Political Influence of Renaissance Neoplatonism in 15th Century Florence

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[Abstract] Despite the prominence of Neoplatonism in 15th century Florence, scholars have suggested that Neoplatonism was merely a “speculative” enterprise, which was confined only to the purely academic and scholastic, while remaining politically irrelevant. However, to cast Florentine Neoplatonism merely speculative and politically withdrawn is not doing justice to the rich political material in Plato’s philosophy and its political impact on 15th-century Medicean Florence. In fact, there are many facets in Plato’s political philosophy that are ideologically suitable for Medici’s rule in 15th century Florence. This paper will examine Plato’s political philosophy and the rise of Cosimo de Medici and the Medici’s rule, during which Cosimo de Medici was portrayed as a wise ruler who fostered humanist education, and then argue that the idea of philosopher-ruler and doubts on democracy were the two facets of Plato’s political philosophy that legitimized the Medici’s rise to power.

[keyword] 15th Century, Italian Renaissance, Florentine Politics, Plato, Neoplatonism, Cosimo de Medici

1] Introduction

Scholarly interests in Plato, whose works were rediscovered after the Crusades, flourished during the Renaissance. Scholars such as Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, were attracted to this subject. Also, artists like Michelangelo shared deep interest in Plato’s philosophy. Renaissance Neoplatonism was certainly one of the major scholarly and intellectual movements that largely affected the Florence during the Renaissance. The importance of Neoplatonism in Florence was exemplified by the Florentine Platonic Academy under the sponsorship of Cosimo de Medici, who was politically and economically the most powerful man in Florence during the 15th century. In addition, it is important to note that Ficino, a dedicated Neoplatonist who translated Plato’s dialogues mostly under Cosimo’s patronage, advised Plato’s ideals and philosophy to both Cosimo and his grandson Lorenzo. [15]

Despite the prominence of Neoplatonism in 15th century Florence, scholars have suggested that Neoplatonism was merely a “speculative” enterprise, which was confined only to the purely academic and scholastic, while remaining politically irrelevant. Garin and Baron, for example, argue that the rise of speculative and politically withdrawn Neoplatonism during the second half of the 15th century was largely facilitated by the Medici, whose status as the unofficial lords of Florence basically undermined Florentine politics based on republicanism. [14] By commissioning and reinforcing a philosophical trend that is politically withdrawn, according to Garin and Baron, the Medici family was able to
diminish other forms of intellectual movement that cherished the ideals of previous Florentine republicanism. [14]

Raphael. School of Athens. 1511. Apostolic, Vatican City.

Other scholars recently proposed counterarguments to Garin and Baron, that there is a little evidence in the relationship between the Medici rule and Neoplatonism as such, without rejecting the idea that Neoplatonism was merely a speculative enterprise. Scholars like Field and Hankins specifically argue that Medici did not actually favor Neoplatonism over other scholarly subjects by pointing out that the roots of Neoplatonism were already established even before the Medici began consistently commissioning the Neoplatonist scholars. [5] Hankins, in his "Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence", casts doubts on the common belief that Cosimo actually founded the Academy dedicated to the study of Plato in Florence. [9] The underlying assumption on Neoplatonism in their works, however, seems to agree with that of Garin. For example, Hankin does not necessarily refute the idea that Neoplatonism is a politically irrelevant, passive philosophy, because the main point of his argument lies in redefining the relationship between Medici and Neoplatonism instead of Neoplatonism per se. [9] However, to cast Florentine Neoplatonism merely speculative and politically withdrawn is not doing justice to the rich political material in Plato's philosophy and its political impact on 15th-century Medicean Florence. In fact, there are many facets in Plato's political philosophy that are ideologically suitable for Medici's rule in 15th-century Florence. Furthermore, scholars like O'Leary and Howlett pointed out that Florentine Neoplatonist like Ficino brought forth the Platonic idea of philosopher-ruler in "creating ... a sense of [Medici's] destiny and inevitability to power" and portraying the Medici as a philosopher-ruler. [13] O'Leary argues that the tenets of Neoplatonism were "more than abstract values", since they successfully legitimized Medici's rule. [19] In order to highlight the political aspect of Florentine Neoplatonism, which has been largely overlooked, I will examine the political philosophy of Plato, especially through Ficino's interpretations, and the impact it had on 15th-century Florence in terms of how it legitimized Medici's rule. After briefly outlining the rise of Cosimo de Medici and the Medici's rule, during which Cosimo de Medici was portrayed as a wise ruler who fostered humanist education, I will argue that the idea of philosopher-ruler, which emphasizes the wisdom of the ruler and entails that the knowledgeable and educated must rule, and doubts on democratic structure, caused by the fear of mobocracy, are the two facets of Plato's political philosophy that correspond to and legitimize the Medici's rise to power.

