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Introduction: After Civic Humanism: Politics and Learning in Renaissance Italy

Nicholas Scott Baker and Brian Jeffrey Maxson

In his 1449 dialogue, *Vita civile*, Matteo Palmieri observed: "He who sits in public office, before all else, knows he is stripped of his own person, and retains the public persona of the entire civil body."[1] A prominent Florentine humanist, Palmieri also held political offices in the city throughout his adult life. One could be forgiven, then, for thinking that his reflections on government derived from personal experience. The *Vita civile*, however, was modelled more upon classical precedents, most notably Cicero's *De officiis*, than on the hurly-burly of Quattrocento politics in Florence. Palmieri's text was the quintessential expression of the politico-cultural concepts that historians have come to call "civic humanism": the praise of an active life, civic virtue, and public service conflated from ancient Greek and Roman writings that dominated Florence's intellectual life in the first half of the fifteenth century. The relationship between the rhetoric of civic humanism and the realities of Florentine politics during the Renaissance has formed the basis of debate among scholars for half a century now. Despite the ongoing contention over the civic construct and exhortations for the development of new paradigms the thesis first articulated by Hans Baron fifty-years ago continues to hold a dominant position in Anglophone scholarship of the Renaissance.[2]

Having first conceived the term "*Bürgerhumanismus*" in a 1925 review published in *Historische Zeitgeist*, Baron fully developed the concept in his

[1] Palmieri, *Vita*, 98–99: "Chi ne' magistrati siede, inanzi a ogni cosa conosca esere spogliato della propria persona, et ritenere la publica persona di tutto il corpo civile."

[2] Most recently see the essays collected in Hankins, *Renaissance*. See also Edward Muir's pointed survey of the state of Renaissance scholarship in the United States: Muir, "The Italian Renaissance" as well as Mark Jurdjevic's more recent comments on the persistence of the Baron thesis in Anglo-American scholarship: Jurdjevic, "Hedgehogs," 258–260, and also Robert Black's comments in his review of *Renaissance Civic Humanism,* 716.

seminal 1955 publication, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*.[3] Baron argued that the Milanese threat to Florentine independence at the turn of the fourteenth century provoked a dramatic shift in the intellectual and political development of the city on the Arno. He contended that, in response to the crisis of 1402, a form of "civic" humanism emerged, separate from, and opposed to, the earlier classicism of the Trecento. Three essential elements distinguished this intellectual shift. First, a new politico-historical outlook that praised an idealized republicanism and especially the Roman Republic—rather than monarchy and the Roman Empire—and which located the foundation of Florence during the former period. Second, a renewed respect for the vernacular literary tradition of the fourteenth century, which found its epitome in Palmieri's *Vita civile* and the Tuscan dialect biographies of Dante and Petrarca written by Leonardo Bruni. Third, a desire to apply classical learning to the politics of fifteenth-century Florence: the promotion of Ciceronian virtues and active engagement in public life.

Baron's critics have also principally followed three paths, although they do not parallel his own tripartite division.[4] One path of attack has involved highly technical arguments over the dating of various works central to Baron's thesis. A second variety of criticism has demonstrated that many of the strands of republican thought that Baron located only after 1400 emerged much earlier in scholastic writings during the thirteenth century. A third front has attacked Baron's apparently naïve reading of texts such as Bruni's *Laudatio florentinae urbis* as reflecting the reality of Florentine constitutionalism and political behavior. This last group of critics has argued that in the very period that civic humanist praise of public service and republican virtue emerged the government of Florence became increasingly dominated by a narrow oligarchy. The city of freedom and equality hailed by Bruni in his *Laudatio*, they observed, was a fiction.

These attacks from multiple fronts have convincingly refuted many of Baron's original arguments, even as a new paradigm or set of paradigms has yet to take their place. Moreover, the questions that Baron asked—about the

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[3] Later revised into a one-volume edition: Baron, *The Crisis.* On the genealogy of the concept see Brown, "Hans;" Fubini, "Renaissance Historian;" and Molho, "Hans."

