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Toward concordia: Dialogue and Poetry. – The question whether the governance and autonomy of medieval and early modern cities and the participation of their citizens in communal affairs may gesture toward a form of communal self-governance or it is yet another form of the rule of the privileged has re-emerged with new answers in recent scholarship. It was also one of the topics of the lecture series, *Urban Governance and Civic Participation in Words and Stone*, as part of which Prof. Ferenc Hörcher also gave a talk.[1] Prof. Hörcher is a Hungarian philosopher, historian of political thought and aesthetics, a critic, and a poet. Currently, he is head of and research professor at the Research Institute of Politics and Government at the University of Public Service, Budapest, and senior fellow at the Institute of Philosophy of the Eötvös Loránd Research Ntework. One of his latest books is titled *The Political Philosophy of the European City: From Polis, through City State, to Megalopolis?*[2] His lecture, "The Political Ideology of the Renaissance and Early Modern City – from Bruni to Althusius," explored the explicit

1 The lecture series was co-organized by the Democracy in History Workgroup of the CEU Democracy Institute, the Department of Medieval Studies at CEU, the Department of History of Art at Birkbeck, University of London, and the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Erfurt. The talks of various renowned speakers focused on the origins of civic participation in political thought and explored its forms of expression in written and visual media from late antiquity to the seventeenth century. The lecture series also served to prepare the ground for a Summer University titled, Urban Governance and Civic Participation in Words and Stone to be organized by the Open Society University Network (OSUN) in July 2022; details are available online. Prof. Hörcher's talk is available on YouTube.

2 Ferenc Hörcher, *The Political Philosophy of the European City: From Polis, through City-State, to Megalopolis* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2021).

and implicit principles of political thought in the medieval and Renaissance European city. Taking Leonardo Bruni's panegyric *In Praise of Florence* (c. 1403–4)[3] as a paradigm case, Prof. Hörcher first illustrated the example of Florentine civic humanism to demonstrate the intellectual foundations of governance in the medieval Italian "city state." Embedding this overview into a short summary of Max Weber's meta-description of the Western city,[4] Prof. Hörcher then shifted his attention to the paradigm of the Northern European city through the exposition of Althusius' *Politica* (1603)[5] and discussed the influence of the Reformation as well as the birth of the modern state on the self-governance and autonomy of cities. Although the following interview is based primarily on Prof. Hörcher's lecture, the discussion joyfully meandered through a number of other, fascinating topics, like the value of philosophical dialogue vis-à-vis debate, the literary figure of the flaneur, the political ideas of Dante and the philosophical potential of poetry.

You began your lecture, "The Political Ideology of the Renaissance and Early Modern City - From Bruni to Althusius," in a manner of a true Renaissance rhetorician, with a bit of an apologia referring to your profession as a political philosopher and not a historian. It appears to me, however, especially after reading your recent book, The Political Philosophy of the European City, *that you travel through the major epochs of European history, from antiquity to the modern era, with an intellectual historian's ease and expertise. Was there a reason as to why you did not identify as both – a political philosopher and a historian – or was this differentiation tailored to this specific audience, which consisted primarily of historians? How do you think your methodology and questions differ from those employed by a historian?*

Indeed, I emphasized the distinction as I find the difference in the self-perception of these two professions important and although I think of myself as a historian of political thought, I think that to be a historian is something different. My perception was that most

3 Leonardo Bruni, *In Praise of Florence: The Panegyric of the City of Florence and an Introduction to Leonardo Bruni's Civil Humanism*, intr. and transl. Alfred Scheepers (Amsterdam: Olive Press, 2005), 77–99.

4 Max Weber, *The City*, trans. and ed. Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (New York: The Free Press, 1958/1966, 65–81.

5 Althusius, *Politica: An Abridged Translation of Politics Methodically Set Forth and Illustrated with Sacred and Profane Examples*, ed. and trans. Frederick S. Carney (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995).

of the speakers in the series were historians in that more "proper" sense and approach the city from the purely historical perspective. In contrast, I approach urban republicanism from the perspective of the problems I derive from political philosophy. This is where my normative questions originate from and I try to answer them with the help of historical materials, for in politics this is our empirical material and I explore the urban communities and their documents with this in mind. I see a similar example in David Hume, for instance, who is now regarded primarily as a philosopher but in his own time he was considered to be more of a historian and a man of letters. According to Hume, the main distinction between political science and the natural sciences is the following: in the former case, you cannot experiment and test your hypothesis by submitting it to a research procedure in order to see the results. Instead, you can examine concrete historical examples that pertain to the problematic in question and generalize on this basis. This is what he calls political science, that is, philosophy applied to historical material and this is my assumption, too. Political philosophy, history of political thought, and history: these are the different phases that I schematize for myself, and my arena is the history of political thought, which I perceive as the overlap between political philosophy and proper political history.

Moreover, historians receive special training and have a specific set of technical resources and procedures at their disposal for approaching their textual sources from archives. I was not trained in that vein and even though I did some work in archives for my PhD in Scotland, my sources primarily derive from printed versions. Add to this that I was also primarily educated as a literary historian, my undergraduate majors having been Hungarian, English, and Aesthetics.

