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# The Gift of Liberty and the Ambitious Tyrant: Leonardo da Vinci as a Political Thinker, between Republicanism and Absolutism

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# New Worlds and the Italian Renaissance

Contributions to the History  
of European Intellectual Culture

*Edited by*

Andrea Moudarres and Christiana Purdy Moudarres



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THE GIFT OF LIBERTY AND THE AMBITIOUS TYRANT:  
LEONARDO DA VINCI AS A POLITICAL THINKER,  
BETWEEN REPUBLICANISM AND ABSOLUTISM

Marco Versiero

In 1869 the renowned French novelist Arsène Houssaye included in his biography of Leonardo a chapter on “la politique de Léonard de Vinci,” the contents of which reflect a particular current of nineteenth-century criticism. In fact, Houssaye’s characterization of Leonardo’s art as “au-dessus—d’autres diront au-dessous—de toutes les politiques” (“above—others might say beneath—all things political”)<sup>1</sup> to account for his apparent political detachment may be seen as the culmination of a “Leonardo *moralisé*” tradition—a reaction to the Risorgimento’s aversion toward the artist and his intellectual freedom, heroically re-interpreted as a sign of distinction.<sup>2</sup> At the outset of the twentieth century, this reactionary spirit was taken up by Benedetto Croce, who bore little patience for the patriotic and neo-positivist climate of post-unification Italy, in which the political value of Leonardo’s genius was determined by its contribution to the recent and feeble rebirth of a national identity.<sup>3</sup> In his *Leonardo filosofo* (1906), Croce made no concessions to Leonardo’s political indifference: “Leonardo fu del tutto indifferente alle sorti della patria e alle vicende degli Stati; animale apolitico, sebbene uomo, e quale uomo!” (“Leonardo was entirely indifferent to the fate of his homeland and to state affairs; an apolitical animal, and yet a man, and what a man!”)<sup>4</sup> Roused by the neo-Latin celebration of the artist’s greatness and the political propaganda it inspired, Croce’s intolerance was reversed in the early 1930s by Antonio Gramsci, in whose

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<sup>1</sup> Arsène Houssaye, *Histoire de Léonard de Vinci* (Paris: Didier, 1869), 156–160. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are the editors’.

<sup>2</sup> See Roberto Paolo Ciardi, “Leonardo illustrato: genio e morigeratezza,” in *L’immagine di Leonardo. Testimonianze figurative dal XVI al XIX secolo*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Roberto Paolo Ciardi and Carlo Sisi (Florence: Giunti, 1997), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Similar opinions were expressed, for instance, in Arturo Farinelli, *Leonardo e la natura* (Milan: Bocca, 1939 [1903]), 109 and Joseph Péladan, *La dernière leçon de Léonard de Vinci à son Académie à Milan (1499), précédée d’une étude sur le Maître* (Paris: Sanson, 1904), 18–19, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Benedetto Croce, “Leonardo filosofo,” in *Leonardo da Vinci, conferenze fiorentine* (Milan: Treves, 1910), 237.

opinion Leonardo's behaviour might be seen as evidence of the cosmopolitanism of Italian Renaissance intellectuals,<sup>5</sup> a cause of the reactionary nature of this cultural era, if evaluated from a strictly political viewpoint, that is, on the basis of the constitutional process of the modern State as a political order.<sup>6</sup>

Since the mid 1850s, Leonardo's lack of interest in political affairs had been justified by his status as a so-called "citizen-of-the-world," a *cliché* which finds its earliest expression in Edgar Quinet's *Les Révolutions d'Italie*, in which the artist appears as the quintessence of modernity and, therefore, a man without a country.<sup>7</sup> The endurance of this icon, "the solitary spectator, accustomed to hover far above the level of the questions of the day,"<sup>8</sup> has long hindered scholarly inquiry into the political dimension of Leonardo's literary and conceptual legacy. Even during the period of critical revisionism, prompted by the quincentennial of his birth in 1952, Karl Jaspers styled him a "prince among princes," contrasting Leonardo's political detachment to the spirited patriotism of Michelangelo Buonarroti, thereby elevating the artists' legendary rivalry from a trademark of artistic historiography since Vasari to an impetus for philosophical inquiry.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, in those same years, Cesare Luporini's efforts to situate Leonardo and his apparent contradictions within the artist's own cultural environment<sup>10</sup> set the stage for a subtler analysis of the political implications of Leonardo's work—in particular, in his activity as an urban planner, military architect, and engineer.<sup>11</sup> These are, of course, the most

