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Republics in Comparison. Cross-cultural perspectives on Genoa, Venice and the United Provinces in Italian literature (1650–1699)

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ABSTRACT

Italian historiographers of the second half of the seventeenth century often establish parallels between early modern republics, comparing Genoa and Venice with the United Provinces, considered as similar political entities despite their evident political differences. The article, taking into account four different sources, investigates the meaning of those comparisons, published when the absolutist model was taking root all around Europe. In the twilight of the republican state, when the power and reputation of the Italian republics was maybe at its weakest, those comparisons served both as a way to boost a supranational republican identity, and to question the strength of the classical republican constitution. This survey explores how these authors claim that, in order to survive in the Europe of absolute monarchies, those republics have to undergo a radical political change. Only by avoiding splitting the sovereignty among too many subjects, and reinforcing the monarchical element in their constitution, these republican states, no more based on the principle of equality, could compete in the new seventeenth-century political scenario. For this reason, Italian authors looked with great interest, and often celebrated the Dutch republic, considered a stronger government than that of Venice, even if it was regarded as an imperfect republic.

KEYWORDS

Early modern republics; seventeenth-century absolutism; early modern political thought; Italian political writings; Dutch republic; comparisons among constitutions

When we think at early modern republicanism, the critical works of the Cambridge School of Intellectual History immediately spring to mind. Books such as Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* and Quentin Skinner's *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* or *Visions of Politics*¹ have deeply influenced our understanding of Renaissance republican political thought, fostering a significant number of studies, in the last thirty years, on the idea of republicanism as a «shared European heritage».² Their works, focusing mainly volumes they considered masterpieces of republicanism, such as Machiavelli's *Discorsi* or Milton's *Eikonoklastes*, outline a sort of republican theoretical paradigm that connected a long-lasting intellectual tradition, begun in Athens and then developed in republican Rome, Renaissance Florence, English Commonwealth, and capitalized in the constitution of the United States. This paradigm, based on some strong political ideas, such as utter rejection of monarchy, identification of specific republican virtues, celebration of pure liberty, suggests clear dichotomies between early modern republics and monarchies.

However, if we do not deal only with political tracts, surveying other genres of works such as histories, travel reports or literary accounts that are less obvious political, but still express the broader and more concrete political culture of Renaissance republics, things seem less black and

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white.³ If we look at the seventeenth-century works containing comparisons among early modern republics, surprisingly neglected in the study of this shared heritage, this issue comes clearly to light. Such comparisons become very frequent in the second half of the seventeenth-century, when Italian historians and political writers established parallels between Venice, Genoa and the Dutch republic, not only to render the foreign more familiar.⁴

Indeed, this neglected phenomenon, typically addressed only in relation to the later construction of a republican network during the American and French revolutions,⁵ warrants more extensive attention for at least two reasons. First, this parallel among republics is not as neutral or arbitrary as it may appear: at the time, such recurring comparisons were rarely made among monarchies, even those ruled by sovereigns linked by blood ties. Secondly, it demonstrates strong attention to the republic as a form of government, during a period in which Europe was dominated by absolute monarchies and Italian republics were undergoing a crisis that condemned them to political marginality. Why, then, did so many texts advance this comparison?

Since many Italian authors based their accounts on partial, dated or mistaken information about the governments they were describing, they seemed more interested in exploring theoretical weaknesses of the republic as a form of government, and their possible corrections. It is true that, in the seventeenth century, several English authors compared, for instance, the Dutch republic to the smaller Italian ones too, but their comparisons are very different from those developed by Italian men of letters. British philosophers such as the political theorist James Harrington, considered Holland and Genoa very similar from an economic point of view: they both trusted in political neutrality and freedom of commerce to increase their political influence.⁶ However, authors such as Harrington never compare the political structure of these two governments, since they fully recognize a big difference between the Dutch federal regime and the Italian republics, where the local power is centralized. Italian authors seem to neglect this point, and they bear comparison among these two kinds of republics with a political commitment.

During the decades marking the definitive collapse of the sixteenth-century model of the republic on which both Venice and Genoa had built their fortunes,⁷ many Italian historians and political writers were questioning the nature of republican state power and looking through comparative parallels, for alternative models. They did not address this topic in political treatises, but in less common political genres, since they did not develop a full political theory, as in the case of Machiavelli, Hobbes or Milton; they just wanted to offer some possible solutions to the empirical problems that their republics were facing at that time.

In this article, I treat the analogies among republics in Italian texts of the second half of the seventeenth century as the foundation for a sort of republican conceptual network. This network could be properly defined, borrowing an expression Merio Scattola has used to describe communication within early modern political contexts, as a 'discourse community' [*comunità di discorso*],⁸ since it entailed sharing the same ideas and values, rather than geopolitical common interests beyond national borders. By virtue of this community, republican states both self-identified and were externally identified as twin bodies, despite their many and considerable differences. Such parallels were part of a strategy of political representation meant to strengthen a transnational early modern republican ideology, but also to call into question its cogency in an age dominated by great monarchies, debating whether the republican model could be even deeply adulterated in order to survive.

This article will focus on four Italian authors who published their works between 1650 and 1699, fully representative of the different typologies of Italian historiography and political writings of the time, since they were a delegate of the republic of Genoa, two historians in the service of a royal and a republican court respectively, and a staunch supporter of monarchy. Using these texts as case studies, I will argue that Italian comparisons during this time had a twofold aim: to reaffirm and boost their states' political identities in the twilight of the republican state; second, to find an alternative republican model, that could endure in an age of absolute monarchy. They looked to

the United Provinces with great interest for both these objectives, even misunderstanding the real shape of the Dutch republican constitution.

Indeed, in framing Genoa, Venice and the Dutch republic as similar entities, such authors support a republicanism that does not totally match with the one framed by Machiavelli or Harrington. For instance they assert that republican states were superior to monarchies not for their republican values, such as liberty and civic virtues, but in that they worked for the common European good and made decisions that were not only about individual benefit. These authors all envisioned neighbouring monarchies to be common, threatening enemies envious of republican expansion, not only for military reasons but also on an ideological basis. They looked to proximate republican states for solutions, especially with regard to what was pervasively considered the biggest problem faced by seventeenth century republics: the innate lack of a clearly defined locus of sovereignty. In response to this problem, a consensus gradually emerged, especially in the last quarter of the century, that, to survive in the Europe of absolute monarchies republics needed to negotiate a strong identity, and even constitutionally adopt monarchic qualities.

