of the republics. Venetian government was repeatedly cited admiringly as a model by those who desired such stability for their own republics. This reputation was cherished by the Venetians, and the status of their government as a model was a source of pride. It has been argued that Venetian patricians were inclined to accept the reality of the flattering presentation of their state as a model republic, and that their complacency accounts for the paucity of writings on political thought by Venetians in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Venetians themselves evidently felt that the maintenance of their stability depended on constant vigilance and elaborate rules, backed by stringent penalties, to discipline the political behaviour of Venetian nobles and the conduct of government. There were frequent proposals for reform, or to deal with abuses that had come to light, to counter the inventive ways which Venetians found to circumvent the procedures and regulations. Preambles to such reform proposals put before the Senate or the Great Council reiterated the principles by which the Venetian government was, or ought to be, shaped, and how those who drafted the proposals felt that they were being neglected or traduced.

The other major challenge to the Venetian system of government in this period was war, and the consequent disruption of trade and financial difficulties that war brought in its wake. War with the Turks perhaps created fewer political problems than did Venetian involvement in warfare in Italy, following the expansion of the Venetian state into the Lombard plain in the fifteenth century. Above all, the period after 1509, when Venice at times came perilously close to losing all its possessions on the Italian mainland and even the city itself came under threat, brought desperate measures to raise money to pay for troops, measures that involved derogation of some of the most cherished principles of Venetian government. Offices, even the most prestigious office of Procurator and seats in the Senate, were effectively sold. Legislation introducing these measures and the objections raised against them gave occasion for statements of the principles of government, of what was

¹⁶ The best recent survey of Florentine history in this period is John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200–1575* (Oxford, 2006); Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1997), is still the authority on the complexities of Florentine political institutions, and institutional politics, in the fifteenth century.

¹⁷ Angelo Venturi, 'Scrittori politici e scritture di governo', in *Storia della cultura veneta*, 9 vols. (Vicenza, 1976–86), III/3, p. 514.

expedient to meet the crises, as well as what should be done to uphold and defend cherished ideals.¹⁸

The other great maritime republic of Renaissance Italy, Genoa, had very different characteristics from those of Venice. Genoa was notorious for political instability, for frequent changes of regime, for complicated factional rivalries that frequently led to violence. Unlike Venetian doges, Genoese doges (until 1528) were not ceremonious heads of a complex pyramid of councils and committees, but insecure faction leaders, whose power was circumscribed by the limited resources that the Genoese were prepared to grant to their government. For many Genoese, holding an office in the government of their city was more of a chore undertaken with a sense of resignation than an honour to be competed for. In the fifteenth century, access to office was not, as in other republics, the focal point of political life, except for concern that the regulations regarding the distribution of all offices equally between Blacks (Guelfs) and Whites (Ghibellines), and between nobles and *popolari*, were properly observed. There was no permanent legislative council, but nevertheless no important measure could be taken without the consent of an ad hoc assembly, whose decision on what should be done, and how, would be binding. The records of the councils in which the Genoese freely discussed the routine problems of the government as well as the major issues facing the republic are a major source of insights into their political principles.

The Genoese were also notorious for their propensity to submit their republic to the lordship of princes, Italian (the duke of Milan) or foreign (the king of France).¹⁹ From the 1520s, Emperor Charles V was keen to keep Genoa out of French hands, and to exert a degree of control over the republic as an Imperial city. The Genoese were forced to think hard about what they valued in their republic, and how to preserve this. Long-contemplated major reforms of the government culminated in 1528 in a restructuring of their institutions that was so fundamental it was regarded as the foundation of a new republic; it took half a century before the new system was finally settled down. Genoa after 1528 has been regarded by some historians as being virtually subject to Charles and his son, King Philip II of Spain, but the Genoese did not see it that way. Some intriguing

¹⁸ The best clear introduction in English to the government of Renaissance Venice is Robert Finlay, *Politics in Renaissance Venice* (London, 1980); in Italian, the best general histories are Gaetano Cozzi and Michael Knapton, *La Repubblica di Venezia nell'età moderna: dalla guerra di Chioggia al 1517* (Turin, 1986), and Alberto Tenenti and Ugo Tucci (eds.), *Storia di Venezia dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, IV–V, *Il Rinascimento* (Rome, 1996).