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to Tatiana Schucht, September 7, 1931. See my forthcoming "... *Una cosa da nulla, come vedi: il Leonardo di Gramsci*," in *Marx e Gramsci: filologia, filosofia e politica allo specchio*, Conference Proceedings, ed. Francesca Izzo (Naples: University for Eastern Studies—Departement of Philosophy and Politics, December 4–5, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Francesco Orestano, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Rome: Optima, 1919), 197–198, who assimilated his cosmopolitanism to an apolitical attitude, characterizing Leonardo's individualism and isolation as "stoico [...] filantropismo universale, recisamente cosmopolita e apolitico" ("stoic [...] universal philanthropism, decidedly cosmopolitan and apolitical").

<sup>7</sup> See A. Richard Turner, *Inventing Leonardo* (Berkeley; Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 105.

<sup>8</sup> Eugène Müntz, *Leonardo da Vinci. Artist, Thinker and Man of Science* (New York, NY: Parkstone Press, 2006 [1899]), vol. 2, 116. See also Gabriel Séailles, *Léonard de Vinci, l'artiste et le savant, 1452–1519. Essai de biographie psychologique* (Paris: Didier, 1906 [1892]), 499–501.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Leonardo filosofo* (Milan: Abscondita, 2001 [1953]), 83, 108–113. See the same comparison in Leonid M. Batkin, *Leonardo da Vinci* (Rome: Laterza, 1988), 201–202.

<sup>10</sup> Cesare Luporini, *La mente di Leonardo* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1997 [1953]), 137. See also Gerolamo Calvi, *Vita di Leonardo* (Bergamo: Morcelliana, 1949 [1936]), 118–119.

<sup>11</sup> See Corrado Maltese, "Il pensiero architettonico e urbanistico di Leonardo," in *Leonardo, saggi e ricerche*, ed. Achille Marazza (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1954),

natural grounds for an assessment of Leonardo's political thought insofar as they anchor him to the mechanics of social organization. My aim, however, is to shift the focus of attention from the contingency of Leonardo as a *man*, with any concrete political convictions particular to *his* time, to the immanency of his approach as a *thinker*, with a political vision pertinent to *every* time.<sup>12</sup> In other words, I wish to highlight the recurrence in his writings—which, from now on, I will call his “political fragments”—of a precise political vocabulary, one which may prove particularly significant in the context of the vernacular regeneration of political discourse that distinguished the Italian Renaissance.

Leonardo's first extended stay in Milan appears to have inspired most of his political fragments. As a guest at the court of the Sforza family during the last two decades of the fifteenth century, in the service of Ludovico il Moro, Leonardo exhibited the breadth of his talents as an artist and technician, often with a view to their potential for public use. His desire for recognition above all as a master of the arts of warfare, which he proudly declared in his famous letter of self-presentation to Ludovico (1482), re-emerges several years later in a sketch for the proem of his projected military treatise, which he never completed (1487–90): “per mantenere il dono principal di natura, cioè libertà, trovo modo da offendere e difendere, in stando assediati dalli ambiziosi tiranni; e prima dirò del sito murale e perché i popoli possino mantenere i loro boni e giusti signori” (“In order to maintain the principal gift of nature, that is, liberty, I will find the way to offend and to defend when being besieged by ambitious tyrants. And first I will speak about the positioning of the walls, and further, how the people can maintain their good and just lords”).<sup>13</sup> It is surprising that some have

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331–358; Luigi Firpo, *Leonardo architetto e urbanista* (Turin: Utet, 1963), 63–80; Eugenio Garin, “La città in Leonardo. Lettura Vinciana XI, 15 aprile 1971” in *Leonardo da Vinci letto e commentato*, ed. Paolo Galluzzi (Florence: Giunti-Barbèra, 1974), 309–325; Pietro C. Marani, *L'architettura fortificata negli studi di Leonardo da Vinci, con il catalogo completo dei disegni* (Florence: Olschki, 1984), 19–21; Luigi Firpo, “Leonardo as Urban Planner,” in *Leonardo da Vinci Engineer and Architect*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Paolo Galluzzi and Jean Guillaume, foreword by Carlo Pedretti (Montreal: The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1987), 287–301; Carlo Pedretti, *Leonardo architetto* (Milan: Electa, 1988 [1978]), 57–63; Pietro C. Marani, “Leonardo urbanista e l'antico: riflessioni ed ipotesi,” *Raccolta Vinciana* 26 (1995): 3–41.

