

HOW TO AVOID A REVOLUTION:



Francesco Patrizi of Siena on Stability in Republican Regimes

By James Hankins

Francesco Patrizi of Siena (1413–1494), the greatest political philosopher of the fifteenth century, was the first to make extensive use of the flood of new Latin translations of Greek historical, biographical, ethnographical and philosophical writings produced by quattrocento Italian humanists after 1400. This article explores how he exploits these fresh sources to produce new answers to a problem posed by Aristotle in Politics 5–6: how best to ensure the stability of “political” or power-sharing regimes.

Among the greatest collective achievements of Renaissance humanism in the fifteenth and sixteenth century was the transplantation of the literary and scientific heritage of Greek civilization to the soil of the Latin West. As it became ever clearer to contemporaries that the Byzantine empire was unlikely to survive the assaults of the Ottoman Turks, scholars and merchant-princes in Renaissance Italy, realizing the potential loss to civilization, sent agents to the eastern Mediterranean to collect Greek manuscripts and invite Greek scholars to teach in the West. By the end of the sixteenth century European scholars had printed in Greek and translated into Latin most of the works written in ancient Greek that survive today. The language of ancient Greece and its literature began regularly to be taught in European schools alongside Latin literature. Thanks to these heroic deeds of scholarship, the European Renaissance created a new civilization in which the Graeco-Roman inheritance was fused with the legal, scientific, and theological traditions of medieval scholasticism. The search for a harmonious and mutually supportive relationship between the classical and Christian elements in the Western tradition, begun already in late antiquity, was to remain a characteristic feature of European civilization down to modern times.

The modern study of this extraordinary civilizational achievement began in the post-World War II period and was given focus by a great international research project founded in 1945 by Paul Oskar Kristeller, the *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum*.¹ This series, whose first volume was published in 1960, aimed to treat in individual “articles” (some of them book-

¹ Kristeller et al. 1960–2020.

length) every work of Greek or Latin literature written before 600 AD. In principle the *fortuna* of each ancient author from 600 to 1600 AD was to be described, and, for Latin authors, all of the commentaries on that author, in manuscript and print, were to be listed, together with brief biographies of the commentators. For Greek authors every Latin translation was to be listed as well as the Latin commentaries, along with a complete list of manuscripts and editions. The overall goal was to provide a reliable scholarly foundation for the study of the classical tradition in the West.²

Marianne Pade became associated with the *CTC* (as it is familiarly called) early in her career, and her most enduring legacy as a scholar will undoubtedly be her foundational studies of the Renaissance reception of Plutarch and Thucydides, two of the greatest and most influential authors of ancient Greece. Her monumental two-volume work, *The Reception of Plutarch's Lives in the Fifteenth Century* (2007) in my opinion ranks as one of the great contributions to classical reception studies in the past half century.³ Thanks to her work, those who wish to understand how the reception of Greek literature in the Latin West reshaped Western thought and letters are on much firmer ground. Scholars interested in the history of Western political thought in particular are only now beginning to exploit these extraordinarily useful tools.⁴

Francesco Patrizi of Siena

In what follows I would like to explore how Greek sources, especially the histories, biographies, and philosophical writings newly available in the Renaissance, informed the thought of the greatest political philosopher of the fifteenth century, Francesco Patrizi of Siena (1413–1494). It was Patrizi's specific objective as a political writer – one laid upon him by his patron, Pope Pius II – to absorb the practical wisdom of the Greeks and apply it to solving the political problems of modern Italy. The reigning work of political theory in the later middle ages was the *De regimine principum* of Giles of Rome, a student of Aquinas, whose comprehensive work relied almost entirely on Aristotle. Patrizi aimed to replace this scholastic work with a humanist alternative that, following principles laid down by Petrarch, would adopt no one *maître à penser*. He thus became the first Latin writer on politics since Cicero to draw upon a wide range of Greek political history, biography, geography, oratory, poetry, and philosophy in order to inform and elaborate

² For a conspectus of the translation movement of the Renaissance with regard to ancient philosophical sources, see Hankins & Palmer 2008.

