Human Character and the Formation of the State:
Reconsidering Machiavelli and Polybius 6

Jeffrey Dymond

➡ *For additional information about this article*
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/781611

Human Character and the Formation of the State: Reconsidering Machiavelli and Polybius 6

Jeffrey Dymond

This article aims to contribute to a growing debate over the sources of a crucial opening chapter in Machiavelli's *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio* (1517)—a chapter widely regarded as foundational for the political theory developed in the book. Until recently, commentators have largely agreed that Book 6 of Polybius's *Histories* is the principal source for the account of the formation of the state found in *Discorsi* 1.2, offering as evidence Machiavelli's discussion of the mixed constitution and the cycle of constitutions (*anacyclosis*) that supports it.[1] But, over the last decade,

[1] Key publications concerned with the relationship between Machiavelli and Polybius 6 are J. H. Hexter, "Seyssel, Machiavelli, and Polybius VI: The Mystery of the Missing Translation," *Studies in the Renaissance* 3 (1956): 75–96; Carlo Dionisotti, "*Dalla repubblica al principato*," *Rivista storica italiana* 83 (1971): 227–63; Arnaldo Momigliano, "Polybius' Reappearance in Western Europe," in *Polybe—Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique*, tome 20 (Genève: Fondation Hardt, 1974), 347–72; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 186–94; Gennaro Sasso, *Machiavelli e gli antichi e altri saggi* (Milan: R. Ricciardi, 1987), 1:3–118; Luciano Canfora, "Il pensiero storiografico," *Lo spazio letterario di Roma antica*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo, Paolo Fedeli, Andrea Giardina (Rome: Salerno, 1989), 4:62–69; Eugenio Garin, *Machiavelli fra politica e storia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), 9–16; John Monfasani, "Machiavelli, Polybius, and Janus Lascaris: The Hexter Thesis Revisited," *Italian Studies* 71, no. 1 (2016): 39–48;

some historians have moved away from this traditional interpretation. Citing a number of perceived substantive differences between the two texts as well as the long-standing uncertainty over how Machiavelli accessed the contents of Book 6, these readers have suggested Lucretius and Dionysius of Halicarnassus as other possible sources.[2] At the same time, and contrastingly, recent research into the textual transmission of Book 6 has made others increasingly confident that there is an explicit textual connection between the two books.[3] The present article will contribute to this debate by reconstructing the interpretation of Polybius 6 that emerged in early sixteenth-century Florence before re-examining the *Discorsi* within this context. While not precluding additional sources from the chapter, it will argue, first, that Machiavelli was indeed immersed in an environment in which a common reading of Polybius 6 circulated and that, second, *Discorsi* 1.2 is indebted to this interpretation, although it is a substantially different interpretation of Polybius than previous commentators have typically assumed.

The traditional understanding of *Discorsi* 1.2's debt to Polybius 6 claims that *anacyclosis* and the mixed constitution are the most significant Polybian ideas in the chapter, with a number of reasons offered for why Machiavelli uses them. In two essays that first appeared in 1967, "Machiavelli e la teoria dell'*Anacyclosis*" and "Machiavelli e Polibio," Gennaro Sasso argues that Machiavelli takes from Polybius a theoretical defense of

and Cary J. Nederman and Mary Elizabeth Sullivan, "The Polybian Moment: The Transformation of Republican Thought from Ptolemy of Lucca to Machiavelli," *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 17, no. 7 (2012): 867–81. The editors of the most recent Italian editions of the *Discorsi* also refer frequently to Polybius when discussing *Discorsi* 1.2. See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio,* ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), 16–27; Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio,* ed. Giorgio Inglese (Milan: Rizzoli, 1984), 194–201; Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, ed. Francesco Bausi (Rome: Salerno, 2001), 1:20.

[2] For Lucretius, see Alison Brown, "Lucretian Naturalism and Machiavelli," *Lucretius and the Early Modern*, ed. David Norbrook, Stephen Harrison, and Philip Hardie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 79. For Dionysius see Gabriele Pedullà, *Machiavelli in tumulto: Conquista, cittadinanza e conflitto nei "Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio"* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2011), 425 and Jérémie Barthas, "Machiavelli e l'istituzionalizzazione del conflitto: Su una nuova interpretazione dei *Discorsi*," *Rivista Storica Italiana* 77, no. 2 (2015): 560. Pedullà's book is now available in English: Gabriele Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult: The* Discourses on Livy *and the Origins of Political Conflictualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[3] Monfasani, "Hexter Revisited," 39–48. Also see Jeroen de Keyser, "Polybius," in *Catalogus Translationum et Commentariorum: Mediaeval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries*, ed. Greti Dinkova-Brun, Julia Haig Gaisser, and James Hankins (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2016), 11:17.

the mixed constitution and that this serves as a foundation for the political theory developed throughout the *Discorsi*. More specifically, Sasso says, *Discorsi* 1.2 relies on Polybian *anacyclosis* to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the tensions between two social groups, the *popolo* and the *grandi*, and that they can only be stabilized through the imposition of a mixed constitution.[4] J. G. A. Pocock's 1975 *The Machiavellian Moment* offers an alternative interpretation emphasizing the historical claims of Book 6. Pocock argues that Machiavelli is drawn primarily to Polybius's assertion that Rome's mixed constitution developed over time, with each part emerging in response to a different historical contingency. This, according to Pocock, provided Machiavelli with a framework through which a fundamentally historical political theory could operate.[5]

While the traditional interpretation rightly sees a connection between Polybius 6 and Machiavelli's discussion of *anacyclosis* and the mixed constitution, it is limited by the assumption that these two phenomena represent the only extractable theoretical content of Book 6, an assumption that owes more to the image of Polybius sketched by F. W. Walbank than to early modern readings. Walbank, whose interpretation was dominant for much of the twentieth century, argues that the theoretical content of Book 6 is both limited and superficial. At its heart is *anacyclosis*, which he understands to be a historical illustration of Polybius's "fundamental principle," derived from "experience," that all states follow a life cycle of origin, peak, and decline and which the mixed constitution has successfully been able to "brake."[6] The particular reasons behind this are, however, beyond Polybius's scope; Polybius, Walbank says, was a "man of action," "not a philosopher."[7]

Contrastingly, early modern readers treated Polybius as a considerably more sophisticated author.[8] For example, and in stark opposition to Walbank, Francesco Patrizi's 1560 *Della historia diece dialoghi* explicitly categorizes Polybius as a "philosopher" due to the Greek historian's emphasis

---

[4] Sasso, *Machiavelli e gli antichi*, 1:56–60, 1:75–81.

[5] Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 186–94. While the work was originally published in 1975, I am citing from an updated 2016 edition, which includes an epilogue written by the author.

[6] C. O. Brink and F. W. Walbank, "The Construction of the Sixth Book of Polybius," *Classical Quarterly* 4, no. 3/4 (December 1954): 115–16, 122.