1. Establishing a republican network

Since the first decades of the seventeenth century played an important role within the Genoese political context, dominated by the conflict between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ aristocrats, a third current, that of *repubblichisti*, launched by Uberto Foglietta (1518–1581), an opponent of the absolutistic politics and personal power of Andrea Doria (1466–1550).⁹ The *repubblichisti* program called for political independence from the Spanish kingdom, with the aim of ending the internal factional division of the aristocratic families. They carried out a naval and commercial expansion project that extended beyond the Mediterranean, and believed it was necessary to institute a sumptuary law.¹⁰

Within the political dissertations published by the *repubblichisti*, anti-Spanish propaganda was often developed through the identification of other republican models for the Genoese constitution, and general reference to a sort of republican legacy. Genoa’s complex relationship with the republic of Venice confirms this statement. From the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century, the rapport between Genoa and Venice was marked by a strong rivalry that also led to military conflicts, largely motivated by the Genoese aspiration to intervene in the Venetian sphere of influence over the East and the Black sea. After Genoese loss of the Greek island of Chios, which it had controlled until 1566, competitiveness with Venice decreased drastically, and a period of ‘mutual indifference’ began, demonstrated by the almost complete absence of diplomatic relations between the two polities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹¹

Given the context of indifference, as the *repubblichisti* searched for a different republican model upon which to base reforms, the constitution of the old opponent became fair game. Venice was particularly attractive because it was able to protect itself from internal conspiracy plots – the worst plague of the Genoese republic in the first half of the seventeenth century – but also because of its international influence. Moreover, Venice served as the perfect example of a republic in which there was real equality among patricians, and its political service was inspired by the moral quest for the public good, as the Genoese Andrea Spinola (1562–1631) has shown.¹²

At the half of the century, Giovanni Bernardo Veneroso (1604–1685), one of the most influential Genoese politicians, who catalyzed the ‘navalist’ politics adopted in subsequent decades, when the alliance with Spain became weaker, strongly supported the *repubblichisti*’s position,¹³ claiming the need of aligning with Venice, which at that time opposed the Ottoman Empire in the war of Candia. He illustrated his political ideas, and his concrete proposal of sending some Genoese warships in Crete to support the ancient republican enemy, in a 1650 book titled *Il genio ligure risvegliato* [The Ligurian aptitude reawakened]. Beginning in the dedication, the author defined Venice as the defender of Christian Europe, and supported naval alliance with that republic to defeat the Turks and renew Genoa’s glorious past.

Since, in our century, the Ottoman Empire is expanding its influence more than ever before, and in these days they are making efforts to overwhelm that undefeated republic [Venice], which is battling alone in defense of the Christianity, reaffirming its old value and the cowardice of the enemy, I undertook to support the need for a naval armament of Genoa. Thanks to this action, we will benefit all Christianity, repress the Turkish pride, bring an appropriate help to the queen of the Adriatic, and finally restore the ancient glory of our Liguria.¹⁴

Together with its celebration of the Venetian republic, the book also praised other old and early modern republican states, which were often labelled by the author as twins or copies of the *Serenissima* Venice. The Venice model so deeply permeated Veneroso's thought, that he depicted even Genoa, his birthplace, with the characteristics of the ancient myth of Venice; after surveying Genoa's ancient and medieval history, he asserted it had always been free and had often played the role of Christian shelter against the Turkish expansion, just like Venice.¹⁵ Transferring to Genoa the fiction of Venetian original liberty,¹⁶ Veneroso made an effort to prove that Genoa had never been subject to another state. Conquered and ruled for only a couple of years in 205 B. C. by the Carthaginian Mago, who were defeated and casted out by Publio Cornelius Scipius, according to Veneroso Genoa had remained free even during the Roman period and also had retained its liberty during the Gothic invasions, the Langobardic occupation, and Charlemagne's empire.¹⁷

From this perspective, the battle against the Ottoman Empire represented the republic of Genoa's only means of safeguarding its key values, since the Turks threatened not only the Christian world but also Genoese liberty.¹⁸ In his speech, meant to persuade the Genoese governors to support the Venetian fleet, Veneroso drew from natural law theory and the metaphor of body politic to argue that Genoa act to help Venice preserve the liberty and health of the *Respublica Christiana*. He likened this aid to assisting a twin limb, in the name of their 'common nature':

According to the natural law, you should make a move, since nothing is more natural than helping a friend, which represents a part of our common nature. Thus, we see with the different limbs that one helps the other to preserve the body, not only agreeing with that to safeguard the whole body, but assisting the one who hurts not to suffer the same illness in its turn. Both Italy and the Christian republic are facing the same dangers, and even if they occur first only to one of them, the other only enjoy the advantage promised by Polyphemus to Ulysses, that of being devoured last.¹⁹

Veneroso's linking of the Genoese and Venetian republics also aimed to celebrate the republican state as a political model in which governors ensured the public, and not private, good. Indeed, in his *Genio ligure risvegliato*, we find a lengthy celebration of the republican state, from the Athenian democracy to the Dutch republic, which presents a republican model very similar to that of Genoa. Within this lineage, Veneroso identified the Dutch republic as the successor of the Italian maritime republics, since it was established on the industriousness of its citizens and on naval trade.²⁰ For Veneroso, old and modern republics found their economic and political stability through diligence and productivity, thanks to which they had enough money to fund in defensive or offensive wars, and to invest in other activities for the good of the state.²¹

Such as Genoa and Venice, the Dutch republic is included in this community of early modern republics, established on the same economic and ethical principles, such as industry, defense of common good, and naval power. Veneroso ignored the historical conflicts among these republics on purpose: even if Genoa and Venice were opponents until the previous century, and the Dutch republic aligned with the Genoa's rival party in the thirty years' war, concluded in 1648, he considers them part of the same coalition, since they were all republics.

