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Politics of the Imagination: Francesco Guicciardini and the Conditions of Effective Government

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Abstract: This article explores Francesco Guicciardini’s concept of the imagination and argues that it plays a vital, yet hitherto unexplored, role in his political thought. What are called “imaginary conceptions” determine the effects that different governmental strategies have upon a given society. As these both affective and cognitive conceptions are tied to shared, symbolic representations, understanding informal aspects of political life becomes a crucial aspect of Guicciardini’s construal of effective government. To understand these aspects it is necessary to reconstruct the historical genesis of the communal representations as it determines the specificity of the society under consideration. The historical contingency of a society’s imaginary conceptions forces political theory to “imaginatively construct” the institutional forms it suggests, rather than “discover” them among the exempla of the past. The centrality of contingent, imaginary conceptions to political reality leads Guicciardini to break with former Renaissance conceptions of exemplarity.

Introduction

Together with Niccolò Machiavelli, his slightly older friend and more famous compatriot, Francesco Guicciardini is often considered a “political realist.”¹

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¹Vittorio De Caprariis, *Francesco Guicciardini: Dalla politica alla storia* (Bari: Laterza, 1950), 80; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 253–59; Athanasios Moulakis, *Republican Realism in Renaissance Florence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 20–21; Giuseppe Toffanin, *Machiavelli e il “Tacitismo”: La “politica storica” al tempo della controriforma* (Padua: Angelo Draghi Editore, 1921), 92;

Alison McQueen has characterized realism as a commitment to the related views that there “is something distinctive about politics,” that “politics is agonistic or conflictual,” that “utopian thinkers offer inadequate ... guidance for political reform,” and, finally, that the priorities of political thought concern “the requirements of order and stability.”² At a general level, describing Guicciardini as such a “realist” would seem well-founded. His distinction between what ought to be done “in conscience” and what is done according to the “use and reason of states” appears to demarcate a domain of politics distinct from both religion and morality.³ His attack on Plato and those who only “imagine” their preferred political arrangements, together with his stress on the need for political theory to engage with “the nature of things in truth” rather than lose itself in mere speculation, appears to place him squarely in the opposite camp to “utopianism.”⁴ Indeed, closely mirroring Machiavelli’s injunction to study only “the effective reality of things,” Guicciardini is adamant that his theoretical endeavors are concerned with the “effects” of “the nature of things,” not vain flights of fancy.⁵ So while Nicolas Guilhot has recently demonstrated that realism, understood as an avowed, political doctrine, belongs to the twentieth century,⁶ it would seem that Guicciardini fits fairly well into this general scheme of realism.

Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 199; Alison Brown, *Piero di Lorenzo de’ Medici and the Crisis of Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 301; Mark Jurdjevic, “Guicciardini’s Considerations on the Discourses of Machiavelli,” in *Machiavelli’s Discourses on Livy: New Readings*, ed. Diogo Pires Aurélio and Andre Santos Campos (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 263; Artemio Enzo Baldini, “Tempi della guerra e tempi della politica tra Quattro e Cinquecento: Alle origini del ‘realismo politico’ di Machiavelli e Guicciardini,” in *Riscoperte di Guicciardini: Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Torino, 14-15 novembre 1997*, ed. Marziano Guglieminetti and Artemio Enzo Baldini (Genoa: Name edizioni, 2006), 79–94; Laurie Catteeuw, *Censures et raisons d’État: Une histoire de la modernité politique (XVIe–XVIIe siècle)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2013), 69; Jean-Louis Fournel and Jean-Claude Zancarini, *La politique de l’expérience: Savonarola, Guicciardini et le républicanisme florentin* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2002), 137.

²Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 10–11.

³Francesco Guicciardini, *Dialogo del reggimento di Firenze*, in Francesco Guicciardini, *Dialogo e discorsi del reggimento di Firenze*, ed. Roberto Palmarocchi (Bari: Laterza, 1932), 163.

⁴Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 163, 99.

⁵Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il principe*, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. Mario Martelli (Milan: Bompiano, 2018), 859; Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 14–15.

⁶Nicolas Guilhot, *After the Enlightenment: Political Realism and International Relations in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 115–51.

However, while the invocation of these somewhat programmatic declarations to study “effective reality” is a staple of almost all construals of realism, what they amount to is typically left in the dark. Although we might intuitively accept that political theory ought to be concerned with effective reality rather than imaginary constructs, it is far from evident what kind of theoretical commitments that idea actually entails as long as it remains unexplored what, according to those thinkers, determines the capacity of anything to produce real effects. As long as we have no firm grasp on how they understood the type of thing capable of producing such effects, the injunction to study “realty” rather than the merely “imaginary” seems little more than a truism, at best a rallying cry. Should we wish to understand what might be implied by the “realism” of Machiavelli and Guicciardini, a more profound understanding of what they meant by a reality capable of producing effects is needed.

This article takes the first steps towards such an understanding of Guicciardini. Its central claim is that what I call “imaginary conceptions” play a crucial, albeit hitherto unexplored, role in his thought. This entails considering the imagination as pivotal to the explanation of how lasting effects are actually produced. While especially Yves Winter has recently explored similar avenues in Machiavelli, barely anything on Guicciardini has seen the light of day.⁷ Sandro Landi⁸ and Volker Reinhardt⁹ touch upon the Guicciardini’s understanding of the imagination, but neither presents an account sufficiently detailed to properly assess its conceptual import.¹⁰ On the account presented here, the imagination plays a pivotal role in Guicciardini’s construal of political reality in two closely interrelated ways. On the one hand, the imaginary conceptions of a given society determine what political acts will have lasting effects. On the other, because these conceptions are the product of singular historical trajectories, they render ineffective the application of general institutional models that are not specifically construed to fit these conceptions. As a function of this twin role of the imagination, political theory must be radically pliant to the varying circumstances of the society it considers.

⁷Yves Winter, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For similar, yet less extensive, treatments of Machiavelli, see Lars Vissing, *Machiavel et la politique de l'apparence* (Paris: PUF, 1986); Kenneth Robert Minogue, “Theatricality and Politics: Machiavelli’s Concept of Fantasia,” in *The Morality of Politics*, ed. Bhikhu Parekh and R. N. Berki (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), 148–62.

⁸Sandro Landi, *Naissance de l’opinion publique dans l’Italie moderne: Sagesse du peuple et savoir de gouvernement de Machiavel aux Lumières* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006), 55–57.

⁹Volker Reinhardt, *Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540): Die Entdeckung des Widerspruchs* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2004), 134.

¹⁰Similarly, there is no entry for “fantasia,” “imaginatione,” or any of their cognate terms in *Catégories et mots de la politique à la Renaissance italienne*, ed. Paolo Moreno, Jean-Claude Zancarini, Jean-Louis Fournel, and Héléne Miesse (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2014).