2. Political Philosophy of Plato
The movement of Neoplatonism emerged gradually in Florence, making its most noticeable appearance in late 15th century. Although the initial interest in Plato was mainly literary and linguistic, the intensity of Platonic studies grew, moved by a desire to synthesize Christian theology and Platonic worldview. When Gemistus Plethon, one of the most noteworthy Plato scholars, built a friendship with Cosimo de’ Medici and introduced Platonism into Florentine life, the movement culminated in the foundation of Neoplatonic Academy in Florence. [7] Florentine Neoplatonism was spearheaded by Marsilio Ficino, an important member of Academy, and Pico della Mirandola, who always wanted to reconcile the schools of Plato and Aristotle, and it is widely known that their interest in Plato was largely contemplative and religious. [7]

However, a substantial degree of interest in the political aspect of Plato among Florentine Neoplatonists was also evident. In fact, it was the Laws, of all Plato’s dialogues, that Cosimo commissioned Ficino to translate first. Ficino translated and left commentaries for both Republic and Laws that he dedicated to Cosimo’s grandson Lorenzo. Furthermore, many of Florentine Neoplatonists or scholars who studied Plato, like Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, were eclectic in their study, making it difficult to distinguish whether their interest in Plato was purely for practical use—i.e. ethics and politics—or speculative and scholarly aim. [17] If we accept the term Political Platonism, coined by Wells, “as an approach [that] does not lead to or require a comprehensive understanding of Plato’s complete works or fundamental tenet...[but entails] eclectic and occasional use of Platonic thought...in a social or political context,” [20] we would be able to focus on specific political facets of Neoplatonism that influenced the Medici’s rule over Florence, and shift away from the need to categorize Florentine Neoplatonism into either the political or the speculative.

Plato’s political philosophy emphasizes the idea of philosopher-ruler, a political leader to whom the virtue of wisdom, acquired through her experience and knowledge in politics, is crucial. More specifically, wisdom refers to the special kind of knowledge in the “supervising and ruling part” of a city, which is shared by the “fewest members [of a city]...by nature.” [1] In fact, wisdom is the virtue on which Plato’s argument—that only the philosopher-rulers are able to make their city truly happy—is based. Without the wisdom of philosopher-ruler, whose love of learning naturally drives her to seek knowledge in politics, no commonwealth will be happy. Hence, Ficino stresses wisdom as a “divine gift” in his commentaries on Republic: ...

Plato also teaches that [knowledge and] experience in civic affairs is a divine gift. But ...

Plato does not allow anyone to govern his State except the man known to have received both of these gifts through some divine quality and divine training, the man whom he always calls the rightful citizen and philosopher...But even
theologians who have as yet no practical experience of human affairs he does not allow to manage public matters until he has first made them accustomed to dealing with private and less serious concerns. He here concludes that the magistracy should be given to no one whose life does not excel the magistracy ... [4]

Moreover, the wisdom of ruler is prioritized over a set of rigid codes or laws. Her wisdom is described as “the living laws”, which are more effective in ruling a highly complex, ever-changing human society. [2] Thus, Ficino claims that the wise men are much better than the strict laws or fixed traditions:

Again, just as a man who is robust by nature, sensible, and restrained in his ways never needs medicines, so a State which has been really well established from its inception and has continued within that framework has no need of numerous laws at the beginning and no need of incessant decrees thereafter. But bad States busy themselves in their daily administration with the promulgation of new laws and never prosper. This is why Plato gives no heed to laws in this best of States, for he trusts that the level-headed good men will be the living laws. [4]

This idea of philosopher-ruler who rules according to her wisdom was taken up by many scholars who studied Plato for political advice. For example, when Erasmus in Education of a Christian Prince dictates that wisdom is the most crucial virtue for rulers—a wisdom by which “princes rule and nobles dispense justice,” interestingly, he seek justification from the works of Plato, specifically his Republic. In this work, Erasmus stressed, Plato painstakingly laid out the details of educating the guardians of the city[1] that “he would have them surpass the common people not in riches or ancestry but in wisdom only.”