[7] F. W. Walbank, "Polybius on the Roman Constitution," *Classical Quarterly* 37, no. 3/4 (July 1943): 86.

[8] Momigiliano, "Polybius' Reappearance," 361–72. A classic study of the early modern reception of Polybius is A. C. Dionisotti, "Polybius and the Royal Professor," in *Tria Corda: Scritti in onore di Arnaldo Momigliano*, ed. E. Gabba (Como: Edizioni New Press, 1983), 179–99.

on historical causation,[9] a sentiment echoed by Jean Bodin in 1566[10] and François Hotman in 1573.[11] These statements suggest that an early modern reader of Book 6 would be just as interested in the causes behind *anacyclosis* and the mixed constitution as they would be in the phenomena themselves. This is a dramatically different approach to Polybius than has customarily been assumed in work on Machiavelli, and reconsidering the relationship between the two books on these early modern terms could significantly change our understanding of the nature of Machiavelli's debt to Book 6. Indeed, in recent years a number of Polybius scholars have begun to read Book 6 in this way, resulting in interpretations very different from that produced by Walbank. Seminal to this emergent line of interpretation is a reading of Book 6 originally offered by David Hahm in his 1995 article "Polybius' Applied Political Theory."[12] Here Hahm argues that Polybius intends in Book 6 to furnish a comprehensive causal theory that can explain past political events and predict future ones. At the heart of this theory is an account of human psychology, which Hahm reconstructs from the contents of Book 6. According to Hahm, the interaction between these psychological

---

[9] "Quando [l'historico] passa à ricercarne le cagione nascoste, egli divien filosofo. Et io vorrei . . . che tutti gli historici, fossero cosi misti di Filosofo, & d'historico, come si è Polibio," Francesco Patrizi, *Della historia diece dialoghi* (Venice: Andrea Arrivabene, 1560), 59v. Patrizi, however, criticized Polybius for this.

[10] "Videtur autem non minus philosophi quam historici personam induisse," Jean Bodin, quoted in Arnaldo Momigliano, "Polybius between the English and the Turks," in *Sesto contributo alla storia degli studi classici e del mondo antico* (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 1980), 1:132.

[11] "Principium a caussa plurimum discrepare, gravis auctor imprimis Polybius demonstrat," François Hotman, *Francogallia*, eds. Ralph Giesey and J. H. M. Salmon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 142.

[12] David Hahm, "Polybius' Applied Political Theory," in *Justice and Generosity: Studies in Hellenistic Social and Political Philosophy—Proceedings of the Sixth Symposium Hellenisticum*, ed. Andre Laks and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7–47. Others who rely on Hahm's arguments include Malcolm Schofield, "Social and Political Thought," in *Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld, and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 746; Jed W. Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason: The* Republic *and The* Laws (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 87–93; and Grant A. Nelsestuen, "Custom, Fear and Self-Interest in the Political Thought of Polybius," *History of Political Thought* 38, no. 2 (2017): 213–38. Although discussed with less detail, psychological explanations for political phenomena in Polybius can also be seen in Donald Kagan, *The Great Dialogue: History of Political Thought from Homer to Polybius* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 258–59 and Kurt von Fritz, *The Theory of the Mixed Constitution in Antiquity* (New York: Arno, 1974), 74. For a recent interpretation emphasizing alternative philosophical foundations for Book 6, see Benjamin Straumann, *Crisis and Constitutionalism: Roman Political Thought from the Fall of the Republic to the Age of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 151–61.

dispositions and environmental factors shapes why and how political life comes into being and explains both the dynamics of *anacyclosis* and the functioning of the mixed constitution.[13] I will argue here that this increasingly accepted reading of Polybius 6—one that views the psychological causes behind political phenomena as the theoretical heart of Book 6—is broadly in agreement with the interpretation of the book that emerged in early sixteenth-century Florence and was endorsed by Machiavelli in *Discorsi* 1.2.

But before proceeding, it is necessary to address the textual transmission of Book 6, since uncertainty surrounding Machiavelli's access to the contents of the book has made it difficult to reconstruct this context until very recently. Machiavelli, after all, could not read Greek, and until the last few years the earliest surviving Latin translation known to have circulated in Florence dates from the 1540s, over a decade after his death.[14] Grappling with this question in a well-known 1956 article, J. H. Hexter argued that Machiavelli must have had access to an alternative manuscript Latin translation of the early chapters of Book 6, which he likely obtained through his participation in the *Orti Oricellari*, a group of scholars that met regularly during the early decades of the sixteenth century in the gardens of the wealthy Rucellai family in Florence. Hexter speculated that the translator was the Greek émigré Janus Lascaris, who was well known for his translations. Lascaris resided in Florence in the last decade of the fifteenth century, and, during his numerous return visits later on, was an occasional guest in the gardens alongside Machiavelli, as both men were friends of the host, Cosimo Rucellai.[15] Hexter's theory was not conclusive, however. Arnaldo Momigliano, for example, argues in his 1974 essay on the reappearance of Book 6 in Western Europe that its contents must have already been known in Florence by the time Machiavelli wrote the *Discorsi*. He cites as evidence the existence of at least one Greek-language manuscript in circulation in Italy by the end of the fifteenth century, a general philhellenic atmosphere in the city, and an explicit reference to the book in the Florentine Bernardo Rucellai's *De urbe Roma*, a text known to have been completed by 1505.[16]

---

[13] David Hahm, "Polybius' Applied Political Theory," 16.

[14] Polybius, "Romana respublica ex Polybii libri VI," Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana Medicea, Plut. 89 inf. 40, 30r–37v. For the dating of this manuscript, see Canfora, "Il pensiero storiografico," 65–67.

[15] Hexter, "Missing Translation," 88–90. On the *Orti Oricellari*, see Felix Gilbert, "Bernardo Rucellai and the *Orti Oricellari*: A Study on the Origin of Modern Political Thought," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 12 (1949): 101–31. For the *Orti* and Machiavelli, see Carlo Dionisotti, *Machiavellerie* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 101–54, 173–76.

[16] Momigliano, "Polybius' Reappearance," 360. Momigliano's argument that Polybius 6 was known in Italy prior to Machiavelli has received support lately from James Hankins.