[4] See the useful survey of Baron's detractors in Witt, "The Crisis." See also Hankins, "The 'Baron Thesis';" Witt, *In the Footsteps*, 419–431, who offers a defence of several of Baron's central points; and most recently the summary of this literature found in Maxson, "Kings," 191.

relationship between political thought and political action, between meaning and experience—remain important ones for historians to answer. In intellectual historical circles on both sides of the Atlantic the focus has been on increasing the accessibility to humanist texts among scholars and the general public. After centuries of these texts languishing in the special collections of European libraries, historians of humanism have begun systematically publishing and in many cases translating editions of humanist texts from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries.[5] The meticulous work of these scholars has placed the learned literature of the Italian Renaissance at the fingertips of historians, a situation only dreamed of just a couple of decades ago. The proliferation of these texts makes the time ripe for a fresh return to the relationships between humanist learning — and learned culture in general — and politics during the Italian Renaissance.

While various aspects of Baron's vision connected to learning and intellectual history have been challenged, the political considerations of his thought have enjoyed enduring influence. Politics lay at the heart of Baron's thesis: the threat posed by Giangaleazzo Visconti's expansionary ambitions to the communal government of Florence provoked a shift from fourteenth-century contemplative classicism to the active application of classical learning to government in the fifteenth century. Politics provided the catalyst for civic humanism and the field in which its own effects would play out. Baron's vision divided fifteenth-century Italy into republics and tyrannies, which were opposed philosophically, institutionally, and even morally. This binary-vision of Renaissance polities was not an invention of Baron's. It had first appeared in nineteenth-century historical writing, but in the mid-twentieth century it received impetus from contemporary events. Anglo-American scholars viewed the politics of fifteenth-century Italy through the lens of the struggle against anti-democratic forces in the Second World War and the Cold War.[6] Explaining the origins of civic society and participatory democracy in the modern Western world assumed a compelling relevance and significance. For

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[5] On this phenomenon, see Hankins, "A Lost Continent;" Celenza, *The Lost Italian Renaissance*; Kristeller, *Iter*; and the growing *I Tatti Renaissance Library* series, published by Harvard University Press, which contains Latin editions of humanist texts with facing-page English translations.

[6] On the development and dominance of this vision of fifteenth-century Italian politics see Molho, "The Italian Renaissance"; and Muir, "The Italian Renaissance."

Baron, himself a refugee from Nazi Germany, this interpretation appeared intensely personal.

The dominance of this vision of Renaissance politics actually received a significant challenge only a decade after the initial publication of *The Crisis*. Philip Jones argued that, in fact, little practical difference existed between the communal and seigniorial regimes of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy. Power, he suggested, clung obstinately to wealth; and oligarchy "in fact or law, was the predominant form of government."[7] The Jones thesis, however, had little immediate impact.[8] Two generations of Anglo-American scholars dedicated themselves, instead, to identifying and pursuing the civic—in all its manifestations—in Renaissance history.[9] Baron's own personal interest in the connections between humanist learning and politics became a minor issue. Although John Najemy's argument that civic humanism served as an ideology for the emergent elite in Florence and obscured the reality of political and social relations in the city has proven a particularly influential recent intervention.[10] But the concept of the civic realm became the dominant paradigm for Renaissance political history in Anglophone scholarship, which itself became increasingly focused on the apparent twin poles of civic republicanism, Venice and Florence, to the exclusion of the principalities of northern Italy and the Neapolitan kingdom in the south.

As an analytical tool, the civic paradigm proved valuable—flexible enough to serve both traditional political histories as well as innovative approaches inspired by the theoretical and methodological shifts occurring in the broader discipline of History. In the Florentine case, many studies have explored the role of political factionalism in transforming the city's government from a medieval commune to a civic-oriented Renaissance state and a few have even examined the role of humanism in this shift.[11] Others have

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[7] Jones, "Communes," 75.

[8] Law and Paton, "Introduction," xvi–xvii.

[9] Muir, "The Italian Renaissance," esp. 1110–1114.

[10] See Najemy, *Corporatism*, 301–317; idem, "The Dialogue;" idem, "Civic Humanism;" idem, "Giannozzo;" idem, *A History*. See also Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism." Cf. the critiques offered at Witt, *In the Footsteps*, 424–427.