2. The matter of sovereignty within republican states

It seems as if the Italian historians who upheld this comparison between republican states in the second half of the seventeenth century, were engaged in discovering the perfect republic, such as Dante, in his *De vulgari eloquentia*, compared several vernaculars in order to find the flawless idiom. One of them was Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato (1606–1678), who was born in Vicenza, in

the republic of Venice. Following in his father's footsteps, Priorato became a professional soldier, fighting in the siege of Breda (1624–1625) as part of the Dutch army led by John of Nassau. He led a highly adventurous life: after having enlisted with the French army for the 1628 *Grand Siègne de La Rochelle* against the Huguenots, he boarded Maurice of Nassau's vessel direct for Brazil only to abandon the endeavour, and later enrolling in the Habsburg army of Ferdinand II.²² In 1640, Priorato published his first historical account, a history of the war led by Ferdinand II and his son Ferdinand III. From that year onwards, he combined his political involvement in different regimes – the republic of Venice, the French kingdom,²³ and the queen Christine of Sweden²⁴ – with historical writing, until, in 1663, he became the official historiographer of the Habsburg court in Wien.

Priorato did not write political treatises, but rather precise reports, titled *Relazioni*, on the life and culture of kingdoms and republics, often based on first-hand knowledge of historical deeds and places he described.²⁵ In 1668, he published two such accounts: one on the Dutch republic and one on that of Genoa, two states he knew personally, having lived in both. Even if Priorato did not establish an explicit parallel between the two regimes, a close reading of the two *Relazioni* reveals his belief that the two governments had several elements in common.

According to Priorato, there were some formal similarities between these two republican governments and their agencies, political councils, and public offices. For instance, the executive power was a plenary assembly, whose members were elected (the *States-General* in the Dutch republic, the *Maggior Consiglio* in Genoa) led by a rotating president (the *doge* in Genoa).²⁶ Moreover, these assemblies were charged with the same powers and responsibilities, such as presiding over the assembly's sessions, meeting foreign ambassadors, and giving orders to republic delegates.

While cataloguing the main strengths of Genoa and the Dutch republic, Priorato wrote almost the same things. He recognized that Dutch power was due to the state's richness, grown through maritime commerce, and he judged Dutch wealth second only to perhaps that of the French or the German kingdoms. In illustrating Dutch prosperity, Priorato painted an idyllic picture, stating that in the United Provinces no tax seemed to worry Dutch people, despite how high, and that thanks to these necessary funds, even the Low Countries plebs were wealthy.²⁷ He particularly admired Amsterdam's new buildings, designed by architect Hendrick de Keyser beginning in 1612 and requiring heavy expenditure; he depicted them as making the modern Amsterdam an heir of ancient Rome.²⁸ Another great advantage of the Dutch republic consisted in its location, which provided natural impressive protection against enemy attack: being encircled by the sea, crossed by several rivers, and defended by a perimeter of impressive walls, it was virtually unconquerable.²⁹

In his *Relazione* on Genoa Priorato listed the same advantages. In Genoa the prosperity of the state also derived from maritime commerce, which was the 'soul of the city': pursued by all, but particularly by noblemen, who Priorato noted had profited off this trade so much that some had become richer than several European princes.³⁰ Moreover, Priorato argued that its enviable natural position made Genoa impregnable by siege; it was situated between the sea and the mountains and protected by a new fortification constantly monitored by soldiers.³¹

Yet, when he turned to describing the Dutch republic's weaknesses, Priorato stressed its commercial attitude and insatiable thirst for profit, which he suggested could also represent a serious vulnerability. Indeed, with the purpose of expanding their business, the Dutch formed a commercial alliance with the Turks,³² without considering the danger coming of supporting a fierce enemy of Christianity.³³ Here the Venetian background of the author and its influence on his political and historical judgements comes to the surface. Priorato always considered the Ottoman Empire the biggest threat for Europe, to the extent that he celebrated several non-Venetian citizens, such as Veneroso, for their attempt to help Venice in the war of Candia.³⁴

A part from this bias, it is worth nothing that Priorato enumerated also the same weaknesses for both republics. He believed both the Dutch republic and Genoa were likely to fall victim to the envy of the European monarchies. Foreign kings, often linked by blood ties and largely motivated by political interests, might be keen to curb Dutch expansion. As the author reported in his *Relatione* on Genoa, the Duke of Savoy and the King of France had already proven to have such intentions with

regard to Genoa between 1620 and 1630,³⁵ supporting conspiracies and financing military campaigns against the republic. Priorato likewise predicted a possible future alliance between Louis XIV and Charles II against the rising Dutch republic.³⁶

Priorato also noticed that in both republics the entities that seemed to hold the real power to determine state's policies were outside the official civic government. In the Dutch republic, it was the Prince of Orange; in Genoa, it was the noble party, especially the so-called old nobility, which ruled the republic such as it was an oligarchy. Priorato's description therefore suggests that these two governments were not perfect republics, because they allowed for the presence of external political bodies to significantly dominate their sovereignty and destabilize or concretely alter their constitution. In this sense, both Genoa and the United Province adopted, according to Priorato, a republican politics far less noticeable than that of Venice, in which the people's choices were fully represented by the Doge, who implemented the decisions taken by the popular assemblies.³⁷ In fact, in his opinion, the state's sovereignty of the republic of Genoa resided in the hand of noble families ('the highest authority of the republic resided with the noble families'),³⁸ whereas he argued that in the United Provinces, the Prince of Orange retained all the rights and privileges of a king, lacking access only to the treasury:

The Prince of Orange cannot mint coins within the United Provinces; but except from this brand of authority, in any other thing it seems apparently that he holds the sovereignty.³⁹

The Dutch prince and the Genoese nobility represented a danger for the constitutions of the republics, because at any time they could subvert the form of government, or abuse of their private power. In the Dutch case, he foresaw a sharp conflict between the Prince, who desired the same power held by his ancestors, and some provinces wanting to guard their freedom:

The other concern, and the most annoying one, is the claim of the Prince of Orange to be put back in the place of its ancestors, who had the royal leadership in the government and in all the affairs of the Republic. Perhaps the Prince will presume to maintain those privileges, causing big accidents in the life of the Republic. Holland, which is the province that most pays attention to the public benefit, and thoroughly considers how things can develop, will be unlikely to allow the presence of a perpetual Dictator, and will oppose to any other province who eventually will aim to appoint him great Admiral or General Captain such as his ancestors.⁴⁰