³ See the bibliography of her writings in this volume for this study and her many related studies of Plutarch and Thucydides. Pade's article on Thucydides appeared in vol. 8 of Kristeller et al. 1960, 103–181.

⁴ See Hankins 2019, especially Chapters 4, 16 and 17 on the reception of Greek sources. "The Thucydidean Renaissance" was the subject of Kinch Hoekstra's Carlyle Lectures at Oxford in 2017, shortly to be published as a monograph.

his own ideas about the best republic and the best kingdom. His two great works of political theory eventually cited over 160 Greek and Latin sources, an extraordinary number for the last age of the manuscript book. (Plutarch is among the most frequently cited.)

Patrizi is not well known today, so a few words about his life may be in order.⁵ For a future political philosopher his experience of politics, diplomacy and direct governance could hardly have been bettered. To say the truth it was far more extensive than that of a much more celebrated political thinker, Niccolò Machiavelli, who used to boast that he was a man of action rather than an armchair philosopher.

Patrizi was born (24 February 1413) into the most important hereditary bloc of political families in Siena, the *Nove*, which remained the dominant force in Siennese politics for most of his lifetime. He studied Greek with Francesco Filelfo during that humanist's sojourn in Siena, and later taught rhetoric in the Siennese Studio (1440–1446). He also enjoyed a prominent social position in the city. He married, had four children, and maintained a large household with an urban palazzo and rural properties. He also acted as private tutor to Achille Petrucci, offspring of the city's most important political family of the quattrocento, and a future civic leader. He held numerous offices in the Siennese republic, including the priorate (the chief executive) and other executive posts in the city's territories. He headed at least six major ambassadorial missions in the decade before the coup that led to his exile.

After his exile from Siena in 1457, Patrizi supported himself briefly as private tutor to the son of the Milanese ambassador, Nicodemo Tranchedini, and in that capacity met leading statesmen and princes from Tuscany and all over northern Italy. When his friend Enea Silvio Piccolomini became Pope Pius II in 1458, he took holy orders and was made the Bishop of Gaeta. Soon thereafter, Pius appointed him governor of Foligno and its territory, a key post in the Papal State. After Pius' death in 1464, his position in Foligno became untenable owing to a popular uprising, and he retired to administer his diocese in Gaeta, a port city in the Kingdom of Naples. The Kingdom was ruled by Ferdinand I of Naples, the most powerful monarch of the peninsula. In Gaeta Patrizi wrote his two major political treatises, *De institutione reipublicae* (finished around 1471/72) and *De regno et regis institutione* (scribally published around 1483/84). His life in that small city was mostly a retired one, but even so he was called upon to tutor and advise the heir to the throne, Alfonso of Calabria, and to represent the Kingdom as the Aragonese *orator* (or ambassador) on two major public occasions, the marriage of Alfonso with

⁵ For Patrizi's life, see Bassi 1894, Battaglia 1936, Pedullà 2010, and De Capua 2014, and Quintiliani 2014. The present writer has completed a monograph on Patrizi's political thought, together with a biographical study, which will be published by Harvard University Press.

Ippolita Maria Sforza in Milan (1465), and the ceremonies for the coronation of Pope Innocent VIII (1484).

One conviction Patrizi took from his Greek authorities, fundamental to what I have called the “virtue politics” of the Italian humanists, was that political institutions could not function well unless the princes and magistrates who inhabited them were well educated men of good character and practical wisdom. “The man who cannot govern himself cannot govern others” was a favorite classical adage with him as with other humanists. Unlike some other humanists, however, Patrizi did not adopt the view, common in his day, that institutions were irrelevant so long as rulers were virtuous. That view had been expressed by Isocrates in the *Panathenaicus*, but Patrizi recognized its superficiality. He posed the question how institutions could be designed to promote virtue among rulers and to protect the organs of the republic from wounds inflicted by ignorant, greedy and power-hungry persons. He devised a mode of public deliberation that privileged the voices of the best citizens. He proposed as his *optimus status reipublicae*, or best possible republic, a mixed constitution led by aristocrats, though his aristocracy was not defined by high birth but by good character and humane learning. He was nevertheless aware of the claims all good citizens have to participate in their own government and understood, like Aristotle, that broader participation by citizens in their government reinforces political stability. Citizens could not participate in government without some education. By a natural process of thought Patrizi became the first author in European history to advocate universal literacy among the citizen class as well as public funding for teachers of the liberal arts. In the *De republica* (to shorten for convenience the title of his major work) he outlines a detailed curriculum designed to foster virtue in citizen-rulers.