Which is also reflected in the way you choose your sources, including also literary and art works among them…

Of course, for I believe that they are relevant historical resources: as much as politics, art and literature are also activities through which individuals try to make sense of the world around them. Therefore, they can tell us a lot about this world as long as we learn to read them with an eye on politics. These materials themselves, however, must be understood within the framework of the life of their producers, since anything that is a product of ours will be better understood if we place it in our biographical narrative. Thus art, politics, reli-

gious ideas make better sense in the specific contexts of our lives. In contrast, this is not true for activities in science: you can have a scientific discovery but it does not necessarily have anything to do with your life. Neither does it have a relevance in technology. You can have a technological invention and it does not matter what you use it for or why you had that idea. But in the humanities, and in anything dependent on meaning or interpretation, there is this further dimension that if you include it in the life narrative of the person in question, you will probably better understand it.

Which already hints toward the key concepts that you invoke, drawing from Coulanges, civitas *and* urbs.[6] *For those who did not attend your lecture, could you elaborate a bit on the meaning of these two concepts as they fit into your own scholarly discourse?*

Certainly. As Coulanges outlined, these two terms, both of which are usually translated as "city," were actually not understood as synonymous by the ancients. Instead, *civitas* denoted the religious and political associations of families and tribes, and thus had a more abstract, interpersonal connotation; while *urbs* was the place of assembly and of dwelling and, therefore, represented the concrete physical environment. I myself use these two terms to explain the connection between my two main interests that concern the city, the political and the aesthetic. They explain my two approaches: *civitas* requires the political-philosophical aspect, to look at the city as the association of human beings, a community of living persons; and *urbs* is the geographical area, both natural and constructed, where we can see the imprint of the activities of earlier generations of citizens/inhabitants.

It is, thus, convenient for me to use this established distinction to separate the communal aspect from the created, material aspect of the city, the latter being the sort of "hardware" and the former, the "software."

These are, no doubt, dynamic relations and in a way, this is an age-old question, i.e., the relationship between the intellectual and cultural spheres on the one hand and their material expressions on the other. How are the two connected in the city?

6 Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, transl. by Willard Small (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 110.

Well, they are often in direct parallel. The social structure of the community corresponds to the topographical stratification of the *urbs*. We can understand a community, for instance, by looking at the distance between their cathedral and the town hall, by looking at the arrangements of the guild quarters – the ways in which these various groups were positioned inside the city walls. Each community in the city is, thus, subtly represented in the geographical locations of their dwellings and not only through their ranks in the council house. And this is, in fact, the main idea of my book, namely to understand an urban community by their acts, thoughts, norms and settlement arrangements.

This brings to my mind your praise of dialogue, which you mentioned as your favored approach both in philosophy and understanding human interaction in general. You employ a distinction between dialogue and debate in one of your articles.[7] *Could you briefly sum up how you connect it with the urban context?*

Inspired by the ideas of the twentieth-century German thinker, Hans-Georg Gadamer, I think that philosophy, which is now usually understood as debate, was originally, in its classical period, closer to the form of the dialogue, the main distinction between them being that in a dialogue all participants can have their share of the discussion, while in a debate participants want to dominate. This connects to my understanding of urban politics: I see the basic concept of the European city as striving for concordia, i.e., balance or peace. This means that the expression of differing views within an urban community should not necessarily foster factionalism or become a mechanism for exclusion among the rival parties – this is possible in a dialogue but less so in a debate. There is a minimum set of shared agreements as soon as one enters a discussion; otherwise there would be no foundation upon which to build arguments. According to the basic teachings of theoretical linguistics, there must be some elementary level of common understanding for language to appear.

A dialogue, therefore, is not only the foundational philosophical genre, but also the grounding force of political relationships within the community in European cities. The preservation of communal peace is more important here than pushing one's own truth. This

7 Ferenc Hörcher, "Dialógus és vita a nyugati filozófiában: Töredékes feljegyzések [Dialogue and Debate in Western Philosophy: Fragmentary Notes]," *Forrás* 32.5 (2021), 3–12.

can be generalized to a certain extent: according to the teaching of the natural law, a desire to preserve peace within the community is an attribute of human beings as such, not the privilege of particular cultures and civilizations. On the other hand, this metaphor of the dialogue cannot be applied to groups whose members do not live together. This is, again, a crucial advantage of the life of the city as opposed to the life of the state: in an urban setting, one lives in a very well-defined and circumscribed area with members of the community, which influences one's notion of the other inhabitants in that one gets directly acquainted with them by living together with them. And, as I mentioned earlier, this close encounter caused by living together is what interests me.

So, go for dialogue not debate…

Well, at least that is what I see as the European urban ideal, but of course it is not always possible, sometimes we simply miss it. But such is the nature of ideals – we strive for them, miss them, and go for them again.