The injunction to adapt politics to current circumstances could, at a first glance, seem banal. Not only had Aristotle suggested something similar, but the context of humanist culture to which Guicciardini, despite his reservations, clearly belonged, was preoccupied with strategies of rhetorical accommodation.¹¹ In opposition to the empty verbiage of abstract Scholasticism, the rediscovery of ancient wisdom was intended to prove an effective guide to human existence by accommodating itself to the particularities of the audience being addressed. As Nancy Struever has argued, considerations of rhetorical *decorum* played a vital role in the genesis of historical consciousness because it entailed an increasing awareness of the cultural conditions that had determined what, at a specific point in history, could be considered “fitting.”¹² Anyone with a modicum of humanist training would be aware of the rhetorical importance that especially Quintilian, but also Aristotle, had assigned to the imagination.¹³

What, then, in view of these widely shared commitments, constitutes the specificity of Guicciardini’s argument? On the one hand, it consists in the radical historicity of the imaginary conceptions that condition political action and thought. By realizing that to effectively accommodate political acts to a specific audience it is necessary to trace the historical genesis of that audience’s affective and cognitive outlook, Guicciardini historicizes human experience to a hitherto unseen extent. On the other hand, the way this radical historicity translates into political theory constitutes a break with a fundamental presupposition of the Renaissance as such: the revitalization of past examples. It is due to the radical historicity of the imaginary conceptions that the rhetorical strategy of extracting *exempla* from history to provide effective guidance to human existence will no longer work. For political thought to have practical purchase, it must “imaginatively construct” the institutional schemes that will alone be capable of producing enduring effects within a society whose affective and cognitive outlook is radically historical.

This, in brief, is the argument I make. I do not consider Guicciardini’s conception of “reason of state” both because it is already fairly well explored and because, on my account, it is somewhat tangential to the more profound,

¹¹See Lodi Nauta, *Philosophy and the Language of the People: The Claims of Common Speech from Petrarch to Locke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 20–70. See also Aristotle, *Politica*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 1288b10–89a25.

¹²Nancy S. Struever, *The Language of History in the Renaissance: Rhetoric and Historical Consciousness in Florentine Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

¹³Aristotle, *Ars Rhetorica*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 1370a25–30; Quintilian, *The Orator’s Education (Institutio Oratoria)*, vol. 3, ed. D. A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 58–60. See also Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 181–211; Mireille Armissen-Marchetti, “La notion d’imagination chez les Anciens. II. La rhétorique,” *Pallas* 27 (1980): 3–37.

practical commitment of his thought, a commitment that hinges on his conception of the imagination. The first part of the article traces the conceptual background against which Guicciardini articulates this conception. I do not consider any rhetorical construals of the imagination. This is not to deny that Guicciardini, although a lawyer by education, had no rhetorical training and thus no possible knowledge of such construals. Indeed, he was perfectly capable of masterful rhetorical exercises, as his late *Accusatoria*, *Defensoria*, and *Consolatoria* clearly demonstrate.¹⁴ Rather, I set it aside because space does not allow for consideration of the thorny questions relating to Guicciardini's audience. As is well known, only the *Storia d'Italia* was intended for publication, and despite his intense revisionary efforts, all of the remaining works seem to have been written primarily for his own, and maybe his family's, benefit.¹⁵

Instead, I trace the concept of the imagination as it develops from late medieval Aristotelianism to Guicciardini's immediate Florentine context. While Scholastic conceptions of the imagination may seem far removed from Guicciardini's practical aims, I argue that an understanding of this background helps explain why late Renaissance political thought had a particular interest in the concept of the imagination. In the so-called *Pratiche* we find a preoccupation among Florence's ruling classes with practical effects, as well as the affective and cognitive characteristics of the political actors with which they had to deal. These characteristics could collectively be designated by the term "fantasia" or "immaginazione," as testified by Guicciardini's contemporaries Francesco Vettori, Lodovico Alamanni, and Machiavelli. While such terminological practice does not prove the existence of any determinate concept of the imagination, the construal of the psychological dynamics that determine political action, which it seems to presuppose, is sufficiently close to developments traceable in philosophical circles to warrant the procedure adopted here.

I argue that Guicciardini picks up on this terminological tendency and gives it an unseen conceptual coherence.¹⁶ He may therefore be seen to

¹⁴Francesco Guicciardini, *Autodifesa di un politico: Consolatoria, Accusatoria, Defensoria* (Bari: Laterza, 1993). For other rhetorical elements of Guicciardini's works, see Nancy Streuver, "Proverbial Signs: Formal Strategies in Guicciardini's *Ricordi*," *Annali d'Italianistica* 2 (1984): 94–109; Jean-Louis Fournel, "Quels sont les vrais péchés des hommes? Rhétorique de l'état d'urgence dans la Florence des Guerres d'Italie (Savonarole, Machiavel, Guicciardini)," in *Rhétorique et littérature en Europe de la fin du Moyen Âge au XVIIe siècle*, ed. Dominique de Courcelles (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 16–24.

¹⁵See Emanuele Cutinelli-Rèndina, *Guicciardini* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2009).

¹⁶See *Consulte e pratiche, 1502–1512*, ed. Denis Fachard (Geneva: Droz, 1988), 82–92, 96–102, 137. For the origin and nature of the "consulte e pratiche" see Francesco Klein, *Scritture e governo dello stato a Firenze nel Rinascimento: Cancellieri, ufficiali, archivi* (Florence: Edifir-Edizione, 2013), 129–56.

prolong developments in philosophical construals of the imagination while giving them a specifically practical bent in line with the preoccupations of his contemporaries. His “realism,” if we persist in using this term, is conditioned by an adaptation of conceptual tools developed in a speculative setting to entirely practical aims. As these tools are used to analyze a historically determined situation that defines the range of viable practical options, his analysis remains subordinate to his practical aims. His realism remains inherently practical, not simply theoretical. However, to give a sufficient account of this historical situation, an account that can actually guide effective action, some level of conceptual determination is needed. And while I am not suggesting that Guicciardini, certainly critical of philosophical speculation, was a particularly systematic thinker, there is, nevertheless, a coherence to his thought that merits our reconstructive efforts.

I tease out this coherence across Guicciardini’s works in the next three sections of the article, detailing his concept of the imagination (section 2), human desire (section 3), and exemplarity (section 4) and, equally important, their conceptual relations. Although reading across a body of work covering more than twenty years has its drawbacks, it presents a Guicciardini, whose unfaltering occupation with understanding the causal mechanisms of political reality can hardly be questioned, much more attuned to affective and aesthetic aspects of political life than most give him credit for.

1. The Background

In what may broadly be defined as the Aristotelian tradition, the imagination had always been understood to play a mediating role between the senses and the intellect.¹⁷ According to Albertus Magnus, the “imagination” was the faculty “in which sensible images, when the sensible things are absent, are retained.”¹⁸ As both Albertus and his pupil Aquinas maintained, this retention made it possible for the so-called “active intellect” to abstract “intelligible *species*” from the “phantasms” stored in the imagination, a process through which human understanding was ultimately actualized.¹⁹ The “Platonists,” on the other hand, tended to attribute a less constructive role to the imagination. While it remained situated between sense and

¹⁷See Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation, and Cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 31–62; Marieke J. E. van den Doel, *Ficino and Fantasy: Imagination in Renaissance Art and Theory from Botticelli to Michelangelo* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022), 36–39.

¹⁸Albertus Magnus, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 5, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1890), lib. III, tract. I, cap. 1. See also Aristotle, *De Anima*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 428b30–429a2.

¹⁹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Roberto Busa (Rome, 1888), Ia, 85, 1.

intellect, the imagination did not so much provide our soul with necessary information as it hindered our attempt to transcend corporeal nature. To Marcilio Ficino, our soul's superior nature, indicated by the fact that it "dominates" the body, entailed a moral necessity of transcending our lower faculties.²⁰ Yet because this dominance was assured through the mediating function of the imagination, even to a moralizing, highly dualist Platonism, the imagination was somehow capable of bridging the gap between soul and body.