[20] Ficino also emphasized this same point by claiming that wisdom was the “surest protection from all vices” in his commentaries on Republic.

[4] Therefore, Ficino, like Erasmus, stressed the passages from Republic about training rulers to nurture wisdom:

Plato also orders [the future guardian] to be practiced in all the activities of city life and to be thoroughly tried and tested, as gold is by fire, in the midst of pleasures, sorrows, toils, and dangers, before the helm of State is entrusted to him... [4]

According to Plato, wisdom could be nurtured by philosophical learning [2], and this claim was used to promote the idea that a leader who eagerly nurtured and commissioned humanistic studies was a wise and fit ruler. This meant that Renaissance scholars utilized Plato to postulate the ideal image of ruler who nurtures wisdom by encouraging humanist education. After Uberto Decembrio, together with his teacher Chrysoloras who held post in Florence briefly between 1397 and 1400 produced a rough

1 So that these properly educated guardians won’t turn against their city, like paid mercenaries. [4]

translation of Plato’s Republic, he used the translation to support the program of humanistic education, which was to bring about “a good society ruled by properly educated leaders”. [10]

According to the Neoplatonists during the Renaissance, a one of the significant features in Plato’s political philosophy is his doubts on democracy, or rule of pluralism. For Plato, democracy is not an ideal political structure because it interferes with the pursuit of common
good of the city. When Plato lists four inferior forms of government—to the ideal city ruled by philosophers and or philosophically trained guardians—he labels democracy a “popular government”, which is described in Ficino’s words:

After the best and blessed form of the State, there remains the question of introducing the lesser forms, which he counts as four...[One of these four lesser forms] is popular government...Lastly, there is the fourth form, the tyranny to which government by the people is particularly prone.

[4]

In a democratic society, important political decisions will be made mostly by people unqualified for running a city, which would result in chaos. Plato concludes that this “government by the people” is not an answer because such a structure allows different classes of citizens within the same society pursue different aims, which often times do not conform to the common good. These people would not even realize what kind of consequences their political decision might bring about, since most of them lack discipline and knowledge necessary for politics. Therefore, it is natural from Plato’s view that these people will look for someone to appear and fix things for them, paving a way to tyranny. [1] This is how democracy, whose ruling group is comprised of different classes that lack of political knowledge and experience, ultimately interferes with pursuit of the common good.

Therefore, Plato claims that “the only way to secure the stability of the state and the wealth and happiness of its citizens was to entrust government to an elite: the Guardians or philosopher kings.” [10] These people are specially educated and trained so that they understand what is best for the state. It is impossible for Plato to think that the mob has this kind of wisdom, which leads him to conclude that they are like brutes. Ficino comments:

In particular, [Plato] thinks that [the common good] is distorted by what the crowd says and believes, and even more by what it does, as well as by riff-raff instructors who adapt their own life and speech to the mob in fawning adulation and pass a similar way of life on to their hearers. And see how apt Plato is in comparing the mob to a great brute and in comparing all States to ships which are ruled by sailors who are totally ignorant of seamanship and who laugh at a man who is accomplished in seafaring. [4]

According to the Plato, the best state is achieved when “outstandingly good men”, who play their role sufficiently and share the same idea about the common good, lead the state. A city is like a ship to be led by the captain with superb seamanship; if it were to be led by a brute who has no knowledge of ship, then the ship will sink.

3. Rise of Medici Family and Their Rule over Florence

Medici family's control of the city of Florence began with Cosimo de’ Medici’s rise to power in the 1430s. With the wealth he accumulated through the Medici bank, Cosimo was able to
consolidate his position within the city and gain influence over the Florentine government. By 1440s, after exiling Albizia family who opposed him, the Medici became the de facto rulers of Florence. [6] However, given the history of Florence being a republic and of the Florentine oligarchs’ attempts to “prevent the ascendency of a single family by vigilantly enforcing a balance of power,” [14] the Medici did not proclaim themselves as the heads of Florentine government.