<sup>12</sup> Some useful indications may be found in Edmondo Solmi, *Scritti vinciani. Le Fonti dei Manoscritti di Leonardo da Vinci e altri studi* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1976), 574. See also, for a more general perspective, Giorgio Baratta's recent, *Leonardo tra noi. Immagini suoni parole nell'epoca intermediale* (Rome: Carocci, 2007), 20, 66, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Paris, Institut de France, *Ms Ashburnham I*, f. 10 recto (formerly *Ms B*, f. 100 recto). The English translation is from *The Manuscripts of Leonardo da Vinci in the Institut de France*.

attempted to deny or at least minimize the political value of this passage:<sup>14</sup> not only does it make plain the centrality of natural liberty to Leonardo's political thought;<sup>15</sup> it also reveals his indebtedness to the Tuscan tradition of civic humanism and republicanism. Thanks to his education as a young Florentine member of the Medicean cultural *milieu* and to the knowledge he eventually acquired of some of the masterpieces of Florentine republicanism, such as Matteo Palmieri's *Vita civile* and Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, Leonardo was well-versed in contemporary doctrines of liberty.<sup>16</sup> Intertwined with the republican dispute was of course the juxtaposition between the "good and just lords" and the "ambitious tyrants" who menace the integrity of the State, a juxtaposition which replaced the traditional (Aristotelian and medieval) opposition between good and bad forms of government with the primacy of the republic over the principality. By applying such linguistic and logical formulas to the non-republican reality of the Lombard Dukedom, Leonardo identifies the political legitimacy of a monarchy both in the preservation of liberty that it enacts and in the consensual legal device by means of which a ruler's subjects are called upon to "maintain" him—not only by defending him militarily from external enemies, but also by granting internal consent as a political approbation of his conduct and rule.

Another fragment of some years later helps to explain Leonardo's understanding of liberty as the foundation of political order. As the Sforza regime collapsed under the French invasion of Lombardy led by Louis XII (1499), Leonardo perceived a subtle allegory of his day and age in the fable of the owl and the thrushes, in which a biting zoomorphic metaphor is employed to illustrate the fate of the precarious political communities of late fifteenth-century Italy. The silly cheerfulness of a flock of thrushes over a hunter's capture of an owl is compared with the attitude of "quelle terre, che si rallegran di vedere perdere la libertà ai lor maggiori, mediante i quali perdano il soccorso e rimangono legati in potenza del lor nemico,

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*Manuscript B*, ed. John Venerella, foreword by Pietro C. Marani (Milan: Ente Raccolta Vinciana, 2003), 162.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Giovanni Ponte, *Leonardo prosatore* (Genoa: Tilgher, 1976), 109, n. 27.

<sup>15</sup> See Fausto M. Bongioanni, *Leonardo pensatore. Saggio sulla posizione filosofica di Leonardo da Vinci* (Piacenza: Porta, 1935), 120, n. 4.

<sup>16</sup> See my "Il dono principal di natura: la libertà politica negli scritti di Leonardo da Vinci, dal repubblicanesimo del bene comune alla prospettiva governamentale anti-democratica," in *Libertà e democrazia nella storia del pensiero politico*, Conference Proceedings, ed. Nicola Antonetti and Matteo Truffelli (Soveria Mannelli, CZ: Rubbettino, 2008), 157–163.



lasciando la libertà e spesse volte la vita” (“those lands which delight in seeing their freedom lost to their overlords, through whom they lose support and fall under the power of their enemy, forfeiting liberty and often life”).<sup>17</sup> Thus, Leonardo was aware of two closely related aspects of the key-concept of liberty: the freedom of the *maggiori*—that is, their individual condition of non-submission to the restrictions imposed by others—and, thanks to them, the freedom of the *terre*—that is, the political provision of autonomy and reciprocal separation among socio-political communities. It is possible to recognize here a negative formulation of liberty as the absence of required action, rather than the power to do what one wants, a discrepancy that would undergo fuller treatment within the context of Machiavellian republicanism. The notion that war is the main cause of the loss of liberty recurs as the solution to the quite contemporary riddle, *De’ metalli*, in which Leonardo carries out a pacifist speech against metals for their deplorable use when converted into weapons: like a monster who “emerges from obscure and gloomy caverns” (“uscirà delle oscure e tenebrose spelonche”) in order to bring about “great anxieties, dangers, and death” (“grandi affanni, pericoli e morte”) or like a merciless tyrant, who “will commit innumerable betrayals” (“commetterà infiniti tradimenti”) and “lead many villains into murder, theft, and slavery” (“persuaderà li omini tristi alli assassinamenti e latrocini e le servitù”), war is depicted as capable of “depriving the free cities of their state” (“torrà lo stato alle città libere”).<sup>18</sup> The word “stato” here seems to refer to that political institution which is to be perceived as contrary to the proper condition of civic liberty. Not by chance, the conceptual juxtaposition of the words “stato” and “libertà,” associated with a third topic of Leonardo’s political vocabulary—that is, “roba”—, resurfaces in another fragment, also referring to the fall of the Sforza government: a 1500 memorandum, rapidly