Patrizi on avoiding revolutions and political unrest

A passage of the *De republica* that gives an excellent idea of Patrizi’s method as a political thinker and his use of Greek and Latin sources is the fifth chapter of Book 6, entitled “Quae vitanda quaeve observanda sint, ne civitatis status evertatur. et virtutem solam rempublicam augere.” (Things to be avoided and to be heeded to order to avoid revolution, and that virtue alone strengthens a commonwealth.)⁶ It is the longest chapter in the entire treatise, an indication of the importance Patrizi attached to the subject. Patrizi begins the chapter by

⁶ All quotations from Patrizi’s *De republica* are taken from the *editio princeps*, Patrizi 1518, edited by Johannes Savigneus, which is the basis for the other 52 editions, translations and epitomes of the work published during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Since Savigneus’ edition is unreliable, I have collated all the passages quoted here against the dedication copy, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 3084, consultable online at https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.lat.3084 (last viewed 5 January 2022).

reiterating a major theme of the whole treatise, that a successful republic requires good character in its leaders and citizens alike. This principle is basic to his prescriptions for avoiding revolution, which, following ancient tradition, he links tightly with moral corruption. Unlike ancient tradition, however, Patrizi did not believe in inevitable cycles of decline from better to worse constitutions in the manner described by Plato, Aristotle and Polybius. He held that a republic could remain in an optimal state in perpetuity so long as the leadership of the republic remained virtuous and restrained the vices of the common people by good laws and good examples.⁷ Virtue is the most important source of political stability. But in this chapter he also supplies a detailed inventory of ways to prevent a republic from falling into sedition and revolution, derived from his reading of ancient sources. In this chapter he places less emphasis than elsewhere in his treatise on limiting the vices of the people and more on correcting mistakes made by the republic's magistrates and the senatorial class. Much of the chapter is devoted to the problem of restraining powerful persons out to increase their own status or wealth.

Aristotle had dealt with the same set of issues in *Politics* 5–6 – how to stabilize constitutions – and his treatment offers a contrast with the approach taken by Patrizi. Aristotle in these books is discussing non-ideal states, and especially how to optimize his best practical regime for most states.⁸ The latter is the type of mixed regime he calls *politeia*, i.e., a constitutional government based in the middle classes and restrained by law; it blends together the best institutions of democracy and oligarchy. In *Politics* 7–8 he lays out his absolutely best regime, an aristocracy where citizenship is confined to the virtuous. In the best practical regime, however, Aristotle begins from the assumption that such a government cannot be led by the best men, because in the vast majority of states (he means Greek oligarchies and democracies) “you would not find as many as a hundred men of good birth and merit” (5.1, 1302a). In any case, well-bred men of great virtue are not the sort to lead revolutions and seize power for themselves. The best practical state will inevitably be led by men of ordinary capacities with conventional ideas about equality. The conceptions of equality characteristic of democracies and oligarchies are partial and tendentious, and therefore inadequate. Democrats see equality in “arithmetical” terms: every citizen should have the same share of honor (meaning offices and political influence) as every other citizen, while oligarchs take a “geometric” view and believe that political influence should reflect the size of one's contributions, financial and otherwise, to the state. The democratic conception is safer, says Aristotle, more conducive to stability and less exposed to sedition. In the best practical regime, the most a prudent philosopher can hope for is that merit will be considered somehow or other in choosing

⁷ See Hankins 2021.

⁸ My interpretation of Aristotle relies on Kraut 2003, Frede 2005, Rosler 2013, Samaras 2015.

magistrates, preferably by elections. Aristotle’s analysis proceeds by diagnosing the causes of sedition and revolution in Book 5, then proposing in *Politics* 6 a series of technical fixes to increase stability in each of the principal kinds of constitution. His treatment is directed to his students, budding experts in the art of politics, and other philosophers capable of understanding his intricate reasoning.