A further difficulty with the Hexter thesis was that when the article went to print, the whereabouts of any possible Lascaris translation were unknown. But shortly afterward, it was revealed that two manuscripts held in the *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* dating from around 1500 contain Latin translations of the relevant chapters of Book 6 (chapters 3–18) and that the translations are believed to have been done by Lascaris.[17] Hexter never returned to the question, but in a 2016 article John Monfasani demonstrates that Lascaris's translation employs several unique Latin words that Machiavelli later italicizes in *Discorsi* 1.2, while also providing further evidence of a relationship between the two men.[18] Monfasani's argument has significantly strengthened the evidence for Machiavelli using the Lascaris translation, with one recent publication now stating confidently that Lascaris was indeed Machiavelli's source.[19]

But while both Hexter and Monfasani assume that Book 6 came to Machiavelli through a personal relationship with Lascaris, there is evidence, which they did not consider, that Lascaris's translation had already been circulating within the *Orti Oricellari* for some time. In addition to knowing Cosimo Rucellai, Lascaris was an acquaintance of Cosimo's grandfather Bernardo, a politician and historian who presided over an earlier generation of gatherings in the gardens during the first years of the sixteenth century. We know that the two men discussed historical writing: a letter survives in which Bernardo mentions such a conversation between them that took place in 1495.[20] We also know that the chapters of Polybius 6 dealing with Roman military structure, likewise translated by Lascaris, were discussed in the *Orti* during Bernardo's time as host.[21] This is notable since, as we have seen, Bernardo's *De urbe Roma* is the earliest extant work to refer explicitly to Book 6.[22]

See James Hankins, "Europe's First Democrat? Cyriac of Ancona and Book VI of Polybius," in *For the Sake of Learning: Essays in Honor of Anthony Grafton,* ed. Ann Blair and Anja-Silvia Goeing (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 2:692–710; Aurelio Lippo Brandolini, *Republics and Kingdoms Compared*, trans. James Hankins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 285.

[17] De Keyser, "Polybius," 17; Hexter, "Missing Translation," 96; Monfasani, "Hexter Revisited," 39. The MSS are Reg. Lat. 1099 and Vat. Lat. 2968.

[18] Monfasani, "Hexter Revisited," 41–48.

[19] De Keyser, "Polybius," 17.

[20] Found in Pieter Burman, *Sylloges epistolarum a viris illustribus scriptarum tomi quinque, collecti et digesti per P. Burmannum*, vol. 2 (Leiden, 1727), 201. This letter is referenced in Rita Maria Comanducci, *Il Carteggio di Bernardo Rucellai: Inventario* (Florence: Olschiki, 1996), 62, no. 1027.

[21] Pietro Crinito, *De Honesta Disciplina*, ed. Carlo Angeleri (Rome: Fratelli Bocca, 1955), 12.4.

[22] Momigliano, "Polybius' Reappearance," 360.

It is evident, then, that by the time Machiavelli began attending the discussions in the *Orti* alongside Lascaris and Cosimo Rucellai, Polybius 6 had already been discussed by some of those whose company he joined, with at least one written interpretation of it, from his friend Cosimo's grandfather Bernardo, already in circulation. As we will see, this context shaped how Polybius 6 eventually appeared in the *Discorsi*.

In the first section, I examine Bernardo Rucellai's interpretation of Polybius 6 in *De urbe Roma*. In section two, I find the basis for this reading in the fragment of Book 6 translated by Lascaris, which, as we have seen, likely circulated within the *Orti Oricellari* before coming to Machiavelli. After briefly demonstrating that this interpretation was shared by others connected to the *Orti*, in section three, I give an account of Machiavelli's debt to Polybius in *Discorsi* 1.2 on the basis of this enriched context. While Machiavelli was indeed interested in Polybius's account of the mixed constitution, he, like his peers, saw a complex portrait of individual psychology behind Polybius's advocacy for it, which he then endorsed. This psychology is one that sees individual human beings as driven by two conflicting impulses: one to cooperate so as to live securely, the other a disposition to assert themselves over others. This psychology, I will argue below, explains why the state comes into being, underlies the structure of the best constitution, and provides the framework through which one can both predict future political problems and determine how to prevent them. Finally, I note the evidence suggesting that this reading of Polybius 6 spread outside of Florence, with possible implications for our understanding of the place of Book 6 in later political thought.

I.

Bernardo Rucellai's *De urbe Roma* is a geographical account of ancient Rome, and it is during his description of the *Curia Calabra*, an important religious site in the city, that the crucial reference to Polybius 6 appears. Rucellai uses this as an opportunity to list other monuments that functioned as *curiae* in Rome, including that which housed the Senate. He digresses to a short analysis of the city's constitution, and this is where his discussion of Book 6 begins.[23] Rome acquired and maintained its vast empire,

---

[23] The relevant passage from which I will now cite is in Bernardo Rucellai, "*De urbe Roma, seu Latinus Commentarius in Pub. Victorem ac Sext. Rufum de Regionibus Urbis. Adcedit ipsius Pub. Victoris ac Sex. Rufi textus ex fide complurium Manuccriptorum*

he says, when it was under a constitution that "mixed and separated the execution of the tasks of government" between "the Forum, the *Curia*, and the *Comitia*."[24] This mixed constitution made the city "greater, holier and richer in good examples" than any other and caused "avarice and luxury" to appear later than usual.[25] Rucellai then states that he agrees with the opinion of Polybius, who argues that "no more perfect constitution could ever be devised."[26] In fact, he continues, any person who blames the turbulent periods of the Gracchi, Cinna, Sulla, and others like them, on the consuls or the tribunate would judge Roman *gravitas* differently "had they correctly interpreted Book 6 of Polybius."[27] This is because, he says, Polybius's central argument is that "all mortal things" are "by nature" such that "the vices are ingrained and bound to the virtues, and cannot be easily separated from each other."[28] As a result, when Rome lived under the mixed constitution and virtue was eminent, vice was bound to appear eventually, meaning that this constitution, despite being the best possible, would ultimately fail.[29]

Rucellai's interpretation of Polybius 6 hinges on a crucial insight. Because of the intimate connection between virtue and vice, the emergence of vicious behavior is an inevitable corollary of virtue, and this explains why all constitutions, even the best one, will eventually collapse. Yet the fact that Rome's constitution in particular enabled it to demonstrate so much virtue before being undermined by vice is evidence that it is possible to manage by institutional design the link between the two in such a way that, at least for some time, prevents the emergence of vice. Informed by

---

Vaticanæ Bibliothecæ," in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores,* ed. J. M. Tartinus (Florence, 1748–70), 2:948–49. This passage is also referenced in Dionisotti, *Machiavellerie*, 139; Momigliano, "Polybius' Reappearance," 360; and Canfora, "*Il pensiero storiografico*," 67.

[24] "Priscos, dum promiscue separatimque in Foro, Curia, Comitio Romanam rem peragerent, his artibus partus Imperium retinuisse," Rucellai, *De urbe Roma*, 948–49.

[25] "Ut nulla umquam Respublica . . . maior, nec sanctior, nec bonis exemplis ditior fuerit, nec in quam tam sero avaritia, luxuriaque immigraverint," Rucellai, *De urbe Roma*, 949.

[26] "Me certe haud poenitet Polybii Megalopolitani sententiae esse, quippe qui Romanam non modo praecellere ceteras omnes Respublicas adserit, sed nihil eo rerum ordine excogitari posse perfectius," Rucellai, *De urbe Roma*, 949.