<sup>17</sup> Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, *Codex Atlanticus*, f. 323 *recto* (formerly 117 r-b). See *Il Codice Atlantico della Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano*, ed. A. Marinoni, foreword by C. Pedretti (Florence: Giunti, 2000 [1973]), vol. 1, 552. Some political considerations regarding this fragment are sketched by Giuseppina Fumagalli, *Leonardo, omo senza lettere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1939), 211, note 2 and Carlo Vecce, *Leonardo da Vinci. Scritti* (Milan: Mursia, 1992), 71, n. 35. For fuller treatment, see my “Questo torrà lo stato alle città libere: stato e libertà negli scritti di Leonardo da Vinci,” *Il Pensiero Politico* 38 (2005): 271–278; idem, “Per un lessico politico di Leonardo da Vinci. II. Indizi di polemologia: ‘naturalità’ del conflitto e ‘necessarietà’ della guerra,” *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 15 (2009): 121–134.

<sup>18</sup> *Codex Atlanticus*, f. 1033 *recto* (formerly 370 r-a), ca. 1494–97. See *Il Codice Atlantico* (as in note 17), vol. 3, 1864. For discussion of this text, see my “Il duca [ha] perso lo stato...: Niccolò Machiavelli, Leonardo da Vinci e l’idea di Stato,” *Filosofia Politica* 21 (2007): 85–105.

sketched on the cover of a travel-notebook, enumerates the names and facts of the Milanese defeat, ending with the epigram: “Il duca perse lo stato e la roba e libertà e nessuna sua opera si finì per lui” (“The Duke lost the state, his possessions, and his liberty; and not one of his works was finished for him”).<sup>19</sup> Such a statement offers a clear indication of the three factors Leonardo perceived as the logical and practical prerequisites for any state’s political stability and, therefore, the ingenious productivity of its citizens.

To better understand the political meaning of “roba” as a synonym of “wealth”—not only in the sense of private possessions but of political leverage, a means of improving or reinforcing power relations and insuring military conquest—we shall now consider a later text, written around 1504, in which Leonardo draws on the anecdotal tradition of Aristotle’s relationship with his famous pupil Alexander the Great, which he likely learned of through Palmieri’s *Vita civile*. Interestingly, his interpretation of this acquaintance as a reciprocal apprenticeship (“Aristotile e Alessandro furon preceptori l’un dell’altro” [“Aristotle and Alexander were teachers of one another”]) aligns Aristotle’s superiority in philosophical speculation, which enabled him to conquer all realms of human knowledge (“Aristotile ebbe grande scienza, la quale li furon mezzo a usurparsi tutto il rimanente delle scienze composte dalla somma dei filosofi” [Aristotle had great knowledge, which was the means whereby he conquered all the remaining fields of inquiry pursued by all philosophers]) with Alexander’s excellence in statecraft, which enabled him to conquer the entire world (“Alessandro fu ricco di stato, il qual li fu mezzo a usurpare il mondo” [“Alexander was rich in power, which was the means whereby he conquered the world”]).<sup>20</sup> The “stato” in this case is conceptualized as a political tool, representing the full range of Alexander’s political virtues and qualities, such as personal charisma, economic strength, together with the support of trustworthy councillors and military might. The same association of politics with economics appears cursorily in chapter 65

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<sup>19</sup> Paris, Institut de France, *Ms L*, front cover verso. See *The Manuscripts of Leonardo da Vinci in The Institut de France. Manuscript L*, ed. John Venerella, foreword by Pietro C. Marani (Milan: Ente Raccolta Vinciana, 2001), 4. Gerolamo Calvi, *Vita di Leonardo*, 141. Edmondo Solmi, *Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)* (Florence: Barbèra, 1900), 121, suggested that the chronology of this memorandum should date back to the second and definitive fall of Ludovico il Moro (February 1500), whose news came to Leonardo during his stay in Venice (March of the same year). Cf. Martin Kemp, *Leonardo da Vinci. Le mirabili operazioni della natura e dell’uomo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1982 [1981]), 196.