Patrizi in his Book 6, by contrast, is discussing his optimal constitution, which is founded on an ideal of proportional (or geometric) merit. Leadership in the community should be proportional to individual merit, measured by educational attainments and a record of proven service to the state. Patrizi aims to create via education and culture a critical mass of virtuous men, a separate order of magistrates numerous and authoritative enough to lead a city-state. This order will by constitutional devices be kept distinct from the pyramid of social status based on ancestry and wealth.⁹ Thus he explicitly addresses his counsels about instability and revolution, not to philosophers or scholars, but to the republic’s rulers, persons who might be of “a denser Minerva” – a bit thick, in other words.

Tandiu igitur victura est respublica quamdiu civiles in ea virtutes et optimae leges dominabuntur. Nullae enim vires sunt quae concordem ac bene moratam civitatem diruere possint. Absit ambitio, absit cupiditas, absit superbia et diuitiarum populator luxur aliaque teterrimae beluae, omnia in ea diurna stabiliaque erunt. Eiusmodi sententiae nos admonent, ut aliquid praecipere velimus his qui reipublicae praesunt, quo intelligant quae vitanda quaeve observanda sint, ne ciuitatis status evertatur ac corruat.

Et si nobis res esset solum cum viris eruditibus ac sapientibus, satis futurum arbitraretur dicere solam virtutem rempublicam augere solaque vitia eam labefactare atque evertere. Sed quia cum multitudine res nostra agitur et popularis omnino sermo noster esse debet, nonnulla praescribere operae pretium arbitror quae pro pinguiore (ut dicitur) Minerva singulorum mentes atque animum attingere possint.¹⁰ Nec satis est dixisse iustitiam et aequalitatem duas esse virtutes quae civilem societatem conservant, et sine quibus nulla civitas diuturnitatem aut pacem habere potest, nisi etiam quaedam attingamus, in quibus

⁹ The fundamental reason for this is that Aristotle tends to blur the distinction between good birth, wealth and virtue, while the humanist tradition insists that the springs of virtue are found in all classes; they believe in an “equality in the capacity for virtue,” or virtue egalitarianism, foreign to Aristotle; see Hankins 2019, 40–41, 296, 499–500.

¹⁰ See for example Cicero, *De amicitia* 19; Columella, *De re rustica* 12.1; but the phrase was proverbial.

saepenumero peccatur et ab his qui magistratum gerunt et ab aliis qui potentiores in republica videri volunt.¹¹

The republic will last just so long as it is ruled by the civil virtues and the best laws. There are no powers that can demolish a harmonious and well conducted city-state. Banish ambition, banish greed, banish pride, banish the plunderer of riches, banish luxury and other foul beasts, and your republic will be stable and enduring. Counsels like these remind us that we would like to teach a thing or two to those in charge of the republic, so that they might understand what is to be avoided and what things should be respected in order to prevent the constitution from corruption and revolution.

If we had to do only with men of learning and wisdom, I imagine it would be enough to say that virtue alone makes a republic flourish and vices alone weaken and destroy it. But since our business is with the multitude and our form of speech ought to be entirely popular, I think it would be worthwhile to set out in advance a few principles that can be grasped by the mental and spiritual capacities belonging to individuals of a “denser Minerva,” as the saying goes. It isn’t enough to have said that justice and equality are the two virtues that preserve civil society and that without them no city-state can endure in peace, unless we touch on certain common errors committed by magistrates and others who want to look powerful in a republic.

Patrizi’s advice about stabilizing republics and preventing revolution thus takes the form of a series of twelve counsels, each illustrated by multiple historical examples, designed to inform the prudence of republican leaders. Among Patrizi’s prescriptions we may list the following.