An important lesson therefore emerge from analysing Priorato's comparison between Genoa and the Dutch republic. He saw both Genoa and the United Provinces as imperfect republics, which included entities with the power to alter the republican constitution. These two republics, mirrored, in his opinion, two different degeneration of the perfect republican model, that of the contemporary Venice, in which the power was equally distributed to several subjects, meant to represent faithfully the people's will: such internal conflicts could not even exist there. In light of all this, he stated that Venice, whose political decisions aimed to benefit all the European nations, 'was at that time, and had always been the throne of political wisdom'.⁴¹

Moreover, Priorato's prediction of the Prince of Orange's potential interference with the Dutch republican constitution was untimely, and probably due to an inadequate knowledge of the Dutch political system, since, at that time the United Provinces was experiencing its so-called period of *True Liberty* (1650–1672), and the authority of the *Stadtholder* was at its nadir.⁴² This lack of awareness reflects a parallel lack of interest toward the real historical situation of the Dutch context: what counted most for Priorato, a Venetian citizen working for several royal courts, was to prove that a republic that conceded a portion of its sovereignty to some private subjects was in danger of disappearing in the Europe of great monarchies.

3. Aristocratic and royal republics

The concerns about sovereignty within republican states, carried out through these comparisons, were mirrored also in the work of Gregorio Leti (1630–1701), who lived in several Italian cities,

including Milan, Venice, and Turin, before arriving in Geneva, where he became a Calvinist. Leti then lived in France – where he refused to become the royal historiographer in order to avoid converting to Catholicism – London, and then Amsterdam, where he died in 1701. During his life, he published more than sixty books, some of which were translated into different languages and became European bestsellers.

Leti published several historical accounts of many nation states, just like Priorato.⁴³ In those works, he mirrored the same worries expressed by Priorato towards the lack of complete sovereignty of the republic of Genoa. For instance, his *Visioni politiche* [*Political insights*], written in 1671, when he was still in Geneva, supported and provided justification for some contemporary pamphlets containing political dissent against the Genoese government. In this treatise, Leti included a historical document that provided evidence for the opposition's argument, the *Manifesto* authored by Genoese nobleman Giovan Paolo Balbi, who tried to organize a conspiracy against the republic in 1648.⁴⁴

Balbi's *Manifesto* contested the ruling power of the Genoese nobility, which was identified as greedy and eager to leverage public power in order to have private benefits. The author asserted that sovereignty lie with the people, who temporarily transferred their power to the nobility who were to represent their interests, following the theory of contractualism.⁴⁵ However, since the noblemen, looking for their private profit, failed to comply with their contractual obligations, Balbi argued they should give their power back to people. Openly aiming to incite the Genoese to violent riot against the republican government, Balbi depicted a social context of widespread corruption, tyranny, and the absence of liberty:

The purpose, therefore, which led my actions and my words, is that of soliciting the riot of the oppressed people, putting an end to the research for private interests of the actual leading class and to the corruption of the republican officials. These unbearable burdens were gave to the Genoese people in return for their decision to grant the nobility with the royal mantle of the supreme authority, since every republic which is not based on equality is deprived of any kind of freedom.⁴⁶

The fact that Leti reported Balbi's manuscript in its entirety, without distancing himself from the authors' thesis reveals his endorsement. Furthermore, Leti later took the same opinion expressed by Balbi in his first-hand reporting on Genoese politics, writing that Genoa was not free, since its closeness with the Spanish kingdom and the despotism of its ruling class prevented any kind of liberty.⁴⁷ Still more interesting is Leti's judgement in the first volume of *Raguagli storici e politici* [*Historical and Political Reports*], published in Amsterdam in 1699, that Genoa was no longer a republic. He argued that it had become an aristocracy, in which the people considered themselves subjects, as in a kingdom:

With the passing of time, that republic which was the citizens' homeland became a noblemen's homeland. It converted into an aristocratic government, and the love of Genoese people towards their city cooled down, not preserving but that loyalty which the subject must have towards his sovereign. Thus, the aristocrats, became arrogant for their supremacy, took care only of enriching themselves, acquiring titles and territories in several states, in order not to be subject of the foreign princes, neglectful of being citizens of a republic.⁴⁸

Therefore, like Priorato, Leti does not consider Genoa a full republic, but his vision is far more negative and caustic, arguing that the Genoese aristocracy had already led to collapse the republican system. In contrast, Leti enthusiastically praised the Venetian and the Dutch governments in his *Teatro belgico*, a wide-ranging historical dissertation published in two volumes in 1683, after he had moved to Amsterdam, and clearly inspired by one of Priorato's other account of the United Provinces: *Teatro del Belgio*.

Yet here the perspective differs starkly from Priorato. In fact, according to Leti, the Prince of Orange posed no danger to the republican constitution; he was rather a benefactor and guarantor of peace and freedom within the republic. Praising the United Provinces as the land of liberty, in which words such as censorship and tyranny were meaningless, the celebratory vision outlined in Leti's work was of course connected to the author's move to Amsterdam.⁴⁹ Leti maintained

that the wealth and happiness of the country were not results of the Dutch system's championing of the value of freedom: the United Provinces were successful thanks to the Prince of Orange, William III. Leti described William as a king who demonstrated moderation and a hero in the name of liberty, since he had decided not to assume absolute power, in 1672, despite being applauded and encouraged by several Dutch provinces:

Several frightened cities, thinking that they could find no other means to preserve the republic than to confer the whole government to the prince, began to hail him, aiming to take him on the throne, almost against his own will. They asked him to exercise a free authority, dismissing the elected offices and hiring new ones, according to his wishes. In order to appoint William king of Holland, it was required only the consensus of the city of Amsterdam, which ... even if was not in compliance with the use of discretionary power that he exercised in other provinces, agreed on giving him the title of *Stathouder* that belonged to his father. However, the prince demonstrated a noble moderation, because he did not accept the proposal of that sovereignty that some provinces offered to him, being satisfied with this appointment.⁵⁰

Refusing to demand the power held by his ancestors, the prince showed not only his respect for the Dutch freedom, but had also, according to Leti, helped preserve the republic from external attacks. In fact, he argued that other European monarchs had not assaulted this republican government only because they esteemed that Prince, who preserved monarchical authority within the United Provinces, despite the fact that state sovereignty lay in the States-General.⁵¹