Accordingly, you described the history of political theory as a history of constantly changing problems, whose solutions are also constantly changing. As you put it, dialogue is the way to understand both ends: if one wants to understand the answer, one needs to know the question. This, of, course, comes from R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943),[8] *to whom you also make a reference in your book. How did his thinking influence you?*

I came to Collingwood through [Quentin] Skinner and in terms of methodology, his perspectives on the theory of speech acts were crucial for me. I also perused his works owing to my interest in political philosophy and in particular, in conservatism. But most importantly, he inspired me greatly because of his personal example and educational program. I published an article about this in a bilingual book of mine, which I dedicated to the question whether the humanities are worthwhile to study in the twenty-first century.[9] Let me try to

8 Robin G. Collingwood, "An Essay on Methaphysics," in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, ed. by James Connelly (Oxford, Clarendon Press 2005 (1940), 23: "Every statement that anybody ever makes is made in answer to a question."

9 Ferenc Hörcher, "Sailing with your students to Greece: Collingwood, teaching and praxis," in *Of the Usefulness of the Humanities* (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2014), 13–24.

briefly summarize it. First, Collingwood believed in the importance of connecting theory and practice, especially in education. This was crucial for him as a historian, in other words for his attitude toward the past. He believed that a historian cannot step out of his own temporal framework; therefore, in his historical inquiry he is determined to always remain within the context of his own "real life." Nevertheless, through the re-enactment of past thought in the present, the historian gets a clearer view of his own way of thinking, and through that, his own self as well.[10] In connection to this, he also touched upon the moral problem of a university professor in his ivory tower and – in accordance with the European tradition of the university as a community of professors and students – advocated teaching by example.

Based on personal example, he took his students on an excursion to Greece in 1939, just before the outbreak of the new (second) World War, with the idea that it was a tribute to the birthplace of European civilization and with the wish that with the students they would in a way re-enact the past. He thought of it as an occasion for them to learn more about what a living European tradition means and about what the concept of civilization means. On the sailing ship he and his students had the chance for sharing the same form of life. This was his own way of teaching by example and awakening the desire for knowledge in his students.

Amazing, and this is also very much hand in hand with the Renaissance educational ideals…

Exactly. The importance of education in the Renaissance was otherwise also brought to my attention by Jim Haskins when we invited him to the Institute of Philosophy at the Hungarian Academy of Science for a conference on the topic of educating the Prince. But as I mentioned, I came to Collingwood earlier through the influence of the Cambridge School and their history of political thought. During my PhD, for which I did my research partly in Cambridge, but which I defended in Budapest, I worked with István Hont (who knew my background as he himself got to Cambridge from Budapest) and he helped me to familiarize myself with the Cambridge School. So, Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, John G. A. Pocock, Richard Tuck are the figures I should also mention as integral to my own thinking.

10 "Historical knowledge is the re-enactment in the historian's mind of the thought whose history he is studying." Collingwood, "An Essay," 112.

I see. With this, we return to the sequence prescribed by handbooks of rhetoric, noting the so-called auctoritates maiorum… So let us now turn to the Renaissance ones. The emphasis on change and our responses to it remind me of Machiavelli, who argued that the primary quality of an ideal ruler was flexibility, the ability to adapt to any situation at hand. He even defended Julius Caesar for starting the civil war as he believed that it had been, actually, the correct response to the circumstances at the time. On the other hand, Bruni – as we learned from your lecture – was quite critical of Caesar in The Panegyric of the City of Florence. *Why did you choose to talk about Bruni, who is an earlier humanist, even if you are otherwise more interested in the period after Machiavelli's time?*

Indeed, one of my primary concerns is the late sixteenth century, which is more about the reception of Machiavelli and Protestantism, when Althusius comes into the picture. But I wanted to offer a broader perspective and Bruni represents a sort of medieval and early Renaissance paradigm – "scene one," as it were. Moreover, in the history of political thought, we usually start with Machiavelli and the age of the founding fathers, and Bruni is often left out. He is in a certain way criticized by Machiavelli, actually, and he is a great example of striving for this ideal of concordia we discussed earlier and he proposes an idea of the city that I cherish cherish as a political philosopher.

Machiavelli, on the other hand, contradicts it, especially in *The Prince* (1532). I certainly acknowledge that he is a supremely original thinker and that his work has greater philosophical value than that of Bruni. He reintroduces this negative notion of human nature, which goes against the Scholastic as well as Ciceronian tradition and which recalls the more skeptical Greek and Roman historians, such as Thucydides and Tacitus. Machiavelli is very important to me, because he presents a challenge for a traditionalist like myself. I look for those authors who can preserve the traditional idea of concordia and at the same time answer Machiavelli or even integrate his ideas for their own purposes. In this respect, Botero is crucial. It is enough to mention his *Reason of State* (1589), as he works with the concept of reason of state, or what we would call today "national interest" regarding geopolitics, international relations, economy, etc. Also, he tries to preserve the classical European understanding of living together and civic life, and he remains loyal to his Jesuit upbringing. Such authors, who manage to incorporate all these contrasting conceptions, are very interesting for me, for instance

Montaigne or Lipsius. This more refined view of human nature was of vital importance in the German context and also in the context introduced in the first talk of our series by Prof. Prak;[11] and Althusius is one of these authors as well.