1. Magistrates should never engage in fraud or deceit, either in regard to foreigners or to their own people.
2. Never condemn many people at the same time in a summary fashion; to do so is a sure way of causing sedition.
3. Proscribing citizens, confiscating their goods and driving them into exile always creates *odium* and is dangerous to the regime.
4. One should instead give pardon and absolution for disloyalty to the regime where it can serve a public purpose. In the case of a general insurrection it is better to punish the leaders and grant a general amnesty to their followers.
5. Oligarchy, rule by the wealthy, is almost as much to be feared as tyranny. It is fueled by ambition and leads to factionalism. Factions have

¹¹ Patrizi 1518, f. XCIIIv.

to reward their supporters, and that leads to magistracies being conferred on unworthy men. Oligarchs, being few, must always live in fear of the many. To protect themselves from the wrath of the people, oligarchs try to take away the citizens' arms and buy the services of foreign mercenaries to protect themselves. Oligarchs reduce the people to penury and engross all wealth for themselves. This leads the people, in desperation, to call for a champion who can easily turn into a tyrant. This is one reason statesmen should favor the presence of the middle classes in government, to dilute the political power of oligarchs.

6. Never change old laws and excellent customs; if new laws need to be introduced to deal with new diseases of the body politic, they should be introduced gradually.

7. Magistrates should act to preserve equality and limit envy, and to this end should institute strict sumptuary laws. Frugality should be encouraged and luxury avoided. All citizens should be encouraged to work; unemployment is the seedbed of sedition.

8. Free political speech on matters touching government policies must be preserved, but calumny and slander should not be permitted.

9. Never permit political magistrates to profit in any way from their offices.

10. Never increase the power of magistrates too much. To do so creates envy – that ferocious beast – and invites tyranny.

11. If some person does manage to achieve more power in a republic than is fair or prudent, civic leaders should not try to take it away from him all at once, but do so gradually, until he is reduced again to equality with other citizens.

12. The political system in the best republic should be arranged so that individuals may not seek offices for themselves, and are blocked from doing so if they do seek them. *Ambitio*, in the primary Roman sense of canvassing for office, is thus prohibited. Ambition in its moral sense is equally bad; it is the fundamental cause of factionalism.

Patrizi's use of historical sources

To analyze in detail how Patrizi illustrates all the above points with examples from Greek and Roman history would take us well beyond the limits of a single essay. Here I will look more closely at just one of the points listed, i.e., number 6.

A principle that Patrizi often repeats throughout the *De republica*, and one that shows his fundamental conservatism, is that old laws and excellent customs should never be changed. If new laws need to be introduced to deal with previously unknown diseases of the body politic, they should be

introduced gradually. An excellent example of imprudent innovation was the attempt of the Gracchi at the end of the second century BC to introduce agrarian reforms to Rome. The discussion here is part of a larger argument that the state must take steps to equalize wealth if republics are to be kept stable. Here Patrizi's attitude is more Greek than Roman, in that he privileges political stability, a central goal of Greek political philosophy, over the inviolability of private property, a cardinal principle of Roman law.¹² He argues in Chapter 3 of Book 6 that if a new city-state is being founded, the most prudent course will be to distribute property holdings equally to each citizen, as Lycurgus was said to have done in Sparta. In established republics with long histories, however, to achieve that sort of equality would require redistribution of existing property holdings (and of course Patrizi, in that premodern age, is thinking primarily in terms of agricultural property). History shows, says Patrizi, that agrarian reforms of this type are imprudent and extremely dangerous to political stability.

He gives two examples of the folly of redistribution – taking property away from the rich and giving it to the poor. The second, a story about the terrible consequences of economic inequality in the city of Heraclea in Pontus, taken from the Roman imperial historian Justin, we will omit.¹³ The first describes the oligarchic violence set in train by the attempts of the Gracchi to reform Rome's agrarian laws at the end of the second century BC. The Romans for centuries, says Patrizi, had passed various agrarian laws intended to institute a fair division among the people of lands in Italy and elsewhere won by Roman arms and other territorial acquisitions. But the rich drove ordinary citizens out of their holdings by force and fraud, then used their market power to raise the price of grain, further impoverishing the plebs. The rich got richer and the poor poorer. The plebs responded to this crisis by not having children, which dried up native sources of agricultural labor, so the wealthy brought in slaves and foreigners to take their place.