Thus, neither Cosimo nor his grandson Lorenzo who later succeeded him directly exercised his political power. Instead of exerting political influence by holding important public offices, Cosimo was able to control indirectly important political decisions by maneuvering his business connections with important political figures in and outside of Florence. [11] Cosimo’s exercise of political power was described by Aeneas Sylvius—who later became Pope Pius II—’s remarks on Cosimo’s status:

Political questions are settled in [Cosimo’s] house. The man he chooses holds office... He it is who decides peace and war... He is king in all but name. [8]

While maintaining the apparent structure of democracy which supported the Florence, the Medici undertook the political events secretly. Cosimo was also a well-known sponsor of architects, artists and scholars, which extended his influence over almost every single aspect of Florentine society. This was also one of his indirect political stratagems, since Cosimo used his sponsorship of art and academia to induce a positive image of himself and influenced the public’s perception of him. [6]

Cultivating self-image was a crucial political agenda for Cosimo during his reign. The influence of Neoplatonism can be traced in the way that Cosimo, along with his heir Lorenzo, cultivated his self-image as a man rich in wisdom. By the time he died, Cosimo had successfully created an image of himself as a wise ruler with superb his political acumen and philosophical learning. [3] People in and out of Florence referred to him as "a very wise man" who "behaves very wisely," and "the very man whom the divine Plato wanted to govern cities and public affairs." [3] Public perception of Cosimo was that he was a very competent, wise ruler well trained in philosophy and sharp in debate. The fact that Cosimo’s house was practically a library full of liberal arts collection produced an impression that he was a learned man. Bartolomeo Scala praised his wisdom and compared it to other renowned philosophers:

…it is amazing, I say, that no one, whatever his special ability, left Cosimo without declaring himself to be wiser than when he arrived. For if the topic concerned the obscurities of nature, such was his understanding of every problem that you’d think he always had Thales, Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Democritus and the other philosophers in his hand. If it concerned religion and divinity, good God, what extraordinary, what novel, what unheard of wisdom did he not reveal? And if it happened to concern morals, what law did he not know, what regulation did he overlook? [3]

According to the Ficino, the image of Cosimo who died after reading Plato’s Parmenides and Philebus with Ficino was “sharp in discussion as he was wise and strong in government.” [3] The opinion of Ficino towards the image of Cosimo can be obviously seen when we look at the letter written by Ficino to Lorenzo: "I owe much to our Plato, but I confess I owe no less to Cosimo. For Plato showed me the concept of the virtues but once; Cosimo put them into practice every day."
Similar remarks have been made on Lorenzo as well. In dedicating his *Platonic Theology*, Ficino wrote:

“I decided this work should be dedicated to you in preference to others. It has long been obvious from your philosophical disputations that it is not to you but to others that I need to reveal the secrets of the ancient philosophers, since you have already grasped them it seems with your astonishing natural ability. Rather, I do it...because it seems to me that our beloved Plato would be particularly pleased by this act of respect towards you. For you have achieved what he looked for above all else among the great men of antiquity: you have combined the study of philosophy with the exercise of the highest public authority.” [16]

The obvious influence of Plato can be traced back to the *Republic*, in which Plato claims that a commonwealth will truly be happy when political authority and philosophy coincide with one another. Ficino portrays Lorenzo as an experienced and educated guardian, a philosopher-ruler who is capable of bringing true happiness to his city.

Emphasis on the wisdom of a ruler in Plato’s work matches Cosimo’s image as a wise ruler and a patron of humanist education. Cosimo’s wide-ranging commissions for humanist studies on a large scale also prompted his image as a ruler who nurtured seeking and learning wisdom. He “lavishly patronized the arts with the precisely the kind of spending humanists had intended when they spoke of the civic virtues of wealth.” [14]

In addition to providing stipends for Neoplatonist scholars like Plethron and Ficino, Cosimo also gave funds for the books and book hunting trips of Nicolo Niccoli and Poggio Bracciolini. Also, Cosimo was credited as the one who founded Neoplatonist Academy in Florence, after all. He commissioned numerous translations of classical antiquities, “making him one of Italy’s foremost literary patrons.” [14]