Ficino points to a tension that had also haunted the Aristotelian tradition. By retaining impressions once made in sense, the imagination was at its core the ability to represent something that was no longer present and therefore potentially inexistent.²¹ And whereas these representations were necessary to subsequent intellection, it was nevertheless clear that, being both of what was absent and falling short of universal knowledge, the imagination was inherently prone to mistakes. At the same time, being mistaken was no hindrance to causal efficiency. As Ficino had stressed, although often mistaken and thus representing something "unreal," the imagination exerted all sorts of real actions upon our body. Inescapable but fallible, effective yet somehow unreal, the imagination was something that was hard to do without, but even harder to discipline.

In *De Imaginatione* from 1501, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola insists on both the shortcomings of the imagination and the need to discipline it. This latter concern is particularly pressing in view of Pico's vast extension of the imagination's societal import. Thus, all faults to be found "both in civil, philosophical and Christian life" have their origin in the imagination.²² That the imagination exerts such a massive impact upon human life appears to rely upon Pico's claim "that the operations of all animated beings derive from the nature of the phantasia or imagination."²³ Seeing that all animated behavior derives from the imagination, it is small wonder that the way to cure society's ills passes through the discipline of the imagination.²⁴ While he clearly belongs to a Neoplatonic brand of Christianity, more concerned with personal salvation than institutional reform, Pico nevertheless adumbrates a view of the imagination according to which it profoundly shapes the form that social life assumes.

In a letter from 1506 to Piero Soderini's nephew, Giovan Battista, Machiavelli maintains that "everyone governs himself according to his character

²⁰Marcilius Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, vol. 4: *Books XII–XIV*, ed. James Hankins, trans. Michael J.B. Allen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 110.

²¹Aristotle, *De Anima*, 428a11–12.

²²Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *De imaginatione*, ed. Eckhard Kessler (Stuttgart: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1997), 92.

²³Pico, *De imaginatione*, 86.

²⁴Pico, *De imaginatione*, 126.

and imagination (*fantasia*).²⁵ The latter, in so far as it determines how we “govern” ourselves, is not just a cognitive, but deeply affective, form of mental representation. The imagination not only represents action, it moves us to perform it. Moreover, that fact that we cannot decide whether “ingegno” and “fantasia” are separated by an explicative or a coordinative “and” points to their intimate relation. On this view, a person’s imagination is not just something fleeting, invented on occasion, but springs from in-born nature and, more importantly, from acquired habits. In a closely similar discussion in *Discorsi*, Machiavelli emphasizes how difficult it can be to change a once successful strategy.²⁶ The memory of what has once been successful projects itself onto the present situation and determines the practical measures we choose. Indeed, Machiavelli shows a particular attention to the political effects of memory. For instance, because long government tends to efface the memory of past desires for political change, the Romans experienced multiple rebellions in Spain, France, and Greece because these territories maintained memories of their former rulers.²⁷ Therefore, the range of what we may call “imaginary conceptions,” those both affective and cognitive representations that determine what we desire and how we pursue it, are largely the function of a particular, historical trajectory. Action is the product neither of universal nature, nor of pure reason.

Such a view is not a mere Machiavellian aberration as both Francesco Vettori and Lodovico Alamanni use the term in a similar sense.²⁸ In *Sommario della istoria d’Italia*, written sometime after 1527, Vettori explains that in 1512 the Florentines had the “opinion” that their enemy would not proceed beyond Bologna. This “phantasy was so fixed” in their minds that they declined to raise money to counter a possible attack.²⁹ While “opinione” appears to be used synonymously with “fantasia,” Vettori equates the terms insofar as he is concerned what the Florentines “do not see.”³⁰ Indeed, the fact that the Florentines’ comprehension of their situation proves to be entirely wrong in no way minimizes the extent to which it structures their affective and cognitive attitudes. By emphasizing how “fictional” constructs end up

²⁵Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 2700. For the so-called “Ghiribizzi al Soderini,” see Carlo Ginzburg, “Diventare Machiavelli: Per una nuova lettura dei ‘Ghiribizzi al Soderini,’” *Quaderni storici* 41, no. 121 (2006): 151–64.

²⁶Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, in Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 608. See also Machiavelli, *Principe*, 899; Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 2875.

²⁷Machiavelli, *Principe*, 806, 817.

²⁸See also Baldassare Castiglione, *Il libro del cortegiano*, ed. Giulio Carnazzi (Milan: Rizzoli, 1998), 142.

²⁹Francesco Vettori, *Sommario della istoria d’Italia*, in *Scritti storici e politici*, ed. Enrico Niccolini (Bari: Laterza Editore, 1972), 141.

³⁰For the seemingly synonymous use of these terms, see also Ieronimo Savonarola, *Poesie coll’aggiunta del suo Trattato circa il reggimento e governo della città di Firenze*, ed. Di Audin de Rians (Florence: J. Grazzini, 1847), 22.

having real political outcomes, Vettori places imaginary conceptions at the center of political analysis, the lesson being that we fail to understand what motivates the attitudes of a given society unless we grasp the distinct *fantasia* from which they derive.

Alamanni notes in 1516 that among the older Florentines an inveterate “*fantasia*” precludes their acceptance of the signorial rule of Lorenzo de’ Medici, Duke of Urbino. However, because this imaginary construct is only found among those citizens who remain deeply attached to the memory of Florentine equality, most of the young will easily shed their “civil habit” in favor of the “courtly.” As time has yet to establish their overarching conceptions of political life, they remain amenable to new governmental practices.³¹ Consequently, not only are a society’s imaginary conceptions the product of its historical trajectory, but these conceptions determine the range of political changes that may prove to have real, enduring effects, first, by being accepted by a wide range of citizens and, second, by giving shape to their fundamental political attitudes.

What the political writers so far considered tried to capture by the term “*fantasia*” corresponds quite closely to the preoccupation with the “*natura*” of specific political actors that we find in the Florentine advisory boards (*pratiche*) of the same period.³² On December 14, 1507, for instance, the hope was expressed that Francesco Vettori, then in Germany, could “relate something more about the mind of the emperor.” Vettori frequently employs the term “*fantasia*” in the relevant sense when describing his travels in Germany.³³ Similarly, the Venetian ambassadors of roughly the same period were well aware of the crucial importance of what we might call a people’s “imaginary conceptions” to the range of practical options that could seriously be considered.³⁴ Although surely not with philosophical, even terminological, rigor, the practical import of political actors’ habits of mind, desires, and conceptions—in short, their particular *phantasia*—was widely felt among the political elites at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

2. Guicciardini’s Imagination

In the C-series of the *Ricordi*, Guicciardini stresses that one should not put too much trust in “the people” because it “often has a different *fantasia* than what

³¹Lodovico Alamanni, *Discorsi di Lodovico Alamanni sopra il fermare lo stato di Firenze nella devozione de’ Medici*, in Rudolf von Albertini, *Das Florentinische Staatsbewusstsein im Übergang von der Republik zum Prinzipat* (Berne: Francke Verlag, 1955), 370.

³²See for instance *Consulte e pratiche*, 166.

³³Francesco Vettori, *Viaggio in Alemagna*, in Vettori, *Scritti storici*, 19, 40, 89.