Discussion of human nature is also relevant for another concept that we did not have a chance to delve into during the lecture but you mentioned it in passing: liberty. Libertas *had many meanings already in the writings of humanists and the conceptions of liberty are still a subject of fierce debate nowadays. How do you position yourself with regard to these?*

True. Liberty is, of course, crucial and very much discussed in the period we are talking about as well as today, but this is precisely one of the reasons why I did not see much point in doing it in my talk. Also, my idea of civic liberty (in an orientation best identified as "Aristotelian-Ciceronian urban conservative republicanism") is a bit different. To sum up my position, let us start with the theories of negative and positive or ancient and modern liberty in political philosophy.[12] The ancient one emphasized the participation in the governance of a (political) body, while the modern one is based more on free will and requires the non-interference of the state in the affairs of the individual. However, as Skinner already pointed out, there is no personal freedom under tyrannical rule, even if the tyrant does not interfere in our own personal life.

Here, the republican Machiavelli's originality already stands out. He, too, claimed, that tyranny indeed cannot provide one's personal liberty, because the rule of a single person can jeopardize

11 Prof. Maarten Prak was the first speaker in the same lecture series. See his "The Dutch Republic as a Bourgeois Society," in *The International Relevance of Dutch history*, ed. by Klaas van Berkel and Leonie de Goei (The Hague: Royal Netherlands Historical Society, 2010), 107–138, and "Citizens without Nations," in *Citizens without Nations: Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World, c.1000–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). The talk Prof. Prak held within the lecture series is available online, on Youtube.

12 The difference between the two conceptions of freedom, one held by "the Ancients" and one by the members of the modern societies was discussed by Benjamin Constant in his essay, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns," published originally in 1816. His discussion was elaborated further by Isaiah Berlin who defined the conceptions of "negative" and "positive" liberty. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118–172.

the liberty of the others – Machiavelli's concern was, of course, Florence, where the rule of the Signoria led to the individual rule of the Medici princes. However, that is only one way of framing the problem. On a closer look we can realize that we do not necessarily lose our liberty because of monarchs per se since in history, the cities in fact quite often invited a powerful king or emperor to take the final control over their sovereignty, to make order possible and peace achievable in a world of competing jurisdictions and rivaling camps. As the Florentines had to experience, factionalism actually can directly lead to the loss of liberty, while *concordia* and peace are its prerequisites. Therefore, according to Florentine ideology, in order to have liberty one needs to live in a free, balanced city – city in the sense of a political community.[13] True personal liberty, consequently, is not merely the enjoyment of non-interference (negative liberty) but the enjoyment of certain conditions by the political community, and most importantly the practical elbow room to make their own decisions. According to the notion of republican urban liberty, everyone needs to have the opportunity to participate in the common affairs, and a society needs to be practically, and at least partially, self-determined. Its members are individually free, however, only to the extent that they participate in and support its self-governing process. Factionalism is fatal for both common and individual liberty. That is why peace needs to be preserved, and a balance (which is, though, by no means a sclerotic and frozen form of stability) of the internal agents (in other words *concordia*) is a first prerequisite of smooth operation within urban governance, no matter if in a communal, aristocratic or monarchical regime. At least that is how I understand the early modern teaching of urban republicanism.

I see, it is a sort of paradox. It seems that by attaining one type of liberty, one loses the other and vice versa …

13 Most prominently, Machiavelli put this forward in his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy* (1517), in which he praised the perfection of Roman republic for its balanced constitution and giving sovereignty to the people (in contrast to Sparta, where the ultimate power belonged to the senate). He considered the people to be better guardians of liberty because their desire to usurp power for their own advantage was weaker and they only wished to remain free and avoid domination by others.

Well, the Germans would call it a sort of dialectic, but you are right, and that is the reason for all the debates about how to find a functional equilibrium. And here we return to Skinner. He already called attention to those early conceptions of liberty before liberalism, and as I understand, for him the two concepts of liberty do not pose an either/or question but represent, rather, a kind of synthesis and that is why he formulated a third concept.[14] And a further point: we must also keep in mind that there are two understandings of the republic in the European tradition, too. One is the modern one understood in the French model, the "post-French-Revolution" model of the republic, where liberty is something that the state provides and secures for the individual citizen and the citizen is happy to have it. However, I do not think this is a particularly fruitful framing of liberty in other contexts and therefore I prefer the traditional one, according to which all participants in a political community are responsible for the liberty of that community and for its preservation. This means that every individual has his or her own duties and privileges. Thus, the rights of the citizens are not a given, a thing that exists beforehand, but citizens actually have to take part in the "liberation" of the city; they need to actively contribute before asking for privileges. This "traditional" account is connected to the idea of *libertas*, something more than the negative and personal liberty of liberalism.

It is also different from the present-day discussions on republicanism; the literature on republicanism grew out of Skinner's work and then, Philippe Pettit elaborated on this with his account of the state in accordance with the republican mode.[15] I do not find this line of arguments fully satisfactory. The problem is size or scale: I think that in order for the participatory model of republicanism to work, you need people to be more dependent on each other, you need those who are living together and know each other from personal acquaintance, like in the urban context.