Many of Rome's best men saw that this trend was ruining the republic, but they took no serious steps to reverse it until the time of Tiberius Gracchus. The elder Gracchus as tribune of the people passed a new agrarian law that redistributed land but was otherwise extremely mild and statesmanlike. It didn't punish the senators who opposed the law or demand restitution from those who had illegally occupied land. It even compensated them for their losses before turning the land over to those who needed it. Nevertheless, the rich were so offended that they fought back "quasi pro vr̄bis moenibus aut pro libertate patriae pugnarent" (as though defending the walls of the city or fighting for freedom). They arranged for Tiberius Gracchus to be cruelly murdered, then granted almost divine honors to his assassin. This terrified the people until Tiberius's brother Gaius was made plebeian tribune in his stead.

¹² Nelson 2004.

¹³ Patrizi's analysis is based on Justin 16.4–5.

He tried to carry on the work begun by Tiberius but was driven out of Rome by the faction of the wealthy. Fleeing to a sacred wood, he committed suicide rather than fall into their hands.

Thus even an apparently prudent attempt to reform agrarian laws ended in violent death for the reformers owing to oligarchic resistance. It is noteworthy that Patrizi follows here the sympathetic account of the Gracchi given by Plutarch and Appian rather than the bitterly hostile one found in Latin sources, above all in Cicero.¹⁴ As Eric Nelson has shown, the “Greek tradition” in early modern political thought, unlike the neo-Roman tradition followed by most scholastic jurists and many quattrocento humanists, did not regard the ownership of private property as sacrosanct, as a right derived from natural law via civil law. The ancient Greek authors Patrizi follows were far more receptive to state supervision of the private economy.¹⁵ Patrizi, to be sure, was enough of a “Roman” to think that private property should be respected on prudential grounds. He proposed nothing so radical as Thomas More’s utopian communism – for Nelson the first great representative of the early modern “Greek tradition.” Nevertheless, his study of Greek sources led Patrizi to share with philosophers like Aristotle (and Plato in the *Laws*) the view that the distribution of private property was a question of civil prudence, not of right (*ius*), and should be made subject to the ends of the whole political community.

Conclusion

Patrizi’s use of historical sources in this chapter illustrates most of the features of what I call his “historico-prudential method,” to be discussed in greater detail in my forthcoming book. In contrast with scholastic method, Patrizi’s approach aims to be persuasive rather than demonstrative. It does not provide a systematic list of correct teachings backed by syllogistic arguments in the manner of Giles of Rome, but a vision of a better society, together with wise counsels as to how such a society might be achieved. Though he often quotes poetry and cites the opinion of moral philosophers, his primary resource for finding and arguing for his political counsels is history. Unlike Machiavelli, however, Patrizi does not try to elicit laws of history. He explicitly rejects, as we have seen, the idea that constitutional changes fall into regular cyclical patterns. What history does for him and for his readers is to open a vast theater

¹⁴ Patrizi’s main sources here are Plutarch, *Lives of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus* 8, and Appian, *Civil Wars*, Book 1. Patrizi certainly made use here of the translation of the Plutarchan life made around 1410 by Leonardo Bruni: see Pade 2007 I, 143–144 and vol. 2, 101–102. Pier Candido Decembrio translated Appian around 1452/54 for Pope Nicholas V. Patrizi also uses Sallust, *Jurguthine War* 42.1 and Book 2 of Livy’s history, but ignores Cicero’s bitterly hostile views of the Gracchi and their tribunate in *De legibus* 3.19–20 and *De officiis* 2.73, 78, 84.

¹⁵ Nelson 2004, especially 52–68 on the contrast between the Greek and Roman accounts of the Gracchan reforms.

of human actions, counsels, and measures that have been tried in past societies and whose outcomes, practical and moral, we can often judge, enriching our own political prudence. If, as Cicero wrote (*Orator* 34.120), to be ignorant of history is to remain forever a child, familiarity with history can give us a kind of supercharged wisdom, far beyond the ken of any one person, no matter how old and experienced. The proud excitement that bubbles beneath the surface of Patrizi's treatises is the conviction that he has placed at the service of his contemporaries, and for the first time since antiquity, a vast store of experience to which his knowledge of Greek has given him an access forbidden to earlier generations.

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