³⁴See Daniel Barbaro’s report in *Relazioni degli ambasciatori Veneti al senato*, vol. 4, ed. Eugenio Albèri (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 242. For the problems of interpreting these “*relazioni*,” see Filippo de Vivo, “How to Read Venetian ‘Relazioni,’” *Renaissance and Reformation* 34, no. 1/2 (2011): 25–59.

you think.”³⁵ The term “fantasia” does not appear in the corresponding maxim of the earlier B-series, but Guicciardini explains that “[t]he inclinations and deliberations of people are so faulty and most often derive from coincidence rather than reason” that it shows a lack of “judgment” to count on their support.³⁶ As Emanuele Cutinelli-Rèndina had demonstrated, Guicciardini’s successive editions of the *Ricordi* showed increasing conceptual lucidity, which should caution us not to underestimate such terminological changes.³⁷ The fact that “inclinations” and “deliberations” flesh out what Guicciardini would later gather under the term “fantasia” thus confirms that, when he eventually used that term, it was to designate those both affective and cognitive conceptions that determine the way a specific group will react to governmental changes. And although they may often prove entirely false, they nevertheless condition communal life at its very roots.³⁸ Not mere representations of reality, these conceptions condition our deepest desires (*inclinazione*) and the way we try to attain them (*deliberazione*). Because these conceptions derive from coincidence (*dal caso*) rather than reason, they belong to the domain of history, not universal reason or immutable nature.

For any given society, then, its historically constituted *fantasia* conditions the range of political changes it may effectively sustain. As Guicciardini explains elsewhere, should we wish to institute a republican government instead of a monarchy, and the people’s “opinions” already assume the evils of the latter, we need to maintain neither the reality nor the façade of monarchy’s “old orders.”³⁹ As a condition for any sustainable political acts, it is necessary to first analyze the *fantasia* of the society for which those acts are considered. The deeply historical, collective psychology of social groups becomes the primary object of political analysis in an effort to vouchsafe the efficiency of the governmental strategies to be adopted.⁴⁰

This is the view we find in *Dialogo del reggimento del Firenze*, Guicciardini’s most detailed piece of political theory, composed towards the middle of the 1520s. Here, we are told by Bernardo del Nero—Guicciardini’s seeming mouth-piece—that to evaluate which is the most “useful” between the Medici government prior to 1494 and the one that Piero Capponi, Pagolantonio

³⁵ Francesco Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, ed. Raffaele Spongano (Milan: Rizzoli, 2021), 146–47: “spesso avendo fantasia diversa da quello che tu credi.” For the problems of interpreting the *Ricordi*, see Joseph Markulin, “Guicciardini’s *Ricordi* and the Idea of a Book,” *Italica* 59, no. 4 (1982): 296–305.

³⁶ Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 237. For a similar use of “fantasia” see Francesco Guicciardini, *Carteggi XV*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per l’età moderna e contemporanea, 1969), 149–50.

³⁷ Cutinelli-Rèndina, *Guicciardini*, 238–60.

³⁸ Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 134.

³⁹ Francesco Guicciardini, *Considerazioni sui “Discorsi” del Machiavelli*, in Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, 731.

⁴⁰ Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 162.

Soderini, and others tried to introduce afterwards, we have to “imagine what effects” the latter “would produce” (*immaginarci che effetti produrre*). In fact, the need to exercise imagination to construe what effects may be produced by adopting specific institutional orders goes a long way to explain Guicciardini’s choice to adopt the literary form of dialogue in a work that explicitly aims at the effective reality of politics, not its speculative invention. Imaginative strategies are part and parcel of political theory to the extent that it aims at having practical effects. So while Roberto Ridolfi expressed surprise at Guicciardini’s choice,⁴¹ when seen in this light, it appears as a logical consequence of his global construal of political theory.

Seeing that the effects of the Medici government, having had historical reality, are known to everyone, we have to use our imagination to construe what might have been the consequences of the alternative.⁴² To imagine these effects in a way that rises above mere fiction, two things must be considered: the nature of the government to be introduced and the nature of the city and its people. If we wish to assess the consequences of a specific political change, we must know both the government and, crucially, the nature of the city and the people that is to receive it. That Guicciardini’s understanding of “nature” is closely tied to the concept of *fantasia* is confirmed shortly after. Bernardo thus emphasizes that the “best government that can be instituted in a city” is that which is natural to it. This is so because it better adapts to its people’s “minds and appetites” (*cervelli ed appetite*).⁴³ To this view, no government can function unless it corresponds to the cognitive (*cervelli*) as well as affective (*appetite*) dispositions of the people that it is to be imposed upon. To imagine, in a methodologically sound fashion, the effects that will result from imposing determinate political institutions upon a specific people, the primary task of the political theorist is consequently to get to know its nature, its “mind and appetites.” Or, so we may conclude, its *fantasia*.⁴⁴

Not only, then, is the imagination, considered as a privileged object of study, central to the analysis of a determinate society. To assess the effects that novel institutions might have upon any social group, so we are repeatedly told, we have to “imagine” them.⁴⁵ Initially, this has to do with the fact that

⁴¹Roberto Ridolfi, *Vita de Francesco Guicciardini* (Milan: Rusconi, 1982), 169–72. For different renditions of the *Dialogo*’s form, see Alison Brown, *Medicean and Savonarolan Florence: The Interplay of Politics, Humanism, and Religion* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 111; Catteuw, *Censures*, 68–69.

⁴²Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 16.

⁴³Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 18. For the non-physiological sense of “cervello,” see *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, vol. III (Turin: UTET, 2002), 7–9.

⁴⁴See also Francesco Guicciardini, *Del governo di Firenze dopo la restaurazione de’ Medici nel 1512*, in Guicciardini, *Dialogoi*, 260–61; Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 149, 157.

⁴⁵Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 17. See also Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 91. The fact that Guicciardini uses the verb *immaginare* need not imply that he rigorously separates a passive faculty (*fantasia*) from an active one (*immaginazione*). Although the verb “fantasiare” is used by writers such as Boccaccio in the sense of *immaginare*, it is much

the terms of the comparison introduced at the beginning of the *Dialogo*—the Medici government prior to 1494 and the one proposed by Soderini and others—are not “equally in being” (*equalmente in essere*).⁴⁶ Because the effects of the latter have hitherto remained unavailable to empirical observation, they have to be imaginatively constructed. To do so, however, general reasoning will not suffice.⁴⁷ Seeing that these effects will rely upon the specifics of the Florentine people, only particular experience and historical knowledge allow for their proper evaluation. As Guicciardini puts it, to project into the future what the effects of political acts will be, we have to “distinguish between case and case” and “consider which are the substantial differences and which are of less importance.”⁴⁸ The intellectual procedure required of political analysis relies not so much upon conceptual derivations as upon the close scrutiny of particular cases. Consequently, it is a function of the realization that political action is radically conditioned by the imaginary conceptions of a given society that political theory is transposed to the domain of the imagination. Because its object is intimately conditioned by the contingent circumstances that have occasioned a distinct *fantasia*, political theory must employ the methods of imaginative construction rather than pure, conceptual derivation.