These different conceptions remind me of those popular discussions of "Ciceronian" or "Cesarean" liberty among humanists as they debated

14 Skinner names this concept "neo-Roman liberty." Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998).

15 Pettit referred to his conception of liberty, inspired by that of Skinner, as "non--domination." Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

the goodness or badness of Caesar. Already Salutati (in De Tyrano*)*[16] *argued in favor of the legitimacy of Caesar's rule supporting it with the fact that Caesar had won the approval of the vast majority of the Roman people – through his beneficent governance, charisma and virtue… And even before, already Dante found in Caesar a kind of paradox placing him in Limbo, while throwing his murderers in the ninth, deepest circle of Hell. But you discussed Dante yourself.*

Indeed, I was really interested in Dante partly because of his political ideas. Officially, Dante endorses monarchy as the preferred institutional framework, but while doing so, he keeps the republican language.[17] This is partly because the tyrants in Florence also used a republican terminology to legitimize their power (look at the Medici for instance), but also, because the divide between the proponents of republicanism and monarchism was not that wide. So, in that respect the Florentine ideology is false, as there is no real polarity between majority rule and republican freedom on the one hand, and the rule of the monarch on the other, and a fortiori, there is no loss of liberty. What Dante is trying to show is only that an external leader can solidify and stabilize power in the city and in that way contribute to its autonomy.

In fact, if you look at the medieval and early modern Hungarian kingdom, the royal cities did not strive for autonomy to become a city state; that was impossible, unachievable. What they wanted, instead, was to have privileges as a royal free city, being directly under the rule of the king. The king could protect their freedom from other potential overlords and reduce the latter's influence. Of course, the price the cities had to pay for this were heavy taxes, but they were prepared to pay them in exchange for securing their liberty. Such liberty or, to put it better, "semi-autonomy" can thus be achieved within the framework of monarchy.

This is how I translate all that to the ideology of the European city: urban constitutions are not necessarily about becoming an

16 Collucio Salutati, "On Tyranny," in *Political Writing*, transl. by Rolf Bagemihl (Harvard: Harvard UP, 2014).

17 For an argument in this direction see Alexander Lee, *Humanism and Empire: The Imperial Ideal in Fourteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Prof. Hörcher showed the republican elements of Dante's language in *On Monarchy* in a talk titled, "Republican Vocabulary and Monarchical Regime – about Dante's *Monarchia*; Republikánus nyelv és egyeduralmi rezsim – Dante Az egyeduralom című művéről" at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 2021. Dual language slides of the lecture are available online.

autonomous or sovereign political entity. Rather, it is about how to ensure a practical state of affairs within which burghers can "do their business" to run economy, can bring up their children in a safe environment and do their usual cultural activities. These sorts of advantages or freedoms are to be provided by the city for the citizens and the citizens themselves want to do their best to help to make it. And most importantly, this cannot be achieved, especially from the seventeenth century onwards, without the help of a monarch, as the territorial state becomes so important and overwhelmingly powerful that the cities cannot compete with that. Of course, absolute rulers tended to oppress cities as well, but they had to make practical concessions to ensure the inflow of the required tax revenue.

Thus, Dante shows us that already in the Renaissance, some people understood that this was the way to avoid factionalism. In the second part of his life and career, Dante was himself a victim of Florentine factionalism and he realized that concordia could not be maintained unless there was some external guarantee for that.

I see, so political communities should always strive for internal balance. From politics to a way of life: at first glance, discussions about the two conceptions of liberty remind me of the famous duality of vita activa and vita contemplativa, which was also widely discussed among humanists. Another enigma?

I agree with you again: I do not see a real solution to balance the two forms of individual life; there will always be tension between them. I understand their relationship within the Aristotelian-Ciceronian framework: citizens are active as long as they can be, and when they are not active anymore, they have to withdraw from public life, which allows them to reflect on their life. Behind all that, however, one can also recognize the Platonic teaching, according to which it is the contemplative mode of life that is fundamentally human, and the real human flourishing is there. As my hero in practical matters, Aristotle is perhaps less certain about that, I am still undecided as well.

I think there is an unresolvable logical contradiction there. You cannot act and reflect on it at the same time,[18] and yet refleftion might be needed to make the right practical judgement. The contradiction was illustrated well in the twentieth century: for some time, people were forced to get involved in public life, so when the tension was

18 The paradox of the social standing of the philosopher, and the difference between the thinker and the man of action, was also an interest of Collingwood.

released, they certainly and quite naturally distanced themselves from politics. The notions of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, as I see them, represent two extremes, and the ideal is to try to find the right balance between the two or, again, a synthesis of the two, if you will, or, finally, to do the right thing at the right time…

But how do you know when it is the right time?

Well, you can never know it with absolute certainty and clarity. The only thing that can serve as your guide is the teaching of Kairos about right timing.[19] You will never find an algorythm which could serve as a key to your life and so you have no basis for generalization; you do not possess any perfectly reliable form of knowledge about it and the only available source of wisdom is experience and memory, yours and that of others. We can learn from earlier failures what to avoid or from successes what to pursue and this is the only way to find out what to do and what to avoid.