[27] "Sunt tamen, qui quum in Gracchorum, Cinnae, Sullae ac huiusmodi tempora inciderint, non possint non commoveri quin modo consules praevalidos, modo turbulentos tribunos incusent, vituperentque universum corpus Reipublicas; qui si Polybii sextum volumen recte interpretati sint, profecto longe aliter, ac senserant de Romana gravitate iudicabunt," Rucellai, *De urbe Roma*, 949.

[28] "Ea enim natura mortalium est, ut insita, adnexaque virtutibus vitia separari facile nequeant . . . ," Rucellai, 949.

[29] "Quo factum putem, ut dum prisci illi eam regendae Reipublicae rationem statuerent, unde virtus enitesceret, inde et vitia simul emanarint," Rucellai, *De urbe Roma*, 949.

this reading of Polybius, the central problem of constitution-making on Rucellai's account becomes how to order a state so that it can successfully manage this truth about human character.

That Rucellai credited his "correct" reading of Polybius for these insights suggests that in Book 6 he found an account of human nature that explains how the presence of great virtue can lead to the appearance of vice. He evidently also found there an account of how Rome's mixed constitution successfully managed these characteristics of human nature. Rucellai does not describe in explicit detail the logic behind this in *De urbe Roma*, but an explanation can be found in the fragment of Book 6 that Lascaris made available.[30]

<center>II.</center>

The fragment begins with Polybius's statement about the purpose for the account of the formation of political society and *anacyclosis* that will follow: only after understanding the natural processes behind the formation, growth, mutation, and eventual collapse of the various forms of government will one be able to assess Rome's constitution and make predictions about its future.[31] The book thus begins with the implication that there are a set of natural constants in human life, knowledge of which enables one to explain past political events, assess the political present, and predict future political upheavals, and that the subsequent account aims to elucidate these constants.

Polybius then describes how individual human beings came to live under political authority. After floods, plagues, or other misfortunes destroyed their previous society and, with it, all knowledge and art, the remaining human beings grew in number and then, like animals, organized themselves into a group on account of their physical weakness. It is a necessary consequence

---

[30] I am using the Lascaris translation here not because I believe with absolute certainty that both Rucellai and Machiavelli accessed the contents of Book 6 through it, but because it is the only surviving Latin fragment known to have circulated in Florence, and in their shared circle, at the time.

[31] "Quod autem que superius enarravimus verissima sint facile quilibet perspiciere poterit. Si ad singulorum principia ortusque mentem adhibuerit. Cuius libet enim exordia animo colligens: solus hic profecto augmenta, vigore, mutationes finemque poterit apprehendere. Quando & quo quomodoque cursus devenient: maxime autem Romanorum Reipublicae huiusmodi narrationis modum convenire puto," Polybius, *Polybii ex VI Historiarum Libro Romanorum Reipublicae*, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg. Lat. 1099, 12r.

of this form of congregation, Polybius continues, that the one among them who was most outstanding in strength and audacity assumed leadership over the others and they submitted to his command. This form of government, which he labels "monarchy," is the very first form in the cycle of governments to follow.[32] By specifying that all knowledge and art had been lost, Polybius emphasizes how the formation of political society must be attributed to instinct. This is particularly apparent in his comparison of human beings with "unreasoning" animals, which likewise select the strongest to command the weaker by common consent. However, since human beings congregate and agree to the rule of the strongest only after perceiving that they are unable to defend themselves individually, it must be the case that this instinct to install cooperatively someone in a position of authority requires the recognition of weakness to be activated. For Polybius, it is therefore not a naturally occurring instinct to live under political authority that leads to the formation of government, but rather an instinct toward collective cooperation when individuals find themselves at risk.

The origin of this initial insecurity can be implied from the militaristic language that permeates the passage. Polybius labels the strongman who assumes the position of authority a *dux*, or military commander, while the power he exercises, and to which the others "submit," he calls *imperium*, invoking the supreme authority associated with military command.[33] By likening this pre-political existence to a war zone, Polybius implies that political union is a response to an environment characterized by continuous insecurity generated by other human beings. The exact cause of this violence is unclear in Polybius's presentation, but considering that it unfolds within the context of a world devoid of any human artifice, we are left to assume that it is motivated by a natural inclination of human beings to violently assert themselves against others if they are otherwise not prevented from doing so. Recent commentators on Book 6 have also observed such an

---

[32] "Tunc igitur omnibus studiis artibusque extinctis quum ex hominum reliquiis: tanquam ex seminibus rursus incrementum tempore ceperit multitudo: tunc inquam veluti cetera animalia: que simul collecta naturali quadam ratione cum eiusdem generis animalibus congregantur necesse est ob naturalem imbecillitatem corporis robore animique audacia ceteris prestantem ducem assumere: illiusque imperio parere: ut in huiuscemodi irrationabilium animalium generibus videmus . . . quod nature opus verissimum putandum est ut fortissimi imbecillioribus communium consensus imperent. . . . Quibus sane dominatus terminus est fortitudo nomen autem merito Monarchia appellari potest," Polybius, *Romanorum Reipublicae*, 12v–13r.

[33] "Necesse est ob naturalem imbecillitatem corporis robore animique audacia ceteris prestantem ducem assumere: illiusque imperio parere," Polybius, *Romanorum Reipublicae*, 12v.

instinct in the text, labeling it a propensity toward "self-aggrandizement."[34] It is indeed likely that scattered individuals engaged in self-aggrandizing behavior could create the kind of conditions of constant vulnerability akin to a state of war that then leads others to seek protection through cooperation.

The political community thus forms in the interest of self-preservation and at the confluence of two instincts—one self-aggrandizing and the other cooperative, with the latter activated by the recognition of weakness. The status of these two instincts as facets of a permanent human psychology is borne out by the subsequent account of *anacyclosis*, where the interaction between these instincts and changing external conditions lie at the heart of every political transition. Beginning his discussion, Polybius observes that, initially, monarchs were elected based on their ability to govern well, and under elective monarchy, the defense and physical sustenance of subjects were well taken care of.[35] After some time, however, came a significant material change: the monarch's position became hereditary. Now, he says, with "their security for the most part provided for," the monarchs began to follow appetites that their predecessors ignored, using their elevated position specifically to distinguish themselves from the others.[36] Seen from the perspective of the psychology, the change from elective monarchy to hereditary tyranny is not surprising. Having grown up accustomed to the internal and external peace brought by virtuous government, the subjects no longer felt the need to select leaders based on their ability to govern well, since their secure position removed any impetus for cooperative vigilance. The cooperative instinct, after all, is only activated by the experience of weakness. As a result, they ceased to elect kings. Under these new conditions, the monarch, whose elevated position no longer depended on anyone else, now had no reason to feel insecure and, as a result, had no natural desire to cooperate. In this case, the other, self-aggrandizing instinct could take hold, as it ultimately did, thereby ushering in tyranny. The response to the tyrant's behavior, and the next step in the cycle, can also be explained by the psychology: the tyrant's self-aggrandizing behavior created new

---

[34] Hahm, "Polybius' Applied Political Theory," 18; Nelsestuen, "Custom, Fear and Self-Interest," 229.