[11] Becker, *Florence*; Brucker, *Florentine Politics*; idem, *The Civic World*; Kent, *The Rise*; Najemy, *Corporatism*. On the role of humanism, see the multiple publications of Riccardo Fubini, especially *Storiografia*. In the interests of keeping the citations to a reasonable length, we have offered only a few, indicative examples, principally monographs published in English, in notes 10–20.

explored the endurance of communal institutions and civic republican ideas despite the increasingly princely rule of the Medici in the fifteenth century.[12] Students of Venetian history meanwhile sought to explain the actual, socio-political, foundations of that city's myth of stability and serenity by exploring how republican values, corporate identities, and political institutions fostered civic pride and unity.[13] Historians of both cities explored the role of public ritual and Christianity in shaping and expressing civic values.[14] Beyond the Florentine-Venetian axis, even in as unlikely a location as papal Rome, scholars pursued the civic paradigm as a defining Renaissance political construct.[15]

The civic construct, however, never quite fit outside the historiographically dominant republican city-states. More recent studies, including works on Florence and Venice, have begun to complicate and problematise understandings of Renaissance politics even further. Some scholars have attempted broad, comparative studies that have tackled head-on the old Baron-favored binary opposition between communal and despotic regimes in favor of promoting a model that looks much closer to the Jones thesis.[16] Others have ventured outside the social and civic elites that the older paradigm emphasized to explore how women and subaltern orders possessed and deployed political agency in a hierarchical, homosocial culture.[17] But even within such studies, at times, the civic paradigm still proves a useful and even unavoidable analytic tool.[18]

Within Italian scholarship the civic construct never gained the same traction that it had in the English-speaking world. Italian historians of Renaissance politics instead pursued questions about how the experience of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century polities fit with the larger picture of the development of the European state. In particular, they responded to, challenged, and re-considered Federico Chabod's suggestion (contemporaneous to the appearance of *The Crisis*) about the existence of a "Renaissance state"

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[12] Kent and Kent, *Neighbours*; Rubinstein, *The Government*; Field, *The Origins*; Ganz, "The Humanist; Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism," with further bibliography on 998.

[13] Bouwsma, *Venice*; Finlay, *Politics*; Romano, *Patricians*.

[14] Muir, *Civic Ritual*; Trexler, *Public Life*; Weinstein, *Savonarola*.

[15] Nussdorfer, *Civic Politics*.

[16] Shaw, *Popular Government*; Law and Paton, *Communes*.

[17] See for example Cohn, *Creating*; de Vivo, *Information*; Hurlburt, *The Dogaressa*; Rosenthal, "The Genealogy;" Tomas, *The Medici*.

[18] See, for example, Horodowich, *Language*; Terpstra, *Cultures*.

and a unique, Italian path toward modernity. Their investigations continue to produce a rich, variegated picture of the development of governance and the nature of power during the Renaissance.[19] This scholarship tends to minimize the differences, and emphasize the continuities of experience, between republican and princely polities. In this regard, then, recent moves away from the civic paradigm in Anglophone historiography have opened the prospect of increasing common ground with the work of Italian political historians.

Despite the outpouring of much-needed editions of humanist texts and all the wonderful vitality and variety of Renaissance political history the relationship between humanism (civic or otherwise) as well as learning more broadly conceived and politics has tended to fade from the top tier of scholarly concerns and interests; particularly if the distorting, but not undeserved, attention given to Niccolò Machiavelli is excluded from consideration. The studies (outside the Machiavelli industry) that have recently given prominence to the links between politics and learning in Renaissance Italy remain few.[20] With old and newly available texts in hand and armed with historical methodologies established over the sixty years since Baron codified his paradigmatic thesis, this book seeks to return to the relationship between politics and learning with fresh eyes. By moving beyond Baron, civic humanism, and the sub-disciplinary barriers that tend to divide the history of Renaissance learning from rest of the scholarship on the Italian Renaissance, this book attempts to breathe new life into the fascinating interplay of politics and learning in Renaissance Italy. It surveys both republican and princely polities, both communal and monarchical political values, and ranges from well-known, professional humanists to less familiar, less educated protagonists. It considers the concept of civic humanism as only one of several analytic categories and the scholarly concerns of Baron as just one tessera of a much larger mosaic of political cultures and operations.