<sup>20</sup> Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, *Ms 8936*, f. 24 recto; see *Leonardo da Vinci. I Codici di Madrid*, ed. L. Reti (Florence: Giunti Barbèra, 1974), vol. 5, 33.

of the so-called *Book on Painting*, posthumously compiled by Francesco Melzi, Leonardo's pupil and heir, and based on a number of literary autographs that are now lost. Here, Leonardo deems that "molto maggior gloria è quella della virtù dei mortali, che quella dei loro tesori" ("much greater is the glory of the virtue of mortals than is the glory of their treasures"), which leads to a brief political digression that begins: "Quanti imperatori e quanti principi sono passati che non ne resta alcuna memoria, e solo cercorono li *stati e ricchezze* per lasciare fama di loro?" ("How many emperors and how many princes have passed of whom we have no recollection, and who sought to ensure their fame through power and riches").<sup>21</sup> Leonardo's rhetorical quandary also introduces the theme of the ephemeral nature of "states" as human artifacts, especially when compared with the millenarian endurance of natural phenomena, a fixture in Leonardo's thought since the end of his first Florentine period (ca. 1481) when he lamented, echoing a passage of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*: "O tempo, veloce predatore delle create cose, quanti re, quanti popoli hai tu disfatti e quante mutazioni di stati e vari casi sono seguiti . . .!" ("O time, swift predator of created things, how many kings, how many peoples have you undone and how many changes and upheavals have followed . . .!").<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that the word "re," referring to "kings," has been corrected over two previous lexical attempts, "monarchi" and "monarchie," revealing an effort on Leonardo's part to pinpoint the best political order for the expression of kingship—namely, monarchy, which leads to the nominal assimilation of all political orders.

At the same time, Leonardo's pessimism concerning the advantages of democracy emerges in one of his most enigmatic prophecies, dating back to his return to Florence at the beginning of the sixteenth century: "Del comune. Un meschino sarà soiato e essi soiatori sempre fien sua ingannatori e rubatori e assassini d'esso meschino" ("Regarding the *comune*: A wretch will be flattered and those flatterers will always make tricksters and thieves and assassins of that wretch").<sup>23</sup> The municipal institution

<sup>21</sup> The lost original of this passage is believed to date back to ca. 1505–10; see *Leonardo da Vinci. Libro di Pittura, Codice Urbinato lat. 1270 nella Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, ed. C. Pedretti and C. Vecce (Florence: Giunti, 1995), vol. 1, 175–177.

<sup>22</sup> London, British Library, *Ms Arundel 263*, f. P 1 *recto* (formerly 156 *recto*); see *Il Codice Arundel 263 della British Library. Edizione in facsimile nel riordinamento cronologico dei suoi fascicoli*, ed. C. Pedretti and C. Vecce (Florence: Giunti, 1998), 89.

<sup>23</sup> *Codex Atlanticus*, f. 105 a *verso* (formerly 37 v-c), c. 1504. See *Il Codice Atlantico* (as in note 17), vol. 1, 147. A political interpretation of this fragment has been confirmed by Carlo Vecce, *Leonardo da Vinci. Scritti* (as in n. 17), 132.

of the Italian *comune* is seen in both its mirrored and complementary dimensions: as the social basis of a political institution (that is, as a synonym of *popolo*), it is embedded in the words “meschino soiato”; as a directive organization, comprised of the whole of the community’s representatives, it is characterized by “soiatori [...] ingannatori e rubatori e assassini d’esso meschino.”<sup>24</sup> It is thus possible to notice, on the one hand, Leonardo’s allegiance to the traditional understanding of the *bene comune* as the heart of a republican constitution, to be defended from the threats of egoistic individualism in accordance with the principles of civic humanism; and, on the other hand, his distrust of any form of indirect democracy, which relies upon the mediated representation of interests and rights. Explicitly denounced by Leonardo through a late reference to St. Mark’s Gospel, the vulnerability of any political apparatus that stresses the recurrence of internal division as a cause of their downfall (“ogni regno in sé diviso è disfatto” [“every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation”]),<sup>25</sup> re-emerges in an allegorical aphorism that compares life and human states to a rank of tiles, or dominoes, falling in chain reaction, thus underlining the rivalry among “states” as a further cause of their collapse.<sup>26</sup>