Additionally, the Scipio-Ceasar debate of 1435 bolstered Cosimo’s rule, as Italian humanists around 15th century began to measure the legitimacy of political regimes by cultural and intellectual vitality of its inhabitants. Scholars who were involved in the Scipio-Ceasar debate of 1435 reinforced the idea that any government’s legitimacy relied on promoting vitality of scholarly learning. For example, Poggio, on one hand, who supported Scipio due to his commitment to liberty, claimed that liberal studies would flourish best in an environment of political freedom. On the other hand, Guarino Guarini claimed that the state of learning in Rome bloomed under Ceasar’s rule. [14]

Both sides of the debate supported either Scipio or Ceasar, each representing a republican and authoritarian regime, on the basis that in each regime the intellectual vitality was at its peak. Cosimo, whose generous patronage for liberal arts and humanist studies resulted in the blooming Florentine intellectual culture, certainly fit as a wise ruler on such basis.

One can trace the influence of Plato in terms of his doubts on democracy or ruling by plurality of classes in the times when the Medici family under Cosimo became the single ruling family in Florence. Plato’s idea that the qualified few must rule instead of the plurality fits the Medici rule very well. Florence was, before Medici’s ascent to power, a republic, ruled by a council known as the signoria representing and elected by different Florentine guilds. (Brown 386) The leadership of Florence, then, consisted of representatives from a mixed class of citizens, such as “landed gentry, merchants, and artisans”, closely resembling what Plato described as “government of people” or popular government. [3]

Certainly, consolidation into a single power in the hands of the Medici
would be a fitting Platonic narrative, when the Medici were described as rulers who combined wisdom and political authority. Furthermore, Florence, after 1382, was already undergoing a similar process of becoming oligarchy, where the political power was concentrated in fewer hands of the patriciate, “providing a government that was less representative but probably much more stable and efficient.” [12]

The legitimization that the Medici and Neoplatonist scholars imposed on Florentines, which was the idea that an “unstable republic, unsure of itself and in need of a guiding hand, was fortunate enough to find within...the political skills and benevolence of the Medici.” [18] This legitimization, as we have seen, closely resembles Plato’s argument in the Republic that a popular government often slips into a tyranny due to its instability, and the government led by the specialized class of people—philosopher-rulers—is the best one.

4. Conclusion

Although the appreciation of Florentine Neoplatonism in terms of its political influence during the Renaissance has been relatively overlooked, Plato turned out to have left more profound political impact on the overall Florentine society, contributing to the rise and consolidation of Medici power in the 15th century Florence. Two ideas of Plato’s were taken up during this time—his doubts on democracy and the idea of philosopher-ruler who combined wisdom and political power to bring about true happiness to her city. Cosimo and Lorenzo’s cultivation of self-image as a wise, philosophical rulers who fostered the intellectual vitality of their city was certainly influenced by Plato’s political philosophy. The Medici was able to derive legitimization for their rule from Plato’s argument that a philosopher-king who combines wisdom and political power is the only one who can bring about true happiness of the commonwealth. Perhaps Cosimo himself, too, might have been truly interested in philosophical learning, since, according to de la Mare’s study of Cosimo’s personal library, he read books “more than superficially and was a true enthusiast.” [14]

Genuine wisdom or not, Cosimo was, to say the least, perceived by many as a ruler who combined political authority with wisdom and promoted vibrant intellectual culture in Florence. Plato’s doubts on democracy gained currency when Florence underwent transformation from its pluralistic, republican structure ruled by representatives of mixed class of citizens to the nominally republican state ruled by a single family. This was an apt material for legitimizing the Medici rule, where the Medici was perceived as an elitist group fit for ruling, and the popular rule as unstable and inefficient.

It is true that the crux of scholarly work done on Plato by Neoplatonist like Pico della Mirandola or Ficino were largely mystic and metaphysical, as opposed to being political and ethical. However, delineating their extensive work into the speculative and the practical, and evaluating only one of those aspects in terms of how it affected their society does not seem appropriate. This calls for the need for examining Florentine Neoplatonism in its entirety.
[REFERENCE]