However, there is also the general knowledge of the human being: at a younger age, one is more active and able to pursue things that require greater physical effort, and in advanced age, one has more experience to rely on in order to achieve general wisdom. This is a biologically determined tendency in human life.

I see. This is also what Renaissance educational treatises espouse (e.g., Pier Paolo Vergerio's De ingenuis moribus*)*[20] *but in philosophy, there is more debate and it is interesting to observe the changes in perspective, for instance, from Petrarch to Vergerio or Bruni, and then to Machiavelli.*

Indeed. Let us take Petrarch: he was not that successful in political affairs, he had a strong inclination toward the philosophical, contemplative mode of life, while Bruni was not particularly gifted as a philosopher but he was able to achieve great political successes. This also connects to your question about my choice of Bruni for the lecture: he was also an experienced political agent, even a leader, just as Althusius was. Arguably, Machiavelli was one as well but he could

19 *Kairos*, or καιρός in ancient Greek, denotes "the right, critical, or opportune moment" (e.g. for action).

20 Pier Paolo Vergerio, "De ingenuis moribus et liberalibus adulescentiae studiis liber," in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, ed. and transl. by Craig Kallendorf, 2–91 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

not remain long in power – he had no real future as a political leader and that is why he became so great in philosophy. So, sometimes it is actually a blessing to lose power and then become a philosopher and secure eternal glory for yourself.

Which is precisely what Petrarch rebuked Cicero for, for not letting go of political power and not retreating to a contemplative life. So, these debates and treatises could also be conceived of as the performative actions of these intellectuals?

Of course, and here the sensibility of the Cambridge School and Collingwood shines through again: to understand the political thought of the past, you need to understand the political situation in which the people were involved, and then you can have a clearer grasp of their references and you can make better judgments about their intellectual claims as well. In other words, you need to keep in mind the function of these writings. For instance, in Bruni's case, his panegyric was undoubtedly a young man's work, composed before he attained the respectable status of the notary. Thus, it was a tactical, or perhaps a strategic move on his part. As I mentioned earlier, we can only make sense of the activities and productive output of people if we reflect on them within the narrative of their lives. I was looking at Bruni's panegyric more from the point of view of the ideology of the city. In his piece, he presents a useful summary of those ideas: no matter for what reason and from which political perspective, it is a fruitful overview of the elements of that ideology.

It also bears to say that the literary influences on Bruni's panegyric were equally numerous: Aelius Aristides' Panathenaic oration *was the most important but inspiration came from another source as well, Manuel Chrysoloras, the humanists' famous teacher of Greek. If we read Chrysoloras'* Comparison of Old and New Rome*, we can notice similar concepts, especially with regard to balance and concordance.*[21]

21 In Chrysoloras' case, this comes from his implicit encouragement of the union of the Eastern and Western Church. In his *synkrisis*, he takes us on a walk through the ancient ruins of Rome that survived until his time and then, among the buildings of contemporary Constantinople. See Christine Smith, *Architecture in the Culture of Early Humanism: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Eloquence 1400–1470* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), Chapter 7, "Byzantine learning and Renaissance eloquence," 133–149. An English translation is available in the same volume.

How should we respond to the critics who deem these works mere rhetorical pieces full of literary devices?

The models are very recognizable, indeed, but I do not think his utilization of earlier material should be considered a problem. We know that at that time, they had a very different notion of authorship from what we have now. More importantly, Bruni as a Florentine approached the inherited patterns creatively: he did not use what he learned from his Greek models as they did but rather, he applied them to make sense of his own position as a citizen of Florence. These transformative practices are what makes political thought so interesting: one takes arguments from others and uses them for one's own purposes. The fascinating thing is what stays and what changes in the semantics of the reappropriated concepts. This is what ensures the continuity and what brings forward the narrative, as neither the making of a narrative nor change is possible otherwise. I look at these works with an eye on how they transformed the Ciceronian and Aristotelian notions, but I keep my other eye on how the tradition will remain more or less intact.

Again, the context is very important. We can identify the literary techniques by examining the social position of the person, their possible intentions (including the target audience), the ways in which they achieved their objectives and the reason why they had chosen specific mannerisms.

This is a great answer. Could one say that Bruni's choice of format already indicates in some ways his political outlook? And to take the literary discussion a bit further, do you find the difference in literary genres of the works you compared in your lecture relevant? Althusius' Politica is a very theoretical piece while Bruni's panegyric is obviously a rhetorical text par excellence.