¹⁹ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Genoa came under the dominion of the king of France in 1394–1409, 1458–61, 1499–1512, 1515–22, and 1527–8, and to the duke of Milan in 1421–35, 1464–77, and 1487–99.

debates on republican government and the nature of *libertà* arose out of these problems in the mid-sixteenth century.²⁰

Siena was another notoriously unstable republic, at least from the 1480s. For most of the fifteenth century there had been stable, popular government, with little call for institutional change. The most serious challenges had come in the 1450s, from a combination of the disruption caused by wars in Tuscany and the aspirations of some Sienese for a more oligarchic regime. This had been followed by the demands of the Sienese pope Pius II (1458–64) for the admission of the Sienese nobles, including his own family, to full participation in all political offices. From the 1480s, a combination of bitter rivalry among the officially constituted political factions known as the *monti*, the development of a *de facto* oligarchy whose institutional base was the executive *Balia*, and the aspirations to lordship over the city of Pandolfo Petrucci and his political heirs, gave rise to frequent rejigging of the political institutions and an almost constant atmosphere of political tension and insecurity. It was these challenges and developments that gave rise to the most interesting reflections by the Sienese on the nature of their government and the principles on which they thought it should be based, which can be found principally in the registers of the deliberations of the main executive committees, the *Concistoro* and the *Balia*, and the main legislative council, the Council of the People.

Obsessed by these internal battles, in 1530 the Sienese allowed agents of Charles V, backed by a contingent of Spanish troops garrisoned in the city, to establish a presence there that compromised the independence of the republic. After the Imperial representative, Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, undertook the construction of a fortress in the city, attempting to coerce the Sienese into agreeing to this and paying for it, the Sienese rose up and threw out the Spanish garrison in 1552. However, they did not recover their full independence, for they fell under the dominance of the French who came to help them fight the Spanish and then, following the fall of the city, they were handed over by Philip II to Cosimo de' Medici, duke of Florence. These last decades of the Sienese republic, with the intervention of the agents of Charles V and of the king of France, gave rise to much comment on the government of Siena and how it should be reformed, which provide insights into how the agents of the

²⁰ There is little in English on the political history of Renaissance Genoa; for a survey of the political structure and institutions, see Christine Shaw, 'Genoa', in Andrea Gamberini and Isabella Lazzarini (eds.), *The Italian Renaissance State* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 220–36; and Christine Shaw, 'Principles and practice in the civic government of fifteenth-century Genoa', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 58, 1 (2005), 45–90. The authoritative accounts of Genoese politics in the first half of the sixteenth century are Arturo Pacini, *La Genova di Andrea Doria nell'Impero di Carlo V* (Florence, 1999), and Arturo Pacini, 'I presupposti politici del "secolo dei genovesi": la riforma del 1528', *Atti della società ligure di storia patria*, 104 (1990).

major European monarchies perceived and understood the principles of republican government and what respect they were prepared to accord to them.²¹

Lucca had the most uneventful history of the five Italian republics in this period. Republican government had been re-established there in 1430 after the overthrow of the lordship of Paolo Guinigi, and the Lucchese were able to avoid absorption into the dominions of the duke of Milan and, what the Lucchese would have regarded as an even worse fate, conquest by Florence. Lucca's territory was small, offering few salaried offices for Lucchese citizens, and they avoided involvement in war or even diplomatic conflict as far as they could. There seems to have been a general consensus on the desirability of a quiet life. There was not much competition for political office, and not much conflict over policy, and therefore the Lucchese had little occasion to enunciate the principles of their government. Even the records of the *Colloqui* – the Lucchese equivalent of the Florentine *Consulte and Pratiche* – do not yield much reflection.