However, once the historical singularity of a given people is recognized, knowledge derived from historical precedent seems insufficient if political theory is to have its intended, practical effects. Indeed, to ameliorate a political situation entirely determined by a particular chain of events, theory has to imaginatively construct, not simply excavate from the realm of experience, solutions specifically adapted to that situation and to no other. Not only, then, must the imagination try to predict what may happen in the future based on precedent. It must somehow “construct”—while falling short of any modern conception of “creation”—new forms of political rule adapted to the historically conditioned *fantasia* of a given people. This dual, conceptual work of the imagination is fleshed out in the remainder of the article.

3. Desire

This section details how the imaginary conceptions of the Florentine people are intimately linked to its historically determined desire for liberty. As this

less common. See *Dizionario*, V, 647. Whereas Albertus Magnus, drawing on Avicenna, had distinguished between “phantasia” and “imagination,” Aquinas rejected this distinction. Ficino was later to reintroduce it, yet there is no reason to assume that Guicciardini did. See Albertus Magnus, *Opera*, III, I, III; Aquinas, *ST*, 1a, 78.4; Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, 194.

⁴⁶Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 16.

⁴⁷Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 15–16, 97–99.

⁴⁸Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 17. See also Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 131.

desire is attached to a range of societal, even ceremonial, representations, understanding their nature conditions whether or not they can successfully be co-opted by governmental practice. One of the primary tasks of political analysis is therefore to discern the means through which desire might be harnessed by prudent manipulation of public representations.

According to Guicciardini, we naturally desire the good but, more often than not, do what is bad.⁴⁹ In the *Ricordi* we are told that “all humans are by nature more inclined towards the good than the bad,” but that our nature “is so fragile ... and the occasions that invite to the bad so frequent in the world that humans easily let themselves deviate from the good.”⁵⁰ As the *Dialogo* explains, it was to keep people “firm in this first, natural inclination” that lawgivers introduced rewards and punishments.⁵¹ On this account, governments fundamentally serve the function of shaping human desire by directing it towards some acts and away from others. Politics are meant to curb the nefarious consequences of human weakness not so much by addressing reason, as by the enticements of hope and fear.

We can thus distinguish two levels of Guicciardini’s analysis of desire: on a first, he affirms, seemingly *a priori*, the existence of a universal tendency of humankind that, in entirely general terms, explains the origin and basic function of political rule. While it was to avoid the pernicious consequences of humankind’s ubiquitous deviation from its natural tendency that governments were instituted, their continued existence is warranted by the fact that there remains no surer guide to the prediction of another’s acts than what serves the private, rather than public, interest.⁵² On a second level, however, the specific attempts at affective redirection have caused an almost infinite variety in human desire. Indeed, experience testifies that humans are moved by a myriad of different causes.⁵³ This variety is tied to the specifics of each historical epoch that have witnessed change not only to the way people speak and dress but even to their “tastes and inclinations.”⁵⁴ Moreover, such variations are linked to the political institutions in place. In the *Considerazioni* we learn that, given the variations of arts, religion and the general movement of “human things,” it is no wonder that “the costumes of men, often acquiring their movements from institution, opportunity or necessity, also vary.”⁵⁵ Political institutions, we may conclude, account to no small degree for the shape of the psychological states that determine how a given people acts.

⁴⁹Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 120.

⁵⁰Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 151. See also Francesco Guicciardini, *Del modo di ordinare il governo popolare [Logrogno]*, in Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 225; Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 705.

⁵¹Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 55.

⁵²Guicciardini *Ricordi*, 128, 157, 160, 182, 219–20.

⁵³Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 126, 129.

⁵⁴Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 223.

⁵⁵Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 750.

Such extensive variety in even our most intimate preferences should caution against simplifying interpretations of Guicciardini's conception of "private interest."⁵⁶ While such interests may provide us with the surest means of predicting another's behavior, that interest will nevertheless vary as a function of that person's particular preferences and desires. From the perspective of "effective reality" what is in a person's interest is not to be decided by the tribunal of universal reason but relies upon the historical trajectory that has given rise to that person's affective and cognitive outlook. All the way to the *Storia d'Italia*, it remained Guicciardini's firm conviction that personal desires and beliefs are a function of the practical engagement we have been involved in.⁵⁷ And already in the *Storie fiorentine*, we hear that Charles VIII's arrival in 1494 not only changed the "modes of government" on the Italian peninsula, but even the manner of thinking of its inhabitants.⁵⁸

The idea that political events and institutions at a very basic level shape human desire constitutes the key to Guicciardini's rendition of the history of Florence. The institution of the so-called "Consiglio Grande" in 1494 gave the Florentines at large a "taste" of liberty such that "the entire people" now desires it. In fact, this desire has so become "fixed," even "sculpted" (*scolpita*) in the Florentine hearts that even the most accommodating form of affective appeasement is incapable of making them forget it.⁵⁹ Guicciardini's use of the term "sculpted" clearly points to the fact that this desire is not the product of a universal nature, but of a singular, historical trajectory. Consequently, when we are repeatedly told that the Florentines naturally desire liberty, this is not meant to designate the consequence of a transhistorical essence, the causes of which remain outside the purview of human activity.⁶⁰ Rather, the Florentines' "natural" desire for liberty is the direct outcome of their city's political

⁵⁶For only the latest iteration of this once dominant tendency of Guicciardini scholarship, initiated by Francesco de Sanctis, see Carlo Celli, *The Defeat of a Renaissance Intellectual: Selected Writings of Francesco Guicciardini* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2019), 5–6.

⁵⁷See Francesco Guicciardini, *Storia d'Italia*, ed. Silvana Seidel Menchi (Turin: Einaudi Editore, 1971), 343–44. Guicciardini traces the genesis of Louis XII's desire to have the duchy of Milan, as well as the gradual cooling of the Florentine's friendship with the French, as consequences of varying political circumstances. These "disposizione degli animi" explain "gli andamenti," constitutive of the historical narrative. According to Donald Wilcox, Guicciardini's most important historiographical innovation in *Storia d'Italia* consisted in "his integration of personality into the process of change," see Donald J. Wilcox, "Guicciardini and the Humanist Historians," *Annali d'Italianistica* 2 (1984): 30.

⁵⁸Francesco Guicciardini, *Storie fiorentine*, ed. Roberto Palmarocchi (Milan: Rizzoli, 2006), 144.

⁵⁹Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 111, 119. See also Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 726; Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 18, 146; Guicciardini, *Del governo*, 261–62.

⁶⁰Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 98; Guicciardini, *Logrognò*, 223; Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 724.

history, what John Pocock calls “second nature.”⁶¹ History rather than immutable nature has given rise to the Florentines’ overarching conceptions of the world they inhabit. For better or worse, the fact that the Florentines now desire liberty is a historical fact from which the consideration of institutional reform must take its point of departure if its avowed hope of producing enduring, practical effects is to be anything more than the vain product of abstract speculation.⁶²

What this means for political analysis is that, to evaluate the finite range of viable action that a specific society may sustain, it is necessary to assess the historical trajectory that has produced its current configuration of desire and the way it maps onto imaginary conceptions. This is the conception we find in Guicciardini’s most explicit account of method. In the second book of the *Dialogo* we are told by Bernardo that, for their discussion to be practically “fruitful”, it must be persuasive. Indeed, the good of the city cannot enduringly be introduced by way of violence, but only with the Florentines’ willing acceptance.⁶³ The fact that only persuasion, and never the use of violent means, may prove to be effective in the long run, entails that the suggested reform has to cater to the dominant affective and cognitive tendencies of the Florentines. As Bernardo explains, the participants of the discussion must “search out a government” of such a nature that “we will not be without hope” that the Florentines could be persuaded to introduce it. The proposed government has to correspond to “the nature, quality, conditions, inclinations, and, to put it altogether in one expression, the humors (*umori*) of the city and the citizens.”⁶⁴ The intricate task of the political analyst, then, consists in seeking out a program for institutional reform that caters to what the Florentines already believe while inducing changes within the range of what their fundamental conceptions of political life are still able to comprise.