The contributions to this volume demonstrate the multiplicity of connections between learning and politics in Renaissance Italy. Some engage explicitly with Baron's thesis and the civic humanist paradigm, illustrating its

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[19] Useful entry points for English speakers into this scholarship exist in the essays collected in Connell and Zorzi, *Florentine Tuscany*; Gamberini and Lazzarini, *The Italian Renaissance State*; and Kirshner, *The Origins*.

[20] For example, see Bentley, *Politics*; Field, *The Origins;* Ianziti, *Humanistic Historiography*; Ianziti, *Writing History*; Jurdjevic, *Guardians*; Meserve, *Empires*; Maxson, *The Humanist World*.

continuing viability but also stretching its application to prove the limitations of its original expression. Others move beyond Baron by examining the actual practice of various individuals and groups engaged in both political and learned activities in a variety of diverse settings. The collection begins with an essay that looks ahead to a historiography less dominated by the possibilities and limitations of Hans Baron's thesis. Oren Margolis argues that, ironically enough, Jacob Burckhardt's classic *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* draws a roadmap showing the way to new and interesting studies on the relationship between politics and learning. By returning to Burckhardt with fresh eyes, historians of Renaissance Italy can move beyond civic humanism to a new "politics of humanism" with a renewed focus on the practical political nature of many humanist texts and authors. Christopher Celenza, in the second chapter, offers compelling answers to two basic historiographical questions: Why did Hans Baron's civic humanism thesis become so successful in the historiography of the twentieth century, and why should historians continue to study Florence? Celenza suggests that Baron traced a compelling genealogy, later elaborated upon by J.G.A. Pocock, of the political features associated with modern western democracies, particularly secularization. Celenza proceeds to tie humanist discussions about the mutability of language to this intellectual chain traced by Baron and Pocock. For Celenza, the 1430s were the key decade in which the humanists' greatest contributions to the history of western secularization occurred, primarily in discussions held at the papal court then housed in Florence. After these initial historiographical chapters, the book follows a chronological scope from the fourteenth into the sixteenth centuries.

The book's essays on the fourteenth century focus on the continuing importance of the empire and the vernacular in Italian literature and politics, two areas traditionally outside of the literature on civic humanism. Alexander Lee uses the writings of Albertino Mussato — made famous by Ronald Witt for his pivotal role in the origins of Italian humanism — to show the prevalence of imperial praise among early Trecento humanists.[21] Lee situates Mussato's writings amidst the complex political situation of fourteenth-century Padua and suggests that the defense of Paduan liberty did not preclude the advancement of the imperial ideal. In the book's fourth essay, Lorenza Tromboni returns the collection to Florence, where she looks at the practical application of the ideas contained in Marsilio of Padua's *Defensor pacis.* Marsilio's

[21] Witt, *In the Footsteps*, 117–173.

book was commonly cited in political conflicts between secular and religious authorities as well as papal and imperial rulers, but its relationship with the important vernacular chronicle tradition in Florence as well as France has not previously been acknowledged. Tromboni shows that the work had far greater influence on fourteenth-century Florentine politics and learning than the survival of only a single vernacular translation of the work might suggest. Together, the contributions of Lee and Tromboni offer new insights into pivotal texts and figures through methodologies rooted in a deep understanding of their political context.

Scholars from Baron onwards have viewed fifteenth-century Italy, especially Florence, as the peak of the civic humanist ideal. The four essays presented here on the Quattrocento support the basic, abnormally strong connection between politics and learning during that century, but they do so in ways that paint a far more multifaceted and complex portrait of this relationship. Brian Jeffrey Maxson offers a new interpretation of the surviving humanist orations delivered during the ceremonies marking the transfer of military command from the Florentine government to their chosen mercenary captain. Scholars have previously used these speeches along Baronian lines, seeking in them the presence of republican ideas or the praise of the citizen militia. By contrast, this article returns these speeches to their original context to show how the constraints of ritual and contemporary conceptions of magic were the primary factors shaping the content as well as presentation of these speeches.