“Roba,” understood as a combination of wealth and fortune, may also serve as a means to preserve and reinforce the hierarchical bonds within a political setting. Leonardo makes this evident in the most important of his political fragments, written during the central phase of his first stay in Milan—that is, the draft of a memorandum to Ludovico il Moro, containing an ambitious proposal of urban renewal in the wake of a dangerous pestilence (1484), together with an innovative revision of the social and economic landscape of the city of Milan. This text dates to about 1493–97 and has been interpreted by such eminent scholars as Eugenio Garin and Luigi Firpo as a premonition of Machiavelli’s realpolitik.<sup>27</sup> According to Leonardo:

<sup>24</sup> *Codex Atlanticus*, f. 184 verso (formerly 65 v-b); see *Il Codice Atlantico*, vol. 1, 235.

<sup>25</sup> *Ms Arundel 263*, f. P 139 recto (formerly 180 verso). See *Il Codice Arundel 263*, 425–426. Regarding the late chronology of this fragment (ca. 1505–10), suggested by its second half (“così ogni ingegno diviso in diversi studi si confonde e indebolisce” [“thus every intellect divided among various studies is confused and weakened”]). See Pietro C. Marani, *Leonardo, una carriera di pittore* (Milan: Motta, 1999), 320.

<sup>26</sup> Paris, Institut de France, *Ms G*, f. 89 recto, c. 1511–15. See *The Manuscripts of Leonardo da Vinci in the Institut de France. Manuscript G*, ed. John Venerella, foreword by Pietro C. Marani (Milan: Ente Raccolta Vinciana, 2002), 157.

<sup>27</sup> See Eugenio Garin, *La città in Leonardo*, 320–322 and Luigi Firpo, *Leonardo architetto e urbanista*, 66–67. See also Edmondo Solmi, *Leonardo*, 49–50; Giuseppina Fumagalli,

Tutti i popoli obbediscano e son mossi da' lor magnati, e essi magnati si collegano e costringano co' signori per due vie: o per sanguinità o per roba sanguinata. Sanguinità quando i lor figli sono, a similitudine di stacchi, sicurtà e pegno della lor dubitata fede; roba, quando tu farai a ciascun d'essi murare una casa o due dentro alla tua città, della quale lui ne tragga qualch'entrata.<sup>28</sup>

The end result of this process is that “la poveraglia sarà disunita da simili abitatori” (“the poor will be disunited by such inhabitants”). It is interesting that Leonardo insists on the idea that “chi mura ha pur qualche ricchezza” (“those who build have at least some riches”) so that “esso sarà fedele, per non perdere il frutto della sua casa insieme col capitale” (“they will be faithful, in order not to lose the value of their homes together with their capital”). In other words, Leonardo conceives a painless solution to the problem of a possible insubordination of the *magnati* to the *signori*: the latter, instead of resorting to blackmail through the abduction of their subordinates' children, should establish economic ties—in particular, through the concession of building permits. The latter would thus remain loyal to the former in terms comparable to the analysis of costs (i.e. of treason) and benefits (i.e. of loyalty).<sup>29</sup> Leonardo's rough prose posits as an alternative to the bonds of *sanguinità*—that is, one's lineage—those of *roba sanguinata* that is, one's patrimony—implying that not only the affective ties of family, but their indispensable material substratum are what cement any nuclear union, which is itself the social and economic basis of any political society.

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*Leonardo, omo senza lettere*, 310–312; Corrado Maltese, “Il pensiero architettonico e urbanistico di Leonardo,” 340; Carlo Vecce, *Leonardo da Vinci. Scritti*, 251, note 2; and, more recently, Daniel Arasse, *Léonard de Vinci, le rythme du monde* (Paris: Hazan, 1997), 160–163 and Carlo Vecce, *Leonardo*, foreword by C. Pedretti (Rome: Salerno, 1998), 85–86. A deeper analysis from a strictly political viewpoint may be found in my “*O per sanguinità, o per roba sanguinata: il pensiero politico di Leonardo*,” *Raccolta Vinciana* 31 (2005): 215–230. In connection with Machiavelli's writings, see my “Metafore zoomorfe e dissimulazione della duplicità. La politica delle immagini in Niccolò Machiavelli e Leonardo da Vinci,” *Studi Filosofici* 27 (2004): 101–125.