[35] "Antiquitus sane in potentatibus semel delecti senescebant praecipua quaedam loca munientes murisque sepientes regionemque vendicabant: tum securitatis gratia: tum ut necessariorum copia subditi abundarent," Polybius, *Romanorum Reipublicae*, 14r.

[36] "Postque vero generis ordine succedentes principatum sumspsere ad securitatem pleraque parata habebant. Pluraque quamquam par erat ad victum tunc sane ob rerum affluentiam voluptates sequebantur putabantque imperantes . . . nec non liberis atque illegittimis veneris usibus subditos antecedere debere," Polybius, *Romanorum Reipublicae*, 14rv.

conditions of insecurity among his subjects that encouraged new cooperation and brought about the revolution that ushered in aristocracy.[37]

A notable feature of the above account of corruption and change is that successful and virtuous government created the conditions that led to the degeneration of monarchy. As we have seen, the monarchy's success at furnishing the security and well-being it was originally established to provide elicited a psychological response that ended the practice of election. The subsequent transition to hereditary monarchy then created different conditions that minimized the incentive for cooperative behavior on the part of the monarch and made possible the reappearance of the self-aggrandizing instinct. This pattern is repeated in the examples of the degeneration of the other two constitutions in the cycle, the aristocratic and the popular, suggesting that this is an inevitable outcome under any simple constitution. In the aftermath of their fathers' virtuous rule, the children of the aristocrats faced no obstacles to the assumption of power, and, having lived lives of unrestricted privilege and no suffering, used their position to self-aggrandize.[38] Similarly, popular government became corrupt when a generation that had experienced none of the difficulties of vicious government took control and, instead of cooperating with each other, proceeded to use their authority specifically to seek preeminence over the others.[39] That this pattern repeats itself under every simple constitution suggests the crucial question of political order within a Polybian framework: how to overcome, or at least to slow, the process (rooted ultimately in human psychology) by which success inevitably creates the conditions for corruption. This brings us back to Rucellai, who held that the "correct interpretation" of Polybius 6 is that wherever virtue is eminent, vice will eventually appear, and that consideration of this fact must be at the heart of all legislation.[40]

---

[37] "Hinc initum ruine coniuratorumque in principes conspiratio . . . qui generositate animi magnitudine fiduciaque prestarent . . . Rursus autem Aristocratia principium originemque capiebat," Polybius, *Romanroum Reipublicae*, 14v.

[38] "Postque vero rursus a parentibus filii talem administrandi facultatem susceperunt expertes malorum expertesque penitus civilis equalitatis libertatisque parentum enim libertate promotionibusque educati erant. Itaque hi quidem ad iniquam exuperandi ceteros aviditatem avariciamque conversi illi ad ebrietates," Polybius, *Romanorum Reipublicae*, 14v–15r.

[39] "Ac dum sane qui potentum superbiam fuerant experti susperstites sunt presenti rerum statu contenti civilem equalitatem liberamque loquendi facultatem plurimi faciunt. Postque vero immemores accessere rursusque filiorum filiis Democratia relicta est: tunc haud amplius ob longam consuetudinem magnificentes civilem equalitatem libertatemque multitudinem prestare querunt: quod sane maxime his accidere solet qui ceteros facultatibus antecedent," Polybius, *Romanorum Reipublicae*, 15rv.

[40] Rucellai, *De urbe Roma*, 948–49.

As we saw earlier, Rucellai cited this conclusion from Book 6 in his defense of Rome's mixed constitution. Here he again follows Polybius, who also claims that the mixed constitution is the best possible solution to the same dilemma. Holding up Sparta's mixed constitution as a worthy example, Polybius says that Lycurgus, the city's original lawgiver, recognized that each of the simple constitutions will easily be destroyed by ingrown and irremovable tendencies that develop naturally.[41] Recognition of this fact led Lycurgus to establish his constitution, which Polybius praises in terms drawn from his psychology. Kings in Sparta would not behave with "insolence" owing to their "fear" of the people, who were given a sufficient part in the government of the state, while the people would not treat the kings with "contempt" on account of their fear of, and respect for, the Senate.[42] As a result, under this constitution, successful and virtuous government will not immediately lead to the removal of limitations on the governors, since these limitations no longer depend on a popular vigilance that becomes fickle in times of peace and prosperity, but rather on institutional restraints that, through fear of what might happen if they are violated, encourage cooperative, and discourage self-aggrandizing, behavior among the different ruling parts. When Rucellai cites the "correct interpretation" of Polybius in defense of Rome, then, he indicates his belief that Rome's mixed constitution was successful because of its ability to achieve stability through the psychological implications of its institutional design—the same psychology used earlier to explain the initial formation of political society and the serial failure of the simple constitutions.

III.

The view that Book 6 contains a comprehensive political theory predicated on an understanding of individual psychology came to be shared by a number of other authors connected to the Rucellai circle in the first half of the sixteenth century. Donato Giannotti, for example, was a participant in the

---

[41] "Simplex enim ad proprium natura proximum vitium vergit: nam ferro rubigo lignisque cossi teredinesque nocumentum afferunt ut si externas pernicies effugiant interioribus tamen ac veluti cognatis corrumpantur. Sic civilibus politiis natura coheret vitium," Polybius, *Romanorum Reipublicae*, 16r.

[42] "Reges enim insolescere impediuntur populem timentes: cui & sufficiens in Rep. pars conceditur. Populus vero reges despicere non audet senatores verentes [sic] qui omnes ex optimatibus delecti in omnibus sese ipsos iustos exhibituri essent," Polybius, *Romanorum Reipublicae*, 16v.