Genres are very relevant in philosophy, as in literature, rhetoric or history, and we can indeed connect Bruni and Althusius to rhetoric and theory, respectively. Althusius' *Politica* belongs to a new genre of the same name, *politica*,[22] which is part of the post-Machiavellian

22 Between the 1580s and the 1620s, numerous new treatises were published throughout the Empire dealing primarily with politics. They discussed topics such as the establishment and the meaning of government, guidance for developing imperial public law, and advice on the upkeep of order with the help of the *artes liberales*. They all reflected the constitutional experience of the Empire

discussions that I have mentioned above and is meant to provide a sort of ars conservandi in troubled times. For Atlhusius, the practical and the theoretical issue is about trying to keep the community governable while acknowledging the nature of man – how to avoid or suppress internal conflict for the sake of the common good and to preserve unity and internal harmony. Althusius, therefore, writes like a philosopher would, he is establishing concepts, creating connections between them, and building up structures from these connections and concepts. His *Politica* is a kind of "hard science," at least harder than what we find in rhetoric. He uses different linguistic techniques when compared to Bruni and we have to understand their efforts differently. This goes hand in hand with what I said before. When we are looking for Bruni's "truth," we have to analyze his piece as a rhetorical performance and we are looking for something that is understood as truth within that framework and consequently, presupposes different truth conditions than Althusius' work. Yet one should also note, that Althusius' book served as a handbook of teaching, as well.

And why did you choose to focus on Bruni's panegyric and not his Histories, which would be a bit closer in terms of genre?

To be honest, I was looking for a work that clearly transmits a general idea. History-writing works with a lot of examples and tries to point vaguely toward a far-away theoretical conclusion, while panegyric is a relatively short piece, which, despite the addition of some rhetorical ornamentations, offers a concise message about the author's stance – again, Bruni's ideology of the city, which was in this case my primary concern.

I see, that is quite pragmatic. Some generalization is, I assume, also required in such a large scope of analysis as yours, for the difference is not only in the formats of these two works but also in their geographical origins and cultural backgrounds. How come you decided to embark on this long journey from (late medieval and Renaissance) Florence to the seventeenth-century German lands in your book?

and a common concern for concord. For a discussion of Althusius's work in the framework of its genre, see Horst Dreitzel, "Neues über Althusius", *Ius Commune* 16 (1989), 276–302.

First of all, in this geographical division (North–South axis) I follow, among others, the work of Jacob Burckhardt, Johan Huizinga,[23] Max Weber, Thomas Mann and recently Maarten Prak, but with that we come upon another duality of my research interests. Thinking back to the context of Italian city states, I wish I had majored in Italian. The European South has always been my favorite, as well as the ancient literature of Romans and "Neo-Romans," as Skinner labels them, and their understanding of the community.

On the other hand, my family came to Hungary from Switzerland so my own cultural background has a German angle, too, even if that is not coming from imperial Germany. Also, Northern Europe, and particularly the Netherlands and the United Kingdom played a major role in developing the constitutional democracy we achieved. I also think that the devastating history of Germany should not blind us to the fact that there were competing historical trajectories before nineteenth-century Germany, and therefore there were real alternatives, which were, however, missed. Perhaps we could learn from that even in the twenty-first century. The fate and value of the traditional constitutional structure called the Holy Roman Empire needs to be reconsidered. The cities within the Holy Roman Empire, the connections between them, and the networks they formed, like the cities of the Hanseatic League, require further reflections, and they had, I think, an unrecognized potential. It should not be the privilege of Italian scholars to talk about city states and as you see, these two orientations of Europe are somehow quarreling – or dialoguing? – with each other within me.

It is refreshing that you so explicitly mention these personal histories of deep significance with regard to your scholarly interests, especially in the context of today's increasingly and dismayingly impersonal academia. Reading your book, I noticed that you were aspiring to connect theory and practice, perhaps encouraged by Collingwood. Accordingly, in your exploration of the artistic expressions of different civitates, you made reference to Baudelaire's concept of the nineteenth-century flaneur,[24] i.e., the urban explorer, the observer of modern urban life engaged in the constant creation of ekphrasis. In one of the chapters of your book, you aimed to embody the figure of the flaneur

23 Johan Huizinga, *Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century and Other Essays* (New York: Harper&Row, 1941).

24 Keith Tester, Introduction," in *The Flâneur*, ed. by Keith Tester (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1–21, 1.

yourself – reconstructing your own relationship to your own urban surroundings, which I really enjoyed.

Thank you. Concerning ekphrasis, I build on the well-known theory of Svetlana Alpers and her book, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. But the approach is also connected with my outlook on poetry, as I believe ekphrasis is what much of twentieth-century poetry is about. The modern poetry which is based on Eliot and Rilke tend to rely on fine descriptions of the world of objects, offering sensual data (auditory, visual, olfactory and tactile) for the readers. The poem always springs forth from empirical elements and ideas are unfolded from that "aesthetic" basis. In that sense it is indeed very much dependent on personal experience; experience, in art, as in politics and in all areas of practical knowledge, is crucial. This is, by the way, characteristic of my own poetry.[25] No wonder that ekphrasis, deriving from a sensible experience, is also crucial for contemporary aesthetic theory as well.[26]

In connection to this, I should also mention that in the book on the European city I explore Buda. It used to be a royal capital and for me personally, it is a community that I feel I belong to. This approach gave me an opportunity to look at Europe from a particular perspective, which I thought could be interesting to my readers. The book was published within an American publishing house's project, so – when writing – I expected a primarily American audience. Thus, I thought it might be instructive as well as enjoyable for them to see Europe, which is for them already a foreign world, from a perspective that is even more distant and exotic: Central Europe.