Guicciardini explicitly construes this, his “realistic” government, in opposition to one that is “imagined” (*immaginato*).⁶⁵ On a first reading, this seems to fly in the face of the interpretation that I have presented so far. In fact, however, what Guicciardini warns against is a purely imagined government

⁶¹Pocock, *Machiavellian*, 228.

⁶²Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 119. Donato Gianotti took this lesson to heart a few years later when he wrote his history of Florence. In Machiavellian-Aristotelian terms, he thus construed the current affective state of Florence as a consequence of the way in which its opposing “umori” had historically developed. See Donato Giannotti, *Della repubblica Fiorentina* (Venice: Gabbriel Hertz, 1722), 29–60. For the origin of the concept of “humours” (*umori*) in Ancient Greek, medical discourse, as well as its transposition to the political domain, see Marie Gaille-Nikodimov, *Conflit civil et liberté: La politique machiavélique entre histoire et médecine* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2004), 61–69.

⁶³Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 141.

⁶⁴Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 99.

⁶⁵See also Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 719.

whose “actual potentiality,” to use a somewhat paradoxical turn of phrase, is not evaluated relative to what current circumstances entail. To be sure, both Guicciardini’s institutional scheme and Plato’s ideal republic are “unreal” in the sense of having no empirically ascertainable existence, yet the latter is further removed from actual reality by being construed independently of the possibilities that this reality contains. The difference is one of degree, but it is the kind of quantitative difference that matters. Whereas Guicciardini’s scheme is inescapably imagined, it is so relative to the real potentialities that a singular, historical trajectory has produced in a determined “subject” (*subietto*).⁶⁶

In contrast, a purely imagined government has no structural relation to what has, in fact, happened. It is not construed relative to the distinct set of possibilities for political action that a very real trajectory of historical events has produced. To construe the difference between so-called “utopianism” and Guicciardini’s supposed “realism” in terms of the absence or presence of imaginative procedures thus misses the point.⁶⁷ The question is rather what methodological measures are called upon to vouchsafe that, whatever the imagination might come up with, it is likely to produce enduring effects. To Guicciardini, the imaginative procedures involved in political analysis are always measured against the historical trajectory that has produced the specific configuration of *fantasia* in a given society. It is exactly such a constitutive relation to what has happened that characterizes Guicciardini’s proposal for institutional reform.

To see more specifically how the Florentine desire for liberty relates to the imagination, an example will serve our purposes: the “name of liberty.”⁶⁸ While Guicciardini is explicit that people should pay more attention to the “substance and effects” of things than to mere “ceremonies,” it is “incredible” how much simple words are nonetheless capable of “binding” people.⁶⁹ Hence, vain promises and pure signs of ostentation may just as much alter how people behave as what may hide behind these appearances.⁷⁰ As a consequence, the seemingly clear-cut distinction between “ceremonies” and “effects,” maintained elsewhere in Guicciardini’s works, cannot be rigidly upheld.⁷¹ As ceremonies are fully capable of causing real effects, they

⁶⁶Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 99.

⁶⁷For misleading construals of the difference between “realism” and “utopianism” in terms of the absence or presence of imaginative procedures, see Miriam Eliav-Feldon, *Realistic Utopias: The Ideal Imaginary Societies of the Renaissance, 1516–1630* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 14; Antonio Donato, *Ludovico Agostini’s “Imaginary Republic”: Utopia in the Italian Renaissance* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 3.

⁶⁸Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 24; Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 741; Guicciardini, *Logrognò*, 246.

⁶⁹Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 113, 213.

⁷⁰See also Machiavelli, *Principe*, 870.

⁷¹Guicciardini, *Storie fiorentine*, 325; Guicciardini, *Del modo*, 273; Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 148.

necessarily fall within the scope of his analysis of political reality, premised, as it is, upon the priority of effects over merely supposed principles.⁷² Indeed, the fact that ceremonies can elicit responses to the effect of “binding” people is crucial to a proper understanding of Florentine history. It was by cunningly co-opting the public symbols evocative of the city’s past that the Medici, under the “shadow of civility and liberty,” could maintain their rule for the best part of a century.⁷³ And while the Medici use of such symbols—what John Najemy calls their regime’s “republican trappings”—were intended as mere “window dressing,” they nevertheless played a vital part in the strategies that kept them in power for so long.⁷⁴ As Guicciardini notes, “many people are simple (*grossi*) and easily let themselves be deceived by words.”⁷⁵ The effective role played by the so-called *accoppiatori*, for instance, may have changed significantly after Cosimo’s return in 1434, yet by retaining their name they kept alive the memory of their institutional origins.⁷⁶

The strategy of “ceremonially” co-opting the desires that attach to memories of a shared, historical past is not limited to words. In the second part of *Dialogo*, Bernardo stresses that, to avoid the Signoria assuming “too much authority” it is crucial that they no longer reside in “the Palace,” that is, the Palazzo Vecchio.⁷⁷ Letting the Signoria stay here, they are “accompanied by such splendor and pomp” that everybody will want to partake in it. Although it may prove difficult, indeed impossible, to persuade the Florentines to remove the Signoria from their most famous palace, it would be better to withdraw it “from the eyes of the people.”⁷⁸ Otherwise the Signoria will retain such “honor and majesty” that people will invariably desire to take part of it despite the fact that it would be better, on Guicciardini’s account, to reserve this magistracy for the qualified few.

Places of power are subject to specific “perceptual conditions”, as we may call them, that must be taken into account by political analysis. As these conditions alter the significance ascribed to political acts, the viable range of such acts changes accordingly. As the *Ricordi* stresses, the “palace” and the

⁷²Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 14.

⁷³Guicciardini, *Del modo*, 281. See also Guicciardini, *Logrognò*, 246. For the role of memory, see Guicciardini, *Storia d’Italia*, 45, 164; Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 722–23, 732.

⁷⁴John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence: 1200–1575* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 347. For the expressions “immagine di repubblica” and “immagine della libertà,” see Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 702, 723.

⁷⁵Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 118.

⁷⁶See Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 34–59.

⁷⁷Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 112. The *Palazzo Vecchio* even held sacramental meaning to the Florentines. See Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 47–48.

⁷⁸Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 113–14.

“square” are separated by a “fog” so dense that the eyes of the people fail to perceive what is actually going on in the places of power. Hence, the world “is easily filled with wrong and empty opinions.”⁷⁹ Similarly, the *Considerazioni* explains that the Florentines “in the squares” were easily mistaken about the reality of “the palace” and that “what they had imagined” would often turn out to be wrong.⁸⁰ The frequent falsity of these conceptions, however, does nothing to curb the effects they have upon the reactions elicited by the acts of those in power. To be sure, people might be moved by mere “surface and titles” and “weak foundations,” yet they are so moved.⁸¹ And just as the “majesty” of the Palazzo Vecchio makes people desire the magistracy that resides there, it is such imaginary conceptions that “stimulate” people to “transgress how things are” and make them desire political change.⁸²

The imagination, then, is key to a proper grasp on political reality by mapping onto a historically determined configuration of desire from which a finite range of reactions can be elicited. A society’s imaginary conceptions determine the range of viable political acts because they govern the affective responses that such acts will occasion. This explains why imaginary, seemingly “unreal,” representations may be co-opted so as to profoundly affect the actual course of political life. These conceptions are what society is effectively “made of,” not simply the irrelevant superstructure of a more profound level of reality. To see how this analysis translates into a specific form of political thought, one that also relies upon the workings of the imagination, is the final task of this article.