Orti Oricellari alongside Machiavelli and treats Polybius accordingly. Giannotti's *Republica Fiorentina*, believed to have been written between 1534 and 1538, makes explicit reference to Book 6, stating that the three simple constitutions are certain to become corrupt on their own since they are "founded on the inclinations [*animi*] of men, which mutate often, and are, by these means, exposed to corruption."[43] Additionally, Bartolomeo Cavalcanti's *Trattati, o vero Discorsi sopra gli ottimi reggimenti delle repubbliche antiche e moderne*, published in 1571 but believed to have been written in the 1550s, compares Polybius's views on a wide variety of topics relevant to the formation and government of states with those of Plato and Aristotle.[44] It is unclear whether or not Cavalcanti attended the gatherings in the Rucellai gardens, but we know that he interacted with the slightly older men who did, including Machiavelli.[45] Echoing Rucellai's reading of Book 6 that virtue and vice are naturally linked, Cavalcanti writes that Polybius praises Lycurgus because he recognized that "each simple constitution is unstable and fleeting, easily and quickly degenerates, and corrupts into its corresponding vice and into that vicious constitution which naturally follows it and is nearly joined to it." And, repeating Polybius's praise of the mixed constitution in psychological terms, Cavalcanti says that Lycurgus's constitution satisfactorily deals with this problem by institutionalizing restraints so that each of the parts cannot "assert themselves over the others, and that the fear of the people may be a bridle on the insolence of kings, and the fear of the Senate on the insolence of the people."[46] Both Giannotti and Cavalcanti thus appear to draw from Book 6 the same conclusion as Rucellai: good governments ultimately fail owing to the inevita-

---

[43] "Si come Polibio, nel sesto libro della sua Istoria, prudentissimamente discorre. Ma per tornare a proposito, è manifesto per quello che abbiamo detto che le tre specie di republiche rette e buone, sono alle corruzione propinquissime perché, essendo fondato sopra gli animi degli uomini, li quali agevolmente si mutano, sono sempre per se medesime alla corruzione esposte," Donato Giannotti, *Republica Fiorentina*, ed. Giovanni Silvano (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1990), 82.

[44] Bartolomeo Cavalcanti, *Trattati, o vero Discorsi sopra gli ottimi reggimenti delle repubbliche antiche e moderne*, ed. Enrica Fabbri (Milan: Francoangeli, 2007).

[45] Cavalcanti, *Trattati*, 16–17.

[46] "Quest'autore (Polibio) nell'epitome de sesto libro dell'Istorie fa un lungo et prudente discorso delle republiche . . . Perciò che dice che Licurgo avendo ben considerato ogni cosa, conobbe che ogni forma semplice di governo era poco stabile et molta caduca, con ciò sia cosa che tosto et facilmente ella degeneri, et si corrompa nel vitio suo in quella cattiva septie che naturalmente è conseguente, et quasi congiunta con lei . . . (Licurgo) si mantenesse nella republica una egualità perpetua di tali uomini, per dir cosí, né soprafacesse l'altre, et che ai re fusse un freno dell'insolenza loro il timor del popolo, et al popolo il timor del senato," Cavalcanti, *Trattati*, 195–96.

ble emergence of destabilizing attributes of human nature, and, as a result, the central question behind all legislation must be how to create conditions that manage this tendency successfully.

But by far the most conspicuous person to develop the interpretation of Polybius 6 that circulated among those connected to the *Orti* is Machiavelli. While he does not mention Polybius by name, the ostensible connections between *Discorsi* 1.2 and Book 6 are numerous. Both, for instance, intend to assess Rome's constitution on the basis of conclusions drawn from the account of *anacyclosis*.[47] To this we can also add that Machiavelli begins the chapter with language emphasizing the inseparable connection between virtue and vice, likely signaling a reference to Polybius to contemporary readers: every simple constitution, he says, will, "on account of the resemblance in this case between the virtue and the vice," necessarily slide into its aligned vicious form.[48] But, more substantively, Machiavelli's debt to Polybius is most apparent in his placing at the center of this chapter a similar understanding of human psychology and its implications.

Proceeding with his account of the formation of the state, Machiavelli claims that the creation of all types of government, including the very first, is contingent—it forms "by chance" (*a caso*), he says—on the recognition of threats to security. At the beginning of the world, human beings were scattered, each person on their own, but after some time living isolated lives, this population began to grow, and they assembled together. Then, "so that they could better defend themselves," they sought out one of their own who was strongest and most courageous, "installed him as head" (*capo*), and obeyed him.[49] By stating that the formation of a political body is contingent upon recognizing the need for better defense, Machiavelli agrees with Polybius that a specifically political nature does not exist. But at the same time, and also like Polybius, he emphasizes that political life originated in an act of common agreement and was not ordered through coercion. This points toward the existence of a disposition to cooperate, at

---

[47] Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, ed. Vivanti, 18. For Polybius, see p. 37, n. 31.

[48] "Se uno ordinatore di republica ordina in una città uno di quelli tre stati, ve lo ordina per poco tempo . . . per la similitudine che ha in questo caso la virtute ed il vizio," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 19. For two different arguments connecting this passage and the aforementioned passage from Rucellai's *De urbe Roma*, see Canfora, *Il pensiero storiografico*, 67 and Bausi, *Discorsi*, 1:20.

[49] "Nacquono queste variazioni de' governi a caso intra gli uomini: perché nel principio del mondo, sendo gli abitatori radi, vissono un tempo dispersi . . . dipoi, moltiplicando la generazione, si ragunarono insieme, e per potersi meglio difendere cominciarono a riguardare infra loro quello che fusse più robusto e di maggiore cuore, e fecionlo come capo e lo ubedivano," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 19–20.

least when faced with a threat. The origin of the threat is unclear, but the connection Machiavelli draws between the growth of the human population and the eventual elevation of the *capo* for the purposes of defense suggests that he has in mind threats from other human beings, implying the existence of an additional disposition that leads people to act in ways that can make others feel threatened.

This disposition to cooperate when in danger contributes to the further development of political life, as it is responsible for the creation of the first laws and punishments. The impetus for this development came when individuals began to observe new threats to their safety from others, notwithstanding the presence of the *capo*. Having observed somebody physically harm their "benefactor," the others worried that they, too, could find themselves so harmed. Even after the elevation of the *capo*, then, human beings apparently remained disposed to harm each other when capable and, as a result, new dangers inevitably emerged. In response, they sought "to flee these evils" through the imposition of laws and punishments, with the result that the criteria for the elevation of an individual to a position of political authority moved from strength to their perceived ability to govern according to the laws.[50] Emphasizing that laws originated in humans' disposition to cooperate when threatened, Machiavelli argues here that laws and punishments did not come from the top, but rather from the bottom in response to the experience of a threat, implying that there was widespread agreement both about their content and that the authority should enforce them. A human disposition to act in ways that makes others vulnerable, and one to seek refuge from this danger through cooperation, so far remain constant throughout *Discorsi* 1.2 and are central to the developments described.