According to Leti's survey of the history of ancient and modern republics, the United Provinces represented an anomalous and unique case. While other republics – such as Rome, Florence and almost Venice under the doge Marin Faliero⁵² – dissolved and lost their liberty when they gave too much power to a single person, the Dutch saved and reinforced themselves by granting supreme authority over the republic to the Prince of Orange.⁵³ Within this context, Leti established clear comparisons among republics, in order to outline a perfect, ideal republican template. For instance, he compared Genoa and the Dutch republic to assume that political power should be split among few subject, avoiding in such a way the conflicts among different parties:

The Dutch were able to arrange in a so refined way their government that they opted for giving a huge authority to one person and, in the same time, they made his power useless without the consent of the *States General*, to which he was subject. Indeed, nothing waste the liberty of a republic, more than the presence of several people who are powerful and granted of great authority, since the envy among them, and their ambition, will cause divisions and civil conflicts. If you read the *Malattie politiche della Repubblica di Genova*, you will understand that this republic lost any liberty, since the most powerful families began to clash.⁵⁴

In another passage, comparing Venice and the Dutch Republic, he argued that republican states have the mission of safeguarding the life of other European states, not only their wealth. Conversely to monarchies, led by princes who looked only for their private advantages, republics worked also for the common good:

Both Venice and the Dutch republic give effect to the principle of preserving their safety while looking for the safety of all the other European states. Whence, they often have succeeded in their undertakings, since it is true that God bless those who care the common good. Moreover, it is not disputed that, if also other governments had helped these republic, in the most difficult situations, several revolutions and wars in many kingdoms would never have happened.⁵⁵

Thanks to the introduction within its constitution of a royal figure, the Dutch republic did not only preserve its republican heritage and values, but it also improved its political system, strengthening the innate alliance with other republican states and safeguarding itself from the attacks of other nation states ruled by monarchs.

4. The fate of a republican state jeopardized by monarchies

The overall impression of Italian authors, echoed on several occasions in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, is that republican states, as they were conceived in the sixteenth century,

could no more survive. As the years passed, and the political influence of Genoa and Venice became lower in Europe, it is felt that republics have to change radically their form in order to stay alive.⁵⁶ Whereas Leti believed that a royal republic could be stronger, other authors thought that they had to submit themselves to the protection of greater monarchies.

Gian Paolo Marana (1642–1693) was one of them: born in Genoa of a noble family, he fled to Paris in 1681, in flight from the ruling aristocracy and censorship authorities.⁵⁷ In France, Marana became an enthusiastic supporter of French expansionist politics, and wrote several books meant to celebrate and legitimize the supremacy of the French monarchy in Europe. In 1685, he anonymously published in Amsterdam an interesting dialogue between the cities of Genoa and Algiers, both of which had been destroyed by the French army. The work – attributed to Leti between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries⁵⁸ – depicted the miserable state of the two cities after the French bombing, which took place in Algiers in 1682 and in Genoa in 1684. In this fictitious dialogue, Algiers, having already suffered a devastating French attack,⁵⁹ reproaches Genoa for remaining obstinately faithful to its alliance with Spain. According to Marana, the republic had lost his freedom at that decision, becoming a subject province of the Spanish kingdom. This point is evident in the incisive question Algiers poses to Genoa:

For God's sake, my dear Genoa, you are more Castilian than the Spanish king! However, I cannot understand your politics. Why did you so easily allow that Spain converted you in its slave, if you proudly claim to be free?⁶⁰

In his *Dialogo* the author recognized that, in order to survive, a small republic such as Genoa could only undergo the political influence of a bigger kingdom; nevertheless, he argues that Genoa chose the wrong ally, by preferring Spain to France. Marana suggests that Genoa should follow the model of the much more powerful and wealthy Dutch republic, which capitulated to Louis XIV after the Franco-Dutch war:

Goodbye Genoa, please consider my advice, but before considering it, remember what the first and most powerful republic ever in the universe has done. The Dutch have been smarter, they appeased the soul of the great Louis. They humiliated themselves and obeyed the strongest, and your dear Spanish could not prevent the bombs from falling into your city and destroying it.⁶¹

According to Marana, a devoted subject of Louis XIV, early modern republics – even if they are strong and rich as the United Provinces – are destined, at the end of the seventeenth century, to surrender to the more powerful monarchies: the only choice they have is whether to be subjugated by the French king or by a less powerful sovereign.

5. The meaning of an inter-republican comparison. Some final remarks

Whether written by republican offices or by well-travelled Italian historians, and whether displaying clear preference for republican government, or supporting monarchy, the seventeenth-century texts surveyed above all agreed about the presence of an ancestral, naturally rooted resentment between monarchies and republics. They moreover expressed a consensus that geographical or political proximity to powerful monarchic states was one of the main existential risks for republican constitutions, one that seemed to threaten both Genoa and the United Provinces. Republics were in empirical fact always surrounded by neighbouring monarchies, and in the perceived conflict between the two political forms, they were always understood to be in the weaker position.

Yet, these texts also suggest a sense of solidarity or sisterhood among seventeenth century republics, which were judged to be common bodies led by similar principles and willing to sacrifice private advantages in order to preserve the European good. Indeed, the manner in which Veneroso's pamphlet consciously attempted to establish a sort of political network among republican states by emphasizing early modern republics as identical entities linked by innate ties and common political objectives, was very similar to how Marana presented different

republics as almost identical polities, even though the latter aimed to criticize the republican form of government. Conversely, Leti and Priorato, examining the different republican states and even expressing dissimilar judgments on them, both sought an ideal republican model in their comparisons of Venice, Genoa and the United Provinces. All of these texts acknowledged the existence of a strong republican identity linking the republics they mentioned, despite dissimilarities among constitutions and habits.