<sup>28</sup> *Codex Atlanticus*, f. 184 verso (formerly 65 v-b). See *Il Codice Atlantico*, vol. 1, 235: “All peoples obey and are directed by their magnates, and those magnates relate to and colude with their overlords in two ways: either through bloodlines or through blood-stained goods. Bloodlines when their children are involved, similar to hostages, a guarantee and pledge of their dubious faith; goods, when you make them build a house or two within your city, from which they gain some income.”

<sup>29</sup> Regarding these economic implications, see my “*Ogni omo desidera far capitale . . .*: alcune riflessioni di Leonardo da Vinci e la loro correlazione con gli scritti di Machiavelli,” *Prometeo* 93 (2006): 38–45.

By the same token, Leonardo insists on a theoretical and practical union of “beauty” (*bellezza*) and “utility” (*utilità*) in the development of a city’s forms and functions, asserting at the heart of the memorandum: “E la città si fa di bellezza compagna del suo nome e a te utile di dazi e fama eterna del suo accrescimento” (“And the city makes herself a companion of beauty and useful to you of tariffs and eternal fame of its growth”)<sup>30</sup> and Leonardo’s observation finds an important precedent in St. Augustine’s *De civitate Dei*—a work that appears in the artist’s 1503 inventory of his own library—where it is affirmed of the human body parts that “one would be at a loss to say whether utility or beauty is the major consideration in their creation.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the passage may well have inspired the question subsequently raised by Leonardo: “Non può essere *bellezza e utilità*, come appare nelle fortezze e nelli omini?” (“Can there not be *beauty* and *utility*, as there are in fortresses and in men?”)<sup>32</sup> “Fortress” in this case may refer more generally to a city’s military architecture, which provides not only safety (*utility*), but aesthetic charm (*beauty*), hence its affinity to the human body, which St. Augustine describes as both a useful and a beautiful creation.<sup>33</sup> From a less militaristic and more civic perspective, the “utility” of the urban asset resides for Leonardo in the financial advantages afforded by its social and economic administration—for instance, as noted above, the system of building permits designed to benefit both lords and magnates, without, however, providing for the poor.

Leonardo’s memorandum to Ludovico gains further interest in light of the terms he uses to designate political and social rank—“signori,” “magnati,” “popoli”—terms which reflect a precise lexical and conceptual framework that Leonardo derived from certain vestiges of medieval culture characteristic of Northern Italy, a region further distinguished by a predominance of petty fiefdoms that generally depended on a superior political authority, such as the German Emperor, as in the case of the Sforza Dukedom. Similar terminology may be found in three texts of the

<sup>30</sup> *Codice atlantico* 65v-b, 1497.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972), 22.24.

<sup>32</sup> See Carlo Pedretti, “Il concetto di bellezza e utilità in Sant’Agostino e Leonardo,” *Achademia Leonardi Vinci* 5 (1992): 107–111.

<sup>33</sup> On the interpretation of this fragment, see Anna Maria Brizio, *Leonardo da Vinci. Scritti scelti* (Turin: Utet, 1952), 238; Pietro C. Marani, *L’architettura fortificata*, 291 and note 18; Carlo Pedretti, *Leonardo architetto*, 156–159; Edoardo Villata, *Leonardo da Vinci. I documenti e le testimonianze contemporanee*, foreword by P. C. Marani (Milan: Ente Raccolta Vinciana, 1999), 70–71.

preceding decade: a note next to the most attractive of Leonardo's drawings for an "ideal city" (ca. 1487–90)<sup>34</sup> and two excerpts from his anatomical writings on the cerebral localization of the *sensus communis* and its relationship to voluntary motion (ca. 1489). Moreover, these texts bear witness to Leonardo's adherence to the naturalistic conception of the state conveyed by the so-called "body politic," a commonplace in the history of political thought.<sup>35</sup> Leonardo's drawings in Paris *MS B*, often interpreted as evidence of his utopian approach to urban planning,<sup>36</sup> have recently been analyzed in relation to Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, for which they may have been intended as an iconographic apparatus.<sup>37</sup> Leonardo's proposal of a hierarchy of urban planes, one for each social rank,<sup>38</sup> has appeared to some as cold and inhuman;<sup>39</sup> its immediate objective, in any event, was to put into practice an ideal of functionality inspired by the analogy between the "living" body of the city-state and the physiology of any "organic" body existing in nature, an analogy he would have assimilated since his first Florentine period given its origins in the neo-Platonic correspondence of microcosm and macrocosm.<sup>40</sup> Naturally, the primacy of the brain over any other member of the body implies a vertical political relationship between a ruler and his subjects.<sup>41</sup> In the two anatomical writings concerning the *sensus communis* as the seat of the soul, the function of the nerves "nel muovere le membra secondo la volontà e il desiderio

<sup>34</sup> See Richard Schofield, "Leonardo's Milanese Architecture: Career, Sources and Graphic Techniques," *Achademia Leonardi Vinci* 4 (1991): 137.