4. Exemplarity

Schematically put, the Renaissance understood itself as an “imitation” of antiquity. To move past modern degeneracy, so the argument ran, it was necessary to resuscitate the virtues of the past by imitating the *exempla* of its heroes.⁸³ The hope was that, if ancient examples were revived in the present, it would be possible to leave the “Middle Ages” definitively behind and inaugurate a new, invigorated epoch. This idea dominates Renaissance historiography. Mirroring ancient historiography itself, Renaissance writers saw the task of historical narration as that of making moral acts of the past available for present imitation. Taking its cue from Cicero’s famous view of

⁷⁹Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 153–54.

⁸⁰Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 742.

⁸¹Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 713, 743.

⁸²Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 114.

⁸³See John D. Lyons, *Exemplum: The Rhetoric of Example in Early Modern France and Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance literature* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

history as “magistra vitae,” historiography served a moral purpose and was considered as a branch of rhetoric, not an independent discipline.⁸⁴ According to Giovanni Pontano, following Quintilian’s description of the tripartite role of the *rhetor*, history ought “to teach, please and move” by “meting out praise or blame” in a rhetorically appropriate way. Doing this, it was hoped, would incite the reproduction of ancient virtue.⁸⁵ Political thought essentially relied upon a similar scheme.⁸⁶ Although he takes himself to be breaking new ground, it is such a view that Machiavelli condones at the beginning of the *Discorsi*. Whereas the current epoch had been willing to imitate the aesthetics of the ancients, a revival of their political institutions had yet to be attempted.⁸⁷ Making this possible was the task that Machiavelli set himself by presenting the causes that had once made Rome so glorious and ought therefore to be imitated in the present. Both historiography and political thought, then, relied for their ability to produce practical guidance on the possibility of replicating exemplary action in the present.

Guicciardini sharply criticizes such a view of the practical value of exemplarity. In the *Ricordi* we are told how wrong it is “to judge by examples.”⁸⁸ If these different examples are not entirely “similar,” they will be incapable of successfully guiding present action. Because the former act was invariably a response to a complex range of specific conditions, should these fail to reproduce exactly, what is called for under present circumstances cannot be a simple repetition of the former act. As Guicciardini explains: “every small variation ... can be the cause of the greatest variation in the effect.”⁸⁹ This is why those who constantly evoke the Romans, such as Machiavelli, are

⁸⁴Cicero, *De Oratore, Books I–II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 224. For the overwhelming importance of Cicero, possibly even inhibiting engagement with the theory of historiography, see Robert Black, “The New Laws of History,” *Renaissance Studies* 1, no. 1 (1987): 126–28. For the later *artes historicae*, see Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁸⁵Giovanni Gioviano Pontano, *Dialogues*, vol. 2: *Actius*, ed. Julia Haig Gaisser (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 246–48.

⁸⁶James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 54–57.

⁸⁷Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 307–08. Machiavelli’s conception of imitation is not, however, as straightforward as Guicciardini could lead us to believe. See Thierry Ménissier, *Machiavel, la politique et l’histoire: Enjeux philosophiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001), 99–100; Eugene Garver, *Machiavelli and the History of Prudence* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 119. For the varying conceptions of exemplarity, see also Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 171–96.

⁸⁸For Guicciardini’s early condonement of exemplarity, see Francesco Guicciardini, *Memorie di famiglia*, in Francesco Guicciardini, *Scritti autobiografici e rari*, ed. Roberto Palmarocchi (Bari: Laterza, 1936), 3.

⁸⁹Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 145–46.

mistaken. Roman institutions were solutions to Roman circumstances and for their examples to be of any practical use to contemporary Italians the latter would need to have “a city conditioned as theirs was.”⁹⁰

However, Guicciardini does not simply preclude the possibility of imitation.⁹¹ Instead, he emphasizes the extreme difficulties involved in acquiring sufficient “judgment” to successfully ascertain what such a procedure would actually require. As the *Considerazioni* informs us, should we seek to reproduce the deeds of the past, we cannot simply apply a general rule inductively lifted from prior instances unless we closely consider the “humors of the city, the being of the things that varies according to the temporal circumstances (*la condizione de’ tempi*), and other happenings that shifts.”⁹² Consequently, a past example, whether of an entire constitution or a singular act, should be considered neither in abstraction from the situation in which it was first enacted nor the situation in which we seek to reconstitute it.

This entails that no complete institutional order from the past, largely because it corresponds to the contingently formed *fantasia* of a given community, can be derived from historical memory and transposed, *talis qualis*, to current circumstances. The scheme of imitation upon which Renaissance engagement with antiquity had initially been premised can no longer act as the conceptual backbone of political theory.⁹³ By acknowledging the contingency of the determinate conjuncture according to which politics always operate, it appears that political theory, to have the practical import promised by Machiavelli, must imaginatively construct, rather than merely discover, the institutional order that can uniquely accommodate current circumstances.

This does not, however, entail the exclusion of historical knowledge from political thought. What it does mean is that history largely assumes a novel role. No longer the repository of static models to be more or less indiscriminately imitated, it profoundly informs political theory by making manifest the causes responsible for the specific conjuncture that determines the limits of contemporary action.⁹⁴ Thus, Guicciardini’s history is practically instructive

⁹⁰Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 110. See also Guicciardini, *Del modo*, 274; Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 68.

⁹¹A scheme of exemplarity is still present in both *Ricordi* and the *Storia d’Italia*, a point missed by Mark Phillips, *On Historical Distance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 52–53. See Guicciardini, *Ricordi*, 109, 131; Guicciardini, *Storia d’Italia*, 105.

⁹²Guicciardini, *Considerazioni*, 742.

⁹³For the view that, for exemplarity to work, history must repeat itself, see Vettori, *Viaggio*, 85–86; Marie-Dominique Couzinet, *Sub specie homines: Etudes sur le savoir humain au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 2012), 143–55; Kinch Hoekstra, “Political History,” in *Time, History, and Political Thought*, ed. John Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 102–35.

⁹⁴Christian Nadeau, “Rhétorique et histoire politique à la Renaissance : Le statut de l’imitatio dans l’oeuvre de Machiavel et la critique de Guichardin,” *Dalhousie French Studies* 85 (2008): 3–17.

in virtue of the singularity of the causal chains it establishes, not because it manifests universal norms applicable in most circumstances. Tracing the genesis of a given society's imaginary conceptions, history conditions any warranted account of the finite range of actions that may actually prove enduring and whose predictable effects can therefore be ascertained with at least a modicum of methodological rigor. It traces, to use the phrase from above, the historical production of that society's "actual potentialities."