Moreover, in seventeenth century Italian historiography, Genoa and the United Provinces, unlike Venice, were imperfect republics, because their centres of power could attempt to block freedom in the state. The power of the Genoese nobility was often considered detrimental in these decades of the republic's significant political decline, whereas the Dutch republic's prince was regarded, at least according to Leti, as the greatest resource of that far more healthy republic. According to these historians, the main flaw of oligarchic republic, ruled by noble families, lay in the factional division naturally generated by splitting power among several subjects. Conversely, the authority of the prince was considered to be the greatest virtue of the Dutch political system: with executive power carried by a single person, the threat of possible internal conflicts was thought to be eliminated. In this sense, the dominant model of seventeenth century absolute monarchy seems to have deeply permeated even the thinking of republican authors, to the extent that they maintain that contemporary republics have better chances of survival if they maintain strong monarchical elements in their constitutions.

Finally, these texts suggest that the biggest concern for Italian historiographers was the locus of sovereignty within seventeenth century republican states. Their solutions to this problem, however, were ambiguous and sometimes multiple. Monarchical states appeared stronger than republican ones, because those systems of government clearly defined where sovereignty was located: with the king. This is why the new constitution of the United Provinces – according to these Italian authors based not on equality but on the introduction of a royal figure who ruled together with the States General – enabled it to contend with Venice for the title of best republican model in this period.

In short, this survey shows how Italian republics at that time tried to adapt to the political crisis and to the loss of international influence they were facing, and to address the crisis of the republic as a form of government in that age of triumphant absolutism. Often they looked at the Dutch government as a model not for its commercial strength, but for their political constitution. In a paradoxical way these Italian authors do not praise what is more typical of the Dutch republican system, that is their federal status, a key element for balancing the political power, but they appreciate the presence of a centralizing figure, such as the Prince of Orange, probably overestimating his authority. This clearly means that, celebrating the Dutch constitution through this distorted lens, they were demanding for more monarchical elements within the Italian republican constitutions. Leti thus enthusiastically supported the Dutch regime for reasons beyond mere expediency: a sort of monarchical republic, in his opinion, could overcome the natural fragility of the republican constitution in that age of great monarchies. In light of all this, we can see how, in the second half of the seventeenth-century, with the decline of Italian republics, republicanism is not so strictly linked to the political theory of Machiavelli or Milton, but it takes up issues that come from the empirical contemporary political situation.

Such Italian comparisons among republics thus served not only as a discourse that could be mobilized for immediate political interest, but a strategy of political communication with more radical ideological aims, meant to offer a solution to help reverse the incontrovertible decline of contemporary republican states. By observing the slow but steady fall of the Italian republics at the hands of neighbouring monarchies, Italian authors claimed a republican supranational legacy that, gradually questioning and sidelining the models offered by Genoa and Venice, looked to the Dutch system as an antidote to that republican crisis even if it meant upheaval of the republican constitution.

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Notes

1. Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. I, 139–192; Id., *Visions of Politics*, vol. II, 1–212. On and Skinner's methodology, see R. Whatmore, *Quentin Skinner*, 97–112.
2. I am referring to the title of a very important collection of studies on early modern republicanism: M. van Gelderen – Q. Skinner (eds.), *Republicanism*. Historians have not always accepted the idea of republicanism as a «shared European heritage». For example, Venturi, refusing the concept of an early modern transnational republicanism based on the same ideological principles, asserts that with this term scholars often connect historical realities which were very differentiated, complex and sometimes inconsistent (F. Venturi, *Utopia e riforma*, 107–13). On Venturi's participation to this debate on early modern republicanism, see M. Albertone, *Repubblica e repubbliche*, 153–4.
3. On this point, see also M. Herrero Sánchez, *Líneas de análisis*, 17–92.
4. On this strategy, see Ryan, *Assimilating New Worlds*, 519–83; Howard, *Bettrice's Monkey*, 325–39.
5. During the American and the French revolution the popularity of these comparisons was enhanced, endorsing the definition of 'sister republics' for different republican states considered to share the same ideology. On this point, see Fitz, *Our Sister Republics*, 9–11; Kapossy, *Republican Futures*, 293–4; Oddens and Rutjes, *The Political Culture of the Sister Republics*, 26.
6. Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, 5.
7. On the cultural and political crisis which occurred to Genoa and Venice in the seventeenth century, see at least Cozzi, *Venezia barocca*; Graziosi, *Lancio ed eclissi di una capitale barocca*.
8. Scattola, *Zu einer europäischen Wissenschaftsgeschichte der Politik*, 23–54.
9. Savelli, *Tra Machiavelli e S. Giorgio*, 275–301.
10. Bitossi, *Città, Repubblica e nobiltà*, 18–20; Costantini, *Politica e storiografia*, 93–135.
11. Assereto, *Lo sguardo di Genova su Venezia*, 96–7.
12. This was the opinion of one of the most relevant *repubblichisti*, Andrea Spinola, clearly stated in Spinola, *Scritti scelti*, 81–3.
13. Lo Basso, *Diaspora e armamento marittimo*, 137–56.
14. Veneroso, *Genio ligure risvegliato*, π2v [Vedendosi nel nostro secolo più che mai dilatata la potenza Ottomana, e sentendosi in questi di nuovi sforzi guerrieri fatti dalla medesima per abbattere quell'invitta Repubblica, che con essa da sé sola cozzando, raccorda a Christiani in un tempo medesimo, ed il proprio valore, e la viltà del nimico; ho intrapreso il discorrere di quell'armamento marittimo che potrebbe non meno a favore di tutta la Christianità, rintuzzar l'orgoglio d'un sì potente avversario, che recare opportuni soccorsi alla combattuta Regina dell'Adria, e rinovare le antiche gloria alla nostra Liguria].
15. Veneroso, *Genio ligure risvegliato*, 6. On the myth of Venice as a Christian bastion against the Turkish expansion and on the complex and sometimes ambiguous relationship of the Republic with the Ottoman Empire, see Preto, *Venezia e i turchi*. On the Genoese figurative representation of their long-lasting conflict against the Turks in defense of Christianity, see Stagno, *Triumphing over the Enemy*, 145–88.
16. Gaeta, *Alcune considerazioni sul mito di Venezia*, 58–75; Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty*; Haitsma Mulier, *The Myth of Venice and Dutch Republican Thought*, 77–119; Benzoni, *Venezia tra mito e realtà*, 1–25; Landwehr, *Die Erschaffung Venedigs*.
17. 'Therefore, if there are no evidences that Genoa was possessed neither by the Goths, nor by the Lombards, nor by the Carolingians, then it can be reasonably said that they should never have been subjected' [Se dunque non si trova testimonio veruno che dica essere stata Genova possesa né dai Gothi, né dai Longobardi, né dai Carolini, si può dunque con molta ragione pronontiare che giamai loro sia stata suddita], Veneroso, *Genio ligure risvegliato*, 5.
18. According to Veneroso, the Turks jeopardized 'that liberty, which, given as natural heritage to all human beings, and offered by God for our great happiness, had been put before any other richness or empire by generous princes and every wise man' [quella libertà, che data per Patrimonio dalla natura a tutti i viventi, e dal Cielo concessa in terra per la maggior beatitudine e felicità che provar vi si possa, ben con ragione è stata, da' Principi magnanimi e da' saggi privati alla vita istessa, non che ad ogni delitia, ricchezza e Impero in ogni tempo anteposta], Veneroso, *Genio ligure risvegliato*, 33.
19. Veneroso, *Genio ligure risvegliato*, 34 [Per legge di natura egli è certo che muoverti dovereste poiché nulla è più naturale che l'aiutare quel compagno che in sé costituisce una parte della nostra comune natura. Così vediamo nelle membra che l'uno aiuta l'altro per difesa del corpo, e che non solo l'uno s'accorda con l'altro per la conservazione del tutto, ma che se alcuno in qualche parte patisce, l'altro per non percolare con esso