<sup>35</sup> On what follows, see my "Per un lessico politico di Leonardo da Vinci. I. La metafora organologica della città come corpo politico," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 13 (2007): 537–556.

<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, G. U. Arata, *Leonardo architetto e urbanista* (Milan: Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnica, 1953), 43 and Alessandro Vezzosi, *Leonardo, Art Utopia and Science*, foreword by Carlo Pedretti (Florence: Giunti Barbèra, 1987), 16–17.

<sup>37</sup> See Pietro C. Marani, "Urbanistica rinascimentale da Filarete a Palmanova," in *Rinascimento da Brunelleschi a Michelangelo. La rappresentazione dell'architettura*, exhibition catalogue, ed. H. Millon and V. Magnano Lampugnani (Milan: Bompiani, 1994), 540–545; idem, "Leonardo e Leon Battista Alberti," in *Leon Battista Alberti*, exhibition catalogue, ed. J. Rykwert and A. Engel (Milan: Electa, 1994), 358–365.

<sup>38</sup> *Ms B*, f. 16 recto; see *The Manuscripts of Leonardo da Vinci in the Institut de France. Manuscript B*, 30.

<sup>39</sup> See Fausto M. Bongioanni, *Leonardo pensatore*, 197–199.

<sup>40</sup> See the extensive study by André Chastel, *Arte e umanesimo a Firenze al tempo di Lorenzo il Magnifico. Studi sul Rinascimento e sull'umanesimo platonico* (Turin: Einaudi, 1964 [1959]), 412–438.

<sup>41</sup> On the development of organic metaphors in political discourse, see, for instance, Adriana Cavarero, *Corpo in figure. Filosofia e politica della corporeità* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1995), 113–137; Gianluca Briguglia, *Il corpo vivente dello Stato. Una metafora politica* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2006).

del comun senso” (“in moving limbs according to the will and wishes of the *sensus communis*”) is compared to the services of the *uffiziali* that the lord distributes “per varie provincie e città, i quali in essi loghi rappresen- tano e obbediscano alla volontà d’esso signore” (“through several prov- inces and cities, where they represent him and obey his will”). In sum, while Leonardo describes the legal and political paradigm of representa- tion as the foundation of authority, he also highlights its immediacy and the chronological endurance of the mandate: “e quello uffiziale che più in un solo caso abbi obbedito alle commessione fattoli di bocca dal suo signore, farà poi per sé nel medesimo caso cosa che non si partirà dalla volontà d’esso signore” (“that official, who has obeyed his lord’s orders more than one time, will carry out, in that very case, some things that will not leave from his lord’s will”).<sup>42</sup> The complementary text is equally explicit in its comparison of the body-politic of the city-fortress to every living human organism:<sup>43</sup> just as the nerves and muscles of a human being serve the tendons, which in turn serve the *sensus communis*, which in turn serves the soul, so the soldiers of a city-state serve their *condottieri*, who in turn serve their army’s captain, who in turn serves his lord—that is, the political ruler.<sup>44</sup> Leonardo goes on to identify the intellectual *facultas impressiva*, the function of which is to detect external sensorial stimuli, which are later elaborated by the *sensus communis*, with the *referendaria dell’anima*, a medieval term that referred to the inspectors instructed by the Roman Emperor to respond to the grievances of his subjects, under- scoring the organic basis of Leonardo’s political thought.

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<sup>42</sup> *Codex Atlanticus*, f. 327 verso (formerly 119 v-a); see *Il Codice Atlantico*, vol. 1, 564. Some important considerations concerning this text may be found in Claudio Scarpati, *Leonardo scrittore* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2001), 217–218 and 262, n. 23.

<sup>43</sup> See Pietro C. Marani, *L’architettura fortificata*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Windsor Castle, Royal Library, *Corpus of Anatomical Sheets*, f. 19019 recto; see Anna Maria Brizio, *Scritti scelti*, 156.