The book — like the historiography on Renaissance Italy over the past thirty years — then moves beyond Florence to other centers of political power on the Italian peninsula.[22] Elizabeth McCahill argues that humanists like Poggio Bracciolini and Guarino Veronese may have served as partisan pens for their employers, but both men also strove in their letters and literary works to construct a scholarly discourse of civility where both men could retain their honor and advance their professional reputations. Other humanists like Leon Battista Alberti turned their pens towards modifying the civic conduct of their contemporaries. For McCahill, therefore, civic humanism expands beyond the relationship between learning and politics in one or a handful of cities and includes political men across the Italian peninsula and beyond who

[22] On the push beyond Florence, see the reflections on Florentine historiography offered by Brucker, "Florence," 5–12, and the further bibliographic leads therein; Brucker, "The Uffizi;" cf. Maxson, "Histories."

focused their writings on other facets of life in a political center. From papal Rome, the essays shift to the courtly cities of the north. Gary Ianziti examines the place of Pier Candido Decembrio in the development of humanist historiography, particularly in Milan. Ianziti argues that, despite never writing a full political history, Decembrio nevertheless slowly introduced to Milan in the 1430s and 1440s the form of hybrid history and political propaganda developed by Leonardo Bruni for Florence in his *History of the Florentine People*. In particular, Decembrio's works were highly influential in the development of the *res gestae* tradition — that is the detailed recounting of the deeds of contemporary and recent princes and events — popular in the later Quattrocento. Jennifer Cavalli looks at how female consorts used humanist learning to expand and solidify their political power. Women such as Isabella d'Este and Eleonora d'Aragona became patrons for humanist writers and used their praise to establish and justify prominent positions for themselves in the political world of their respective cities. Isabella Lazzarini's contribution draws on examples of history writing from across northern Italy to blur the traditional boundaries demarcated by scholars to distinguish fifteenth-century chronicles from humanist histories. Lazzarini contends that the primary influence on the genre and content of a piece of Renaissance history writing was less an author's education and more his or her position in the government bureaucracy. Historians and chroniclers shifted their approach to document-based contemporary narratives as a result of the explosion of information available, desired, and collected in chanceries and other governmental offices during the second half of the fifteenth century.

The last four essays in the collection turn to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, balancing the usual predominance of the Quattrocento. These contributions demonstrate the continuing vitality in the relationship between learning and politics after the key transformational moment of 1494, when Charles VIII of France's invasion of the peninsula destroyed the precarious assumptions of the Italian city-state system and ushered in over a half-century of conflict and turmoil. The first essay, by John Gagné, considers the creative impetus that the Italian Wars provided to learning and scholarship. Gagné explores how some observer-participants in Milan saw an opportunity for political innovation and new ideas about popular liberty and government in the ferment at the end of the fifteenth century. He considers how the Milanese and the French negotiated competing political languages — where words were similar but held different meanings in the

different communities — as the city of Milan both capitulated to French rule and defended its continued autonomy in 1499 and 1500. Gagné's conception of the Italian Wars as a field for experimentation counters the usual negative, destructive vision of these years. Nicholas Scott Baker examines how the writing of history—that quintessential activity of so many Italian humanists and scholars—became itself a political act for the exiled Florentine republican, Jacopo Nardi. Baker suggests that in Nardi's *Istorie della città di Firenze* memory and emotion interacted not only to make sense of the collapse of the Florentine republic in 1530 but also to impose a particular political understanding upon this event.

The final two essays offer reinterpretations of grounds tilled by Hans Baron and his followers. Scholars since Hans Baron have usually seen Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* as an abandonment of the republican principles espoused in his earlier works. Mark Jurdjevic, by contrast, contextualizes the work among other contemporary works and argues that the *Histories* reflect a continuing republican sentiment in the enigmatic Machiavelli, even as he condemned many of the historical problems of the Florentine republic. Just as Hans Baron attempted to apply his concept of civic humanism to a figure later than the years covered in *The Crisis*, William Bouwsma argued that events paralleling those described in Baron's paradigmatic book emboldened a republican sentiment in Venice at the turn of the seventeenth century, most notably in the writings of Paolo Sarpi. In the final essay, Edward Muir expands Bouwsma's analysis of Paolo Sarpi to include lesser-known works that argued for greater religious toleration, in doing so Sarpi continued the secularist aspects of civic humanist writings. As Muir demonstrates, these aspects of Sarpi's writings became institutionalized in the Venetian Academy of the Unknowns, which spawned a prolific literature advocating republican forms of government. This last outpost of Italian civic humanism remained until the power of the Venetian Republic waned to such an extent that it lost its ability to influence the thought and actions of others, and a different form of political ideal took hold in Europe based upon northern thinkers like Thomas Hobbes.