naturalmente il soccorre; e pure i pericoli dell'Italia e della Repubblica Christiana sono comuni, e per quanto arrivino all'uno prima che all'altro, non riceve però altro vantaggio l'ultimo dal primo che di goder la cortesia che ad Ulisse promise Polifemo di esser per l'ultimo divorato].

20. 'In less remote times the Venetian Republic, the Genoese and the Pisan, and according to me the Dutch one, soon expanded thanks to their industriousness and the nautical practise'[a tempi meno rimoti la Veneta, la Genovese e la Pisana, e a gli occhi nostri l'Olandese, con l'industria e co' nautici esercitj in breve tempo si dilatarono], Veneroso, *Genio ligure risvegliato*, 21.
21. Veneroso, *Genio ligure risvegliato*, 120.
22. For Priorato's biography see: Gullino, *Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato*, 162–7.
23. He had been the personal secretary of Cardinal Giulio Mazzarino between 1652 and 1656. On his connections with the French culture of the time, see Toso Rodinis, *Gualdo Priorato, un moralista veneto*.
24. Priorato had been probably the most famous contemporary biographer of Queen Christine, who first narrated her conversion to Catholicism in his *Historia della sacra real maestà Christina Alessandra regina di Svezia*, published in Rome in 1656. Afterwards he performed several diplomatic missions for Christine. On Priorato's role as chronicler of the life of the queen and of the Roman cultural life, see Vegelli, *Roma in scena e dietro le quinte*, 93–112.
25. On the historical genre of the *relazione*, with particular reference to the work of Priorato, see Sodini, *Scrivere e compire*.
26. Gualdo Priorato, *Relatione delle Provincie Unite*, 6–8; Id., *Relatione della città di Genova*, 86–90.
27. Priorato, *Relatione delle Provincie Unite*, 47.
28. Priorato, *Relatione delle Provincie Unite*, 122.
29. Priorato, *Relatione delle Provincie Unite*, 57.
30. Priorato, *Relatione della città di Genova*, 69.
31. Priorato, *Relatione della città di Genova*, 7–8.
32. On this commercial partnership, see Bulut, *Ottoman-Dutch economic relations*.
33. Priorato, *Relatione delle Provincie Unite*, 90–2.
34. Priorato, *Scena d'huomini illustri d'Italia*, 346–52.
35. Priorato, *Relatione della città di Genova*, 4.
36. Priorato, *Relatione delle Provincie Unite*, 95.
37. Priorato, *Scena d'huomini illustri*, *1v.
38. [La somma autorità della Repubblica è appresso le famiglie nobili] Priorato, *Relatione della città di Genova*, 86.
39. [Il Principe d'Oranges non poteva far batter danari nel Paese delle Sette provincie unite; ma toltone questa marca di sovranità, in tutte l'altre cose pareva n'havesse qualche apparenza], Priorato, *Relatione delle Provincie Unite*, 39.
40. [L'altra <preoccupazione>, e la più fastidiosa, è la pretensione del principe d'Oranges, ch'egli può haver d'esser rimesso nel posto, e cariche godute dalli suoi Antenati, i quali havendo havuta sempre la Principal direzione nel governo e negli affari della Republica, si può creder che pretenderà mantenersi forsi in dette prerogative, e da ciò potrebbe sorgere novità stavaganti. L'Olanda, che più d'ogn'altra Provincia invigila al publico beneficio, e che perciò pondera con maturo Consiglio ciò che può esser partorito dal tempo, e dalle congiunture, si può dubitar non sia per assentir che nella Republica sia (come si suol dire) un Dittator perpetuo, e che però possa esser contraria ad ogn'una dell'altre, che proponesse doversi eleggerlo grand'Ammiraglio e Capitan Generale come furono i suoi maggiori], Priorato, *Relatione delle Provincie Unite*, 96–7.
41. [Fu sempre, e hora più che mai è la Republica Serenissima di Venezia ammirata per vero Seggio della Sapienza politica], Priorato, *Scena d'huomini illustri*, *2r.
42. On the period of *True Liberty* and on the debate about the role of the *Stadtholder* in those years, see Rowen, *The Princes of Orange*, 95–130; Stern, *The Orangist Myth*, 33–51; Weststeyn, *Commercial Republicanism in the Dutch Golden Age*, 41–57, 236–41.
43. On Leti's political accounts, see Barcia, *Un politico dell'età barocca*. Leti also published anti-Catholic pamphlets attacking Roman corruption, such his *Puttanismo romano* (1668) and fictionalized biographies of popes, kings, and well-known courtiers. On his satiric and libertine pamphlets, see Solfaroli Camillocci, *L'attività editoriale de Gregorio Leti à Genève*, 47–69; Romei, *Secolo settimodecimo*, 217–64, 307–14.
44. On Balbi's conspiracy plot, see Bitossi, *Il governo dei magnifici*, 256–70.
45. 'The sovereignty of the Republic originally resided with the people, not with the nobility. Thus, although the people decided to transfer its power to the aristocracy, it did not therefore intend to renounce to its sovereignty forever, so that the aristocrats could always rule the Republic according to their will'. [Il Dominio della Republica era già del popolo, non della nobiltà, onde se il Popolo si sia contentato di trasferire le sue ragioni alla nobiltà, non perciò intese di privarsene per sempre ... sì che toccasse alla nobiltà di raggirare ogni cosa a suo capriccio] Leti, *Le visioni politiche*, 232.
46. [Il fine addunque che prescrive alle mie attoni, e alle mie parole è quello di procurare la sollevatione de gli oppressi, la sdiradicatione de gl'interessi privati nel Governo publico della fattione predominante,