Machiavelli then proceeds to demonstrate that the interaction between these two instincts lies at the heart of his account of *anacyclosis*, where, again following Polybius, he shows that the driving force behind this process is virtuous government leading to corruption and eventually change by making self-aggrandizing behavior more likely. He begins with monarchy: originally established by an act of cooperation in the interest of security, monarchy degenerated into tyranny when the monarch's position became

---

[50] "Veggendo che se uno noceva al suo benificatore . . . per fuggire simile male si riducevano a fare leggi, ordinare punizioni a chi contrafacessi. . . . La quale cosa faceva che, avendo dipoi a eleggere uno principe, non andavano dietro al più gagliardo, ma a quello che fusse più prudente e più giusto," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 20–21.

hereditary after a period of virtuous rule. Now safe and independent in his elevated position, the monarch began "to assert himself over the others," becoming a tyrant.[51] Like Polybius, Machiavelli implies that monarchy became corrupted after the security provided by good government removed the impetus for election, which in turn eliminated the incentive for the monarch to cooperate, and thereby made the appearance of self-aggrandizing behavior more likely. This new tyranny, as we also saw in Polybius, then created a different set of conditions that incentivized new cooperation, as the tyrant's threatened subjects organized themselves and replaced him with a group of aristocrats.[52]

This same psychologically rooted framework explains the other constitutional changes relayed by Machiavelli. The privileged children of the aristocracy, having risen to political leadership without contest after the virtuous rule of their fathers, had no reason to feel unsafe, and, therefore, no reason to cooperate. As a result, "unable to tolerate civil equality," they began to use their position to assert themselves over the others.[53] Their subjects, now feeling threatened, organized in response to the threat and, remembering the injustice of the prince as well as that of the oligarchy, replaced the latter with a new, popular government.[54] Unsurprisingly, this government also was corrupted when a generation who grew up safe on account of the virtuous government of their parents took control and, "fearing" no one, proceeded to use their various positions licentiously.[55] When this became unsustainable, the cycle began again, with new cooperation

---

[51] "Ma come dipoi si cominciò a fare il principe per successione e non per elezione, subito cominciarono li eredi a degenerare dai loro antichi, e lasciando l'opere virtuose, pensavano che i principi non avessero a fare altro che superare gli altri di sontuosità e di lascivia e d'ogni altra qualità di licenza," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 21.

[52] "Da questo nacquero, appresso, i principii delle rovine e delle conspirazioni e congiure contro a' principi . . . da coloro che per . . . nobilità avanzavano gli altri . . . La moltitudine adunque, seguendo l'autorità di questi potenti, s'armava contro al principe," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 21.

[53] "Venuta dipoi questa amministrazione ai loro figliuoli, i quali non conoscendo la variazione della fortuna, non avendo mai provato il male, e non volendo stare contenti alla civile equalità, ma rivoltisi alla avarizia, alla ambizione," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 22.

[54] "Infastidita da' loro governi, la moltitudine si fe' ministra di qualunque disegnassi in alcun modo offendere quelli governatori, e cosí si levò . . . Ed essendo ancora fresca la memoria del principe e delle ingiurie ricevuto da quella, avendo disfatto lo stato de' pochi . . . si volsero allo stato popolare," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 22.

[55] "Si mantenne questo stato popolare un poco, ma non molto, massime spenta che fu quella generazione che l'aveva ordinato; perché subito venne alla licenza, dove no si temevano né gli uomini privati né i publici: di qualità che, vivendo ciascuno a suo modo, si facevano ogni dí mille ingiurie," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 23.

resulting in the re-institution of monarchy.[56] With this pattern established, the principal question of constitutional design for Machiavelli therefore becomes, as it was for the others, how to order the government in such a way that prevents it from becoming a victim of its own success. In response to this problem, Machiavelli says, prudent legislators have designed mixed constitutions in which "each part is able to guard another" (*l'uno guarda l'altro*),[57] bringing to mind the institutionalization of restraint, and the psychological effect fear of these restraints has on encouraging cooperation and discouraging self-aggrandizement that we have seen previously.

Rome had such a mixed constitution, and Machiavelli elaborates on this in the following chapter, where he describes both its creation and its functioning in terms of the Polybian psychology. In a manner reminiscent of the self-aggrandizing instinct, Machiavelli cautions that all men are disposed to do evil and will do so when they are given the chance.[58] Fear, however, restrains them from acting on these problematic instincts. For example, in the aftermath of the expulsion of Tarquin from Rome, the patricians treated the plebeians with respect since "they feared" that if they did not, the plebeians would not align with them against Tarquin, thereby putting their standing, and security, at risk.[59] The patricians' fear, in this case, restrained their self-aggrandizing behavior and encouraged cooperation. But after the death of Tarquin, and with that threat extinguished, the patricians began to offend the plebeians in any way they could.[60] In the absence of fear, there was no more reason to cooperate, and, as we saw in the simple constitutions above, those in a position to do so began to self-aggrandize. Following the logic illustrated by *anacyclosis*, these self-aggrandizing actions then generated disorder and made life within the city dangerous, until the conflict was resolved, in the interest of "security," by an act of cooperation that created the tribunate.[61] These events led Machiavelli to conclude

---

[56] "Talché costretti per necessità o per suggestione d'alcuno buono uomo, o per fuggire tale licenza, si ritorna di nuovo al principato," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 23.

[57] Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 24.

[58] "È necessario a chi dispone una republica ed ordina leggi in quella, presupporre tutti gli uomini rei, e che li abbiano sempre a usare la malignità dello animo loro, qualunque volta ne abbiano libera occasione," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 27.

[59] "Ed (la nobilità) avendo paura che la plebe mal trattata non si accostasse loro, si portava umanamente con quello," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 28.

[60] "Ma come prima ei furono morti i Tarquinii e che ai nobili fu la paura fuggita, cominciarono . . . tutti modi che potevano la offendevano." Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 28.

[61] "Dopo molte confusioni, romori e pericoli di scandoli che nacquero intra la plebe e la nobilità, si venne per sicurtà della plebe alla creazione de' tribune," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 29.

that, unless limited by necessity, men will act licentiously, and that where the necessity to act otherwise does not exist on its own, it must be artificially imposed by law.[62] The cooperative enterprise that established the tribunate, and created Rome's mixed constitution, was therefore successful because it encouraged further cooperation between the two groups by creating a permanent legal replacement for the external, and ultimately unreliable, fear of Tarquin that had originally checked the patricians' disposition to self-aggrandize.[63] Its success, in other words, came from the beneficial psychological implications of its institutional design. We can see, then, that Machiavelli's endorsement of Polybius's mixed constitution is rooted in the way it interacts with the same psychology used earlier to explain the formation of the state and that was the driving force behind *anacyclosis*.