Although the Lucchese avoided becoming directly involved in the Italian Wars, the problems caused by the disruption in the trade in silk cloth, particularly to France, which was the backbone of the Lucchese economy, gave rise to social unrest – the uprising of the *Straccioni* in 1531. This was a dangerous moment for Lucca, as it offered a pretext for the intervention of Charles V's agents and threatened the republic's independence. The Lucchese managed to ward off this threat. Placing their city under the aegis of the Empire, while seeking the protection of the French king when his forces were in the ascendant in Italy, navigating between the competing claims of the French king and the emperor, challenged the Lucchese to define what their independence meant to them, and what they valued about their republican government. Consequently, Lucchese diplomatic correspondence is a fruitful source for expression of political principles by the Lucchese, as well as comments that reveal how the servants and commanders of the emperor and the king of France thought of the government of this small republic.²²

The Italian republics, rather than Italian princes, are the main concern of this book, and there is limited value in direct comparisons of republican principles with the principles of princely government on some issues of

²¹ The fullest account in English of the political history of Siena in this period is in Christine Shaw, *Popular Government and Oligarchy in Renaissance Italy* (Leiden, 2006); for the institutional history, see Mario Ascheri, *Siena nel Rinascimento: istituzioni e sistema politico* (Siena, 1985), and Riccardo Terziani, *Il governo di Siena dal Medioevo all'età moderna: la continuità repubblicana al tempo dei Petrucci (1487–1525)* (Siena, 2002).

²² For fifteenth-century Lucca, see M. E. Bratchel, *Lucca 1430–1494: The Reconstruction of an Italian City-Republic* (Oxford, 1995), and M. E. Bratchel, *Medieval Lucca and the Evolution of the Renaissance State* (Oxford, 2008); for sixteenth-century Lucca, see Marino Berengo, *Nobili e mercanti nella Lucca del Cinquecento* (Turin, 1965, 1974).

fundamental importance to republican governments and citizens, such as methods of appointment to political offices, or the relative powers and authority of different executive committees and legislative councils. Yet it was a peculiarity of the government of Italian princes of various degrees – from the lords, *signori*, of single towns to the duke of Milan – that the attitude of many of their subjects to their rule was shaped by the legacy of a history of communal self-government analogous to that of the republics. Citizens of many subject towns and cities regarded the authority of the prince over them as being derived from a delegation of authority by the community, one that might be considered as revocable, if the prince did not fulfil his duties or exceeded his lawful powers. Princes looked for and claimed other forms of legitimation for their rule (inheritance, conquest, the grant of a vicariate from the emperor or the pope), but for their subjects, it was the legal basis of his relationship with their own community that mattered. Another peculiarity of Italian states was the personal domination of some towns or cities, even republics, by a family or an individual (such as the Medici in Florence), who had or appeared to have a position analogous to that of a prince – a status outsiders might be readier than their fellow citizens to attribute to them. Such peculiarities of Italians' understanding of the nature and basis of princely power and authority are the focus of the chapter on princes and *signori*.

When analysing the political principles expressed in any of the wide range of sources used in this study, one crucial consideration that has always to be borne in mind is the question of whose opinions were being voiced. Often it has not been possible to identify an individual to whom the words, let alone the thoughts behind them, could safely be attributed.

Even sources such as diaries and letters can present problems. When a diarist recorded a speech given by someone else, or what purported to be public opinion, it is not possible to be sure, without strong supporting evidence, that the speech was authentic, or how accurate was the summation of the public mood. Documents such as decrees and proclamations transcribed into diaries, provided their authenticity is reasonably assured – as with the many documents Marino Sanuto copied into his extraordinary diaries, which were intended to be a reliable source of information for Venetian patricians – obviously need to be approached in the same way as when they are found in other contexts.

Personal letters between friends, if they are private individuals, can generally be assumed to record the opinions of the signatory, although when the letter in question is of the type that was primarily written to display the writer's elegance of style and his learning, there must be some doubt about how personal those opinions really were. Letters bearing the signature of officials and diplomatic envoys would often have been written by a secretary or chancellor. Unless the letter was a routine one, such as a safe-conduct or a recommendation for someone the signatory did not know well and was not an