l'estirpatione de' trafichi de' Magistrati e la discoperta degli aggravii insopportabili, che ... il Popolo <ricevette> in ricompensa d'haver spogliato se medesimo per vestire la nobiltà del manto reggio della sovrana autorità ... considerando che quella Republica in cui non fiorisse l'equalità corre da sé medesima al precipitio della libertà], Leti, *Le visioni politiche*, 233.

47. Leti, *Le visioni politiche*, 403.
48. [Ma col girar del tempo divenuta Patria di Nobili come era prima di Cittadini, e fattasi Aristocrazia col Governo da questi soli dipendente, si raffreddò l'Amore nel generale, non conservando che quel solo debito di Fedeltà che deve il Sudito al Soprano, e i Nobili insuperbiti con tal preminenza, non pensarono ad altro che ad acquistar col danaro Stati, Signorie e Titoli negli altri dominii, rendendosi in questa maniera non meno Schiavi de' Principi stranieri, che membri d'una Republica da loro comandata], Leti, *Raguagli storici e politici*, I, 130.
49. Leti, *Teatro belgico*, I, **2r-v.
50. [Molte Città spaventate, stimarono non trovarsi altro mezzo per conservar la Republica che di confidar tutto il Governo alla dispositioni del Principe, di modo che in diversi Luoghi venne come a forza acclamato e portato sul Trono, dando principio ad esercitare un'auttorità libera, levando via molti Magistrati d'elettione, e stabilendone altri a suo gusto: di modo che per farlo soprano da buon senno, non ci mancava altro che il consentimento della Città d'Amsterdamo ... , e benché la Città d'Amsterdamo se gli opponesse all'esercitio di quella grande autorità che aveva esercitato in altre Provincie, ad ogni modo abbracciò volentieri questa dichiarazione di rimmetterlo nel Governo e cariche del suo Genitore; e il Principe fece conoscere una nobile moderazione poichè disprezzato l'offro di quella soprannità che gli veniva offerta in qualche Provincia si contentò di questo gran carico <di Stathouder>], Leti, *Teatro belgico*, I, 279–280.
51. Leti, *Teatro belgico*, II, 92.
52. On Faliero's conspiracy, see Ravegnani, *Il traditore di Venezia*.
53. Leti, *Teatro belgico*, II, 90.
54. [Gli Holandesii seppero così bene disporre la forma del Governo, con la più raffinata politica, che nello stesso tempo che resero necessaria agli Stati una grande auttorità in un solo: resero anche l'auttorità di questo solo inutile senza la dipendenza della soprema per che sopra auttorità degli Stati Generali, di modo che la concatenazione rende felice e sicura la Republica. Non vi è cosa che ruina più libertà d'una Republica, come quella d'haver più Magnati e più persone costituite in un'eminente auttorità. ... Leggansi le Malatie politique della Republica di Genoa, e si vedrà che la libertà di questa non fu che un picciol passo lungi della sua gran perdita, in quelle gran gare tra le Famiglie più potenti], Leti, *Teatro belgico*, II, 91–2. For a summary of *Le Malattie politiche della Repubblica di Genova*, a dissertation published by Gasparo Squarciafico in 1655, which stated almost the same thesis of Balbi's *Manifesto*, see Villa, *Genova al vaglio di un esiliato*, 505–25.
55. [E l'una e l'altra tengono per massima di conservare la propria salute col procurar quella di tutti gli altri nell'Europa; onde spesso benché con differenti ogetti e colori, sono riuscite fortunate nelle loro intraprese, essendo vero che non mancano mai di benedittioni celesti quei che riguardano il beneficio comune, come il loro interesse particolare, e è certo che se tutti fossero concorsi ad irrigar dalla lor parte il zelo di queste Potenze, nell'occasioni più prementi, goderebbe l'Europa maggior riposo, né si sarebbero vedute tante revolutioni e ruine in tanti Principati], Leti, *Teatro belgico*, I, 1–2.
56. On the reform of the republican model in the second half of the seventeenth-century, see Weeber, *Republiken als Blaupause*, 47–96; 157–262.
57. On Marana and on the reasons of his departure from Genoa, see Rotta, *Gian Paolo Marana*, 153–87; Micocci, *Un doppio esilio di fine Seicento*, 153–67.
58. The dialogue had been wrongly attributed to Leti by Cameroni, *Uno scrittore avventuriero*, 221 and Fassò, *Avventurieri della penna*, 239, and recognized as work of Marana by Venturi, *Utopia e riforma nell'illuminismo*, 41–3. On its critical history, see Barcia, *Bibliografia di Gregorio Leti*, 570.
59. Weiss, *Captives and Corsairs*, 156–69.
60. Marana, *Dialogo fra Genova e Algieri*, 38 ['Per Dio, Genova mia, tu sei più Castigliana che il Re Catolico. Non discerno però bene la tua politica, poichè se tu sei libera, come dai a' Spagnuoli tanta commodità di farti serva?'].
61. Marana, *Dialogo fra Genova e Algieri*, 138 ['A Dio Genova, studia la mia sentenza, ma prima di studiarla considera quello che ha fatto la prima e la più potente Republica che sia nell'universo; gli Holandesii hanno havuto più cervello di te, hanno mitigato l'animo del gran Luigi; si sono umiliati col rispetto e hanno ubbidito al più forte, e i tuoi cari Spagnoli non hanno potuto impedire che le bombe non cadano nella tua Città e non la desolino'].

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