The collective impression of all the contributions is a complex, ever-shifting mosaic of learned enterprises in which the well-examined civic paradigm emerges as just one of several modes that explain the interaction between learning and politics in Italy between 1300 and 1650. The model that emerges rejects any single category of explanation in favor of one that emphasizes variety and multiplicity. It suggests that learning was indispensible to all

politics in Renaissance Italy, that, in fact, at its heart the Renaissance was a political event as much as a cultural movement.[23] The power of language as a political tool and practice became comprehensively re-established in the society and culture of the Italian peninsula between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. The tenuous, even illegitimate, claims to independence of many Italian states and similarly of the sociopolitical elites that dominated them required a political currency that was understandable and transferable across the European landscape and beyond. The governments of Renaissance Italy dealt not only with each other but also with popes, emperors, kings, and sultans. In classical antiquity, the elites of the Italian states found a flexible and variable political language, adaptable to the multiplicity of forms and structures that existed on the peninsula. Classical antiquity provided models, precedents, exempla, and modes of communication with which both governors and governed could frame ideas, debates, and conflicts within a common context and via a shared set of referents and media. The rediscovery of antiquity, and the cultural production that accompanied it, occurred in dialogue with the requirements of Italy's fractured and insecure political landscape. Not only did a language of politics drawn from classical antiquity provide justifications for power but also the imitation of ancient cultures (literary and visual) provided a form of capital that translated across Europe. Indeed the imitation of Italian imitation spread the Renaissance style from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, from the Atlantic to the Baltic.

The sample in this volume is too small to make a grand claim about long-term trends, but some outlines of a pattern do emerge. Overall a long-term shift, although neither neat nor always linear in its progression, appears to unfold by which learning became an increasingly established and indispensable component of the political life of Renaissance Italy. The principal protagonists in the various chapters of this volume gradually shift from figures most readily identifiable as scholars who happened to participate in politics (Albertino Mussato, Leonardo Bruni, Pier Candido Decembrio, for example) to political operatives who also happened to be scholars (Isabella D'Este, Girolamo Morone, Niccolò Machiavelli, for example). All actors in Italian Renaissance politics participated to some extent in a culture of learning from anonymous merchants ignorant of Latin through powerful noblewomen to the host of bureaucrats and "average statesmen" who worked across

[23] A conclusion also expressed recently by Gamberini and Lazzarini, *The Italian Renaissance State*, 2, in a different context.

the peninsula.[24] But as the centuries progressed from the fourteenth through to the seventeenth, learning became less a valuable but inessential extra and more an integral part of the make-up of political operators and agents in an increasingly complex and sophisticated world. At the same time, a related shift seems to occur from a quite self-conscious and earnest use of classical learning—for practical or ideological purposes—and perception of politics in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to a more jaundiced view of both politics and antiquity that remained, nonetheless, ever more attuned to the disruptive, political potential of language in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. So the volume opens with the figure of Albertino Mussato, active in the communal politics of Padua, crafting classically inspired works to express his thoughts about the city's government, and closes with the figure of Ferrante Pallavicino: a political actor empowered by learning alone and not by participation in the formal spheres of any government, who served as a self-appointed gadfly to the powerful of the early seventeenth century. If Mussato's coronation in 1315 as the first poet laureate since antiquity represents a precocious acknowledgment of the importance of culture in the realm of government, Pallavicino's execution for *lèse majesté* in 1644 testifies that the power of language in politics was a central legacy of the Italian Renaissance.

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[24] The quoted phrase comes from Lazzarini in this volume.

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