Let us remain on this poetic ground. 2021 was the 700th anniversary of Dante's death, who passed away on September 14, 1321. You seem to have a special relationship with the poet, which goes much beyond "mere" scholarly interest in his politics that we mentioned earlier. The poet seems to have been a source of inspiration for your Hungarian collection of poems titled, A Dante-paradoxon *[The Dante Paradox],*

25 Ferenc Hörcher published four volumes of poetry, from *Fényudvar* [Court of Light, poems] (Budapest: Seneca, 1996), to *The City of the Meek* (Budapest: Orpheusz, 2018).

26 See Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

published in 2011.[27] *Could you describe this book briefly and how it came to be?*

It is a collection of poems, in free as well as metric verse and "The Dante Paradox" is the longest one in that volume. However, the title actually has its origins in an issue that is quite distant from Dante's political thought. The inspiration is rather Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the paradox is about the entrapment of midlife crisis. Then, one is not lost in an external labyrinth but in a labyrinth within oneself and the only way out is to find peace within. (In this sense it can recall Plato's effort to compare the governance of the human soul to the governance of the city. The labyrinth is a classical symbol of the complexities of the human spirit). Dante's great epic poem is itself a labyrinth, a proof that Wittgenstein was right, and language can indeed build up complex structures, comparable to the medieval city.[28]

I see, and your Virgil leading the way is…?

My own poet-guide? Well, indeed, Dante was in that book my Virgil. But I guess, the most important influence for me to think about the European city is Géza Ottlik and his novel *Buda*. I have also written about him in English.[29] I interpreted his *Buda* as a reflection on Central European *Bürgerlichkeit* (burghership). His other great work, *Iskola a határon* [School at the Frontier] tells the story of the young pupils of a military school on the border between Austria and Hungary and I also look at it as a valuable source about life in a provincial town in Hungary.

Literature, especially poetry, seems to be central for both your personal and academic endeavors around the urban phenomenon. I have been

27 Ferenc Hörcher, *A Dante-paradoxon* [The Dante Paradox] (Budapest: Naplo, 2011).

28 "Our language can be regarded as an ancient city (*alte Stadt*): a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, of houses with extensions from various periods, and all this surrounded by a multitude of new suburbs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, The German text, with a revised English translation by Gertrude Elizbeth Margaret Anscombe, ed. by Peter M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), §18.

29 Ferenc Hörcher, "The Philosophy of Heroic Civility in G. Ottlik's Novel Buda," *Santalka: Filosofija, Komunikacija* [Coactivity: Philosophy, Communication] 25 (2017), 155–166.

wondering in the run-up to our interview how these two identities – poet and philosopher – have co-existed in your life. I hope you will allow me to close our discussion with this rather big question: have your philosophical inquiries been in some ways nourished by your poetic sensibility and vice versa?

This is indeed a big question, but also crucial for me. Actually, I have recently published an article on the topic of poetry and philosophy where I tried to explain the relationship between them.[30] There, I rely on [Michael] Oakeshott, and claim that sometimes philosophy can be cultivated better in poetry. It is only in modernity that we started to think of philosophy as a fully separate discourse. You were right when you implied that one should look into my poetry as well, to make sense of my philosophical position. Poetry in a certain extent is closer to the dialogue model, and in that sense keeps something of the inheritance of classical philosophy.

In our present post-phenomenology era of Continental philosophy, the claim of early modern philosophy, that it is an objective form of knowledge, has disappeared. Analytic philosophy is still closer to science, yet it remains less sensitive and true to our personal experience as poetry or literature can be. Philosophy understood as a discipline that is dedicated to conceptual analysis cannot give a full account of the human experience – in that respect I share the serious doubts of Roger Scruton about the potential of "science" in human interpersonal affairs. In fact, it cannot be accidental that a number of philosophers chose poetry as the vehicle for expressing their ideas; for instance, Heidegger wrote philosophy in a form that resembled poetry, also Pascal, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. For me, this is crucial. Maybe this is simply a return to earlier forms of writing and the end of the modern methodology of science that can be traced back to Bacon, an effort to express things in an objective and conceptually reliable form.

In this respect, the Renaissance is extremely interesting with its rhetoric. From the philosophical point of view, we usually think that it has little to offer, as there are no formidable thinkers of the likes of Aquinas or Descartes. But if you look at the period from the perspective of rhetoric and literature, then it becomes quite relevant and provides an amazing amount of the rhetor's or poet's richness of

30 "A brief enchantment the role of conversation and poetry in human life," in *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott's Conservatism*, ed. by Corey Abel (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), 238–254.

understanding of human life. Moreover, it actively engages the readers who themselves need to interact with the experience – and there we arrive, again, back at the question of dialogue. Thus, the Baconian/Prussian idea that philosophy by its very nature is something practiced in a confrontational way, and the professor stands in front of the students telling them the truth, is perhaps not so successful, nor is it ideal, rigid and alienated, and that form of interaction should sometimes be replaced with something more promising to address the particular issues of a case, such as conversation and dialogue, or interview, for that matter.

(2021)