Accordingly, just as *Dialogo's* first book detailed the "imagined" effects of a regime that had failed to materialize, so its second imaginatively construes the effects of an institutional order that has yet to see reality.⁹⁵ But just as Bernardo was at pains "to baptize" the government that Soderini and the others had planned to institute because it failed to mimic any known, institutional order, so the regime detailed in the second book does not conform to any one *exemplum*.⁹⁶ On this point, Bernardo is perfectly clear. For whereas a new government might be found in the "ancient books of excellent men" that have handed to posterity their knowledge of the "orders and laws that many republics have had" and could thus be "imitated" either wholesale or by choosing the best elements from each, this will not do for an old community, whose "will" and "nature" are already formed.⁹⁷

Instead, it is necessary "to consider" the institutional orders that will both convince and endure relative to this will and nature. This entails giving an account of the orders that will prevent the defects that were imagined in the first book. As these are largely derived from the effects that the planned government was imagined to have upon the Florentine *fantasia*, so the institutional orders that Bernardo now devises stem from a consideration of the same. However, by the expulsion of the Medici and institution of the "Consiglio Grande," Florentine conceptions of politics had been so fundamentally altered that any wish to revert to the institutional situation before 1494 would be historically naïve and politically dangerous.⁹⁸ The singularity of the post-1494 situation thus serves as a lucid reminder that to have any hope of ameliorating any society's political situation, we must "construct" institutional orders that uniquely cater to that society's historically determined

⁹⁵Bernardo's continued use of the term "immaginare" testifies to the continuity of Guicciardini's method. See Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 91–92, 131. Thus, distinguishing the two books in terms of "imagination" will not do. See Giorgio Cadoni, *Un governo immaginato: L'universo politico di Francesco Guicciardini* (Rome: Jouvence, 2002).

⁹⁶Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 16. Reinhardt reminds us that the Medici rule was "not included in the received cataloging of good and bad forms of government." See Volker Reinhardt, "Refutation, Parody, Annihilation: The End of the Mirror for Princes in Machiavelli, Vettori and Guicciardini," in *A Critical Companion to the "Mirror for Princes" Literature*, ed. Noëlle-Laetitia Perret and Stéphane Péquignot (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 197.

⁹⁷Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 99, 153.

⁹⁸Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 82–84, 145–46.

fantasia. Indeed, it is the imagined effects upon that *fantasia*, in turn deriving from equally imagined institutional orders, which constitute the sole criteria for picking out the orders to be preferred.

Yet such “construction” in no way equates to an invention, even creation, *ex nihilo*. Rather, the approach in the *Dialogo*’s second book consists of an excavation of elements from past or contemporary governments that, having been subject to close scrutiny of their particular circumstances, might apply to Florence. For instance, not only “can we not imagine” a more beautiful public distinction than a “gonfaloniere a vita” similar to the “Doge” of Venice, but such a magistrate will quell the conflictual emulation among the “principal citizens” that had always been endemic to Florentine society. Indeed, seeing that this magistracy is for life, and therefore available only to very few, it will not prove disgraceful never to have held it. In contrast, participation in the Signoria, not least due to its seat in the Palazzo Vecchio, was so widely desired in Florence that it had been necessary to restrict participation to just two months so that everyone could take their turn. Consequently, anyone not having held this magistracy was barely considered a man. To satisfy this desire, the “gonfaloniere” had effectively been given free rein by making the Signoria consist of an ever-changing group of men of often dubious quality.⁹⁹

But because the Florentines, “habituated to this custom,” are unlikely, as we have already seen, to remove the Signoria from the Palazzo, rather than introducing a change that is unlikely to endure, it is necessary to limit the power both of the Signoria and the “gonfaloniere” and place instead the “power of government” in a council imitating the Roman “Senate” and the Venetian “Pregati.” Crucially, however, both are stripped of the inconveniences they might be imagined to involve in Florence. The Venetians, for instance, never change the members of their senate “without an important cause”, yet this order, although seemingly responsible for “the quieter nature of their minds” will need so much time to gain acceptance in Florence that Bernardo rejects it. Thus, instead of a term of a year, this magistracy should be for life, but enlarged to 150 members so that initially excluded people may sustain a hope of entering due to naturally occurring vacancies.¹⁰⁰ Although the “Pregati” might be a Venetian *exemplum*, it has no normative claim upon political theory independent of Florence’s specific needs to which it is entirely subordinated. While a wide range of its details therefore stem from other, somehow still “exemplary” governments, it nevertheless appears that Guicciardini’s institutional scheme, construed not as “it should be, but such that we may hope that it can be,” derives from the constructive, even “combinatory,” effort of the imagination.¹⁰¹ This effort essentially consists of evaluating the specific, both cognitive and affective,

⁹⁹Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 110–13.

¹⁰⁰Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 116.

¹⁰¹Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 119.

effects that a range of varied, minute institutional initiatives might be imagined to have upon the Florentine population in order to subsequently combine them.¹⁰²

Moreover, to this combinatory effort is added the invention of truly novel proposals. For instance, because people are not used to speaking freely in the senate such as Bernardo proposes that they do, and that they therefore “proceed with caution to not appear presumptuous,” it is imperative that the Florentines be “habituated to this mode of speaking and discussing.” While this is truly a new function, it is a task that must be carried out by the “gonfaloniere” for Bernardo’s senatorial scheme to work as intended.¹⁰³ So while Bernardo had given up imagining (*non si potendo immaginare*) a more beautiful public distinction than “gonfaloniere for life,” he was clearly ready to imagine new tasks for that magistracy to perform.¹⁰⁴

Not only, then, is the avowed purpose of Guicciardini’s political thought to assess what “can be imagined” to result from non-actual, political changes.¹⁰⁵ It must devise institutional schemes through the combinatory as well as truly inventive effort of the imagination that fit the historically shaped *fantasia* of the society it considers. In the case of Florence, that only something historically new will correspond to its current predicaments is perfectly illustrated by Bernardo’s calm affirmation that the government he has construed, should it one day materialize, will be the first to let the Florentines taste “true freedom,” something they have, in fact, never tasted before.¹⁰⁶

5. Conclusion

Guicciardini’s “realism,” if we insist on using that term, is entirely premised upon a consideration of what is likely to produce enduring effects within a given society. At this level of generality, there is certainly reason to associate his thought with general tenets of realism such as suspicion of abstract speculation and idealistic, normative commitments. However, to the extent that the historiographical use of such labels tends to eschew more detailed interrogation of how the thinkers in question determine the conditions that renders something “effective,” we should use them with caution. While Guicciardini’s thought is intensely preoccupied with effective reality, what is bound to prove effective is by and large determined by the imagination. Construing the sinuous trajectory of the history of political thought in terms of somewhat facile oppositions such as those between “imaginary” and

¹⁰² Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 126, 136–37.

¹⁰³ Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 122.

¹⁰⁴ Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 110.

¹⁰⁵ Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 131.

¹⁰⁶ Guicciardini, *Dialogo*, 140.

“real” tends to obscure more than it clarifies. Guicciardini’s thought, although wedded to the idea that political theory has no function unless capable of affecting real, enduring change through the governmental advice it delivers, is nevertheless a “politics of the imagination” and this in both senses of the genitive: objective genitive, in that political theory relies upon analysis of the historical genesis of the *fantasia* of the society for which political acts are considered, and subjective genitive in that political theory, because this *fantasia* is the product of contingent, historical circumstances, must itself rely upon the constructive, even inventive, effort of the imagination. If realism is a category to be retained, we must be aware that its different historical iterations hardly agree on one description of what constitutes the reality it considers.