I have argued here that *Discorsi* 1.2 draws an account of human psychology from Polybius 6 that explains the dynamics of *anacyclosis* and the value and function of the mixed constitution. Machiavelli's debt to the explanatory capacity of this psychology extends well beyond Book 1, Chapter 2, however. An example can be found in *Discorsi* 1.46, where he applies the psychology when advising how to determine, and avoid successfully, future political conflicts. Commenting on the escalation of the old conflicts between the patricians and the plebeians after the end of the tyranny of the Decemvirs, Machiavelli concludes that in order to dispel fear, men often seek to make others fear.[64] This, he continues, is a means by which republics collapse and is the proper justification for the Sallustian claim that "all bad examples have arisen from good beginnings."[65] To illustrate this point, Machiavelli writes that citizens often ascend to a position that facilitates self-aggrandizement as a result of cooperative relationships established

---

[62] "Gli uomini non operono mai nulla bene se non per necessità; ma dove la elezione abonda, e che vi si può usare licenza, si riempie subito ogni cosa di confusione e di disordine," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 28–29.
[63] "Mancati i Tarquinii, che con paura di loro tenevano la nobilità a freno, convenne pensare a uno nuovo ordine che facesse quel medesimo effetto che facevano i Tarquinii quando erano vivi," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 29.
[64] "Mentre che gli uomini cercono di non temere, comincino a fare temere altrui," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 165.
[65] "Vedesi per questo in quale modo, fra gli altri, le republiche si risolvono; ed in che modo gli uomini salgono da un'ambizione a un'altra, e come quella sentenza sallustiana, posta in bocca di Cesare, è verissima: 'Quod omnia mala exempla bonis initiis orta sunt,'" Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 165.

with others in order to alleviate fear.[66] But what initially began as a way to cooperate for the purposes of protection will eventually evolve into a situation in which that individual finds himself with a group of dependents and followers, thereby placing him in a position to self-aggrandize, which, Machiavelli suggests, is something he will almost certainly do.[67] These actions will then elicit fear from others, which, he implies, will lead to other citizens cooperating for their own defense and eventually creating factional conflict. As a result, he concludes, a well-ordered republic must legislate to prevent individuals from seeking security by private means,[68] and sometimes even take exceptional measures to prevent this from happening.[69] We can see from this example that the same connection between success and failure analyzed in *Discorsi* 1.2 remains relevant at all times: cooperative actions following from a psychological instinct activated by fear can be so successful in alleviating that fear that they discourage continued cooperation and encourage the appearance of self-aggrandizing behavior. This situation leads others to fear, which causes instability and, if not stopped, political changes. From explaining the formation of political society, to serving both as a guide for establishing constitutions and for predicting and preempting future political events, we can clearly see the extent of Machiavelli's debt to the Polybian psychology.

CONCLUSION

Commentators largely agree that the study of Polybius 6 as a work of political theory began in Florence at the turn of the sixteenth century as seen most prominently in the *Discorsi*.[70] Machiavelli's participation in the *Orti Oricellari* situated him among a group of readers who shared an interpre-

---

[66] "Cercono . . . quegli cittadini che ambiziosamente vivono in una republica . . . di non potere essere offesi, non solamente dai privati, ma etiam da' magistrati: cercono, per poter fare questo, amicizie," Machiavelli, 165.

[67] "In tanto che lui, sanza ostaculo perseverando, diventa di qualità . . . che i cittadini e magistrati abbino paura a offendere lui e gli amici suoi, non dura dipoi molta fatica a fare che giudichino ed offendino a suo modo," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 165–66.

[68] "Donde una republica intra gli ordini suoi debbe avere questo, di vegghiare che i suoi cittadini sotto ombra di bene non possino fare male," Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 164–66.

[69] Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 467–68.

[70] In addition to Momigliano, "Polybius' Reappearance," 347–72, also see Momigliano, "Polybius between the English and the Turks," 125–41. De Keyser, "Polybius," 3–4 affirms Momigliano's argument. For treatment of Polybius as a political theorist prior to Machiavelli, see Hankins, "Cyriac of Ancona," 692–710; Brandolini, *Republics and Kingdoms Compared*, xv, xviii; 285–86n34, and Cary Nederman, "Polybius as Monar-

tation of the early chapters of Polybius 6 that centered around a distinctive account of human psychology, which he then endorsed in *Discorsi* 1.2. There is indeed evidence that this particular reading of Polybius 6 spread outside of Florence and remained in use well into the sixteenth century.

For example, Paolo Paruta of Venice, another reader immersed in the Polybian material, applies the Polybian psychology to analyze Rome's constitution and its eventual collapse in his *Discorsi politici* (ca. 1580s–1590s). Midway through an extended discussion of Book 6, Paruta repeats the Polybian claim, by now a familiar refrain, that the strength of a mixed constitution follows from its ability to restrain properly different parts of the state and thus encourage cooperation between them.[71] Disagreeing with Polybius, however, Paruta argues that Rome's constitution did not do so satisfactorily, with the result that each part used the authority it possessed to self-aggrandize.[72] As a result of this conflict, he says, the constitution eventually became a popular one. Then, applying the logic of *anacyclosis*, Paruta shows how the Republic inevitably degenerated into monarchy when, "at the peak of the city's prosperity," the people, "enabled by their prosperity," could no longer tolerate being at "equal standing" with the nobles, and began to pass "self-aggrandizing" laws.[73] Paruta's debt to the Polybian psychology and its implications is clear: people cooperate only when insecurity restrains their ability to self-aggrandize, and the security provided by prosperity undermines cooperation by encouraging self-aggrandizement. It is perhaps more important, however, that Paruta applies this psychology to explain the collapse of Rome's constitution, something Polybius did not live to see; for it suggests that Paruta, like Machiavelli and the others, took from Book 6 an explanatory framework for analyzing political phenomena, as opposed to solely an account of one such phenomenon.

---

chist? Receptions of *Histories* VI before Machiavelli, c. 1490–c. 1515," *History of Political Thought* 37, no. 3 (2016): 461–79.

[71] "Vedasi, come nell'unione di questi tre governi, certe condizioni a ciascuno proprie fussero insieme inserte, ma non già tante nè tali, che . . . non potessero in uno istesso soggetto ben unirsi," Paolo Paruta, *Opere politiche*, ed. C. Monzani (Florence: Le Monnier, 1852), 2:4.

[72] "Tale diversità degli ordini veniva a farla quasi un corpo di due capi e di due forme . . . i nobili, fatti superbi dalla dignità del consolto . . . voleano tutto il governo usurparsi; e, d'altro canto, il popolo . . . fidandosi molto nel magistrato de' Tribuni, era talmente insolente," Paruta, *Opere*, 2:12–13.

[73] " [La] immoderata potenza de' cittadini, la quale nel colmo delle sue maggiori prosperità condusse quella Repubblica all' ultima ruina. Perciocchè, questi disordini . . . erano poi con la grandezza della Città tanto cresciuti, che il popolo . . . prendendo per le tante sue prosperità maggiora licenze e ardire, non contento d'aversi agguagliato a' nobili, volse farsi alle leggi superiore," Paruta, *Opere*, 2:18–19.

Yet, currently, Polybius's account of the mixed constitution dominates the scholarship on the reception of Book 6 in the early modern period, much as it does the scholarship on Machiavelli.[74] It seems then that in order to understand more fully the debt of early modern political thought to Book 6, we should read for Polybius among early modern authors on the same terms they read Polybius himself: by moving beyond the phenomena discussed and searching for their causes.

University of California Los Angeles.

---

[74] See, for example, Momigliano, "Polybius between the English and the Turks," 125–41.