The relationship between diplomatic practice and political writing in Renaissance Italy is in many ways obvious, in other ways rather indefinite. What constitutes diplomacy and diplomatic documents in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is, to begin with, difficult to determine: the label ‘diplomatic documents’ can plausibly encompass, for example, the majority of the correspondence produced by and addressed to state chanceries. If one adopts a broad definition of ‘diplomacy’, then most of the political writers of the age of Machiavelli and Guicciardini were involved for large parts of their careers in diplomacy, whether ‘internal’ or ‘external’, since often the tasks of envoys from a centre into the subject territory shared important features with those of ambassadors to foreign powers. These men spent days and nights writing or dictating letters, composing reports on what they saw and heard, for the eyes and ears of their lords and colleagues who were not present – this is a conspicuous, unavoidable aspect of their understanding of the world, particularly the world of politics.

Few historians have successfully straddled the divide of methods and sources that separates the analysis of intellectual contexts (books read, education received, contemporary philosophical and political debates) from the study of institutional settings such as offices and councils or chanceries. Riccardo Fubini is one of this very small number. He has offered crucial contributions to the history of institutions (including the history of diplomacy) and the intellectual history (including the history of political thought) of Renaissance Italy and

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masterfully shown how the two can be combined. The loose reflections in this paper are intended in gratitude for his mentorship and many years of long and wide-ranging discussions, which have left an indelible mark on my way of understanding the history of this period and the practice itself of history-writing.

The question one must necessarily start with, then, is whether ‘diplomacy’ in fifteenth-century Italy generated a specific language and a specific, and new, kind of expertise. The intense circulation of people, practices, and information that characterise the Italian political system, particularly in the half-century between 1450 and 1500, does produce a language in a narrower sense: a form of chancery Italian vernacular. This vernacular was a written semi-professional language based on a shared late medieval literary tradition; the process of its relative standardisation preceded the learned normative debates about the *lingua* in the sixteenth century. The political powers of the Italian peninsula in the fifteenth century acted through their chanceries as producers, collectors and exchange nodes of linguistic practices. The result was a fairly unified and common written *lingua*, which, it must be stressed, emerged in response to political needs, like other vernaculars in Europe, but went much beyond any degree of political unity one might want to attribute to the Italian state system in the age of the Italian League.

Can we also say that the language of diplomatic documents, instructions, letters, *relazioni* etc. became a language in the sense defined by John Pocock as «an institutionalised mode of speech», which has its own «vocabulary, rules, preconditions and implications, tone and style»?

Among the preconditions of the language of diplomacy those that seem to me particularly apparent are distance, secrecy and an active purpose. Distance marks the political language of envoys as different from that of perhaps the very same individuals arguing in a government council or giving a public speech in front of an audience. Physical distance was of course the general prerequisite of written correspondence, and entailed modes of communication and styles typical of letter-writing. Distance put the writer in a detached position, and one of unequal information vis-a-vis their correspondent. As a result, the language of diplomatic sources has the exchange of information, including description and narration, at its core.

Diplomatic language also entailed a degree of secrecy, not only because secrecy concealed the processual and liminal nature of political decision-

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2 Interest in the language of chanceries on the part of historians of the Italian language is relatively recent: a brief overview and bibliography is in M. Palermo, *Cancellerie, lingua delle*, in *Enciclopedia dell’italiano*, Roma 2010, ad vocem.

making, but also because, in restricting the privilege of information, secrecy contributed to the mystique of political authority. Secrecy could authorise a confidential, intimate tone, where lower registers of speech could be used in the context of an official exchange, and periphrases ditched in favour of succinct, forthright expressions. The secrecy of diplomatic language was in a way directly opposed to the publicity of political oratory and the ideals of transparency and shared information that were not completely obsolete among ‘popular’ republican oppositions in fifteenth-century Italian states. Undoubtedly many state letters were still written to be read aloud to variously small audiences, and all missives, however secret, ran the risk of being read by unintended addressees. The development of parallel postal services and cryptography in the fifteenth century, in addition to the traditional complementary oral role of the human messenger, were indeed a response to this risk, increasingly seen as politically disruptive in an age where control of (better) information was becoming one of the prerogatives of princes.4

An active (as opposed to contemplative) purpose was a further general precondition of diplomatic writing. The language was action-oriented; communication was established and information transmitted in order to take decisions and shape action, if not immediately, then plausibly in the future. The rhythm and short-termism typical of diplomatic writing distinguish it from the genres of political writing better established in late medieval Europe, such as moral, theological or juridical treatises. The ambassador, informer, envoy or spy, needed on occasion to switch from the authorial position of observer and informer to that of advisor, on the basis of his or her expertise, loyalty, and different perspective. The switch from informant to advisor could happen within the space of the same text.

In fifteenth-century Italy, at a moment when a relatively wide range of individuals was involved in formal or informal diplomatic activity, general principles deriving from different professional and intellectual traditions (classical learning, commercial and financial knowledge, as well as scholastic theological or juridical education), informed diplomatic language, according to the background of each writer. These principles converged and circulated in state correspondence in the form of metaphors, maxims, short learned quotations in Latin or other languages, which followed, rather than precede, the flow of empirical data in order to lend credence to an interpretation or conclusion drawn from the events. Arguments tended to be presented as

4 One of the early and crucial works in this respect is F. Senatore, “Uno mundo de carta”. Forme e strutture della diplomazia sforzesca, Napoli 1998; see also the general reflections in F. De Vivo, Information and Communication in Venice. Rethinking Early Modern Politics, Oxford 2007.
inductive and to proceed from empirical observations to more general, usable conclusions.

If one had to point to the most concrete link between diplomatic language and political writing, a sub-genre that we could call memoranda, *ricordi* or *memoriali* would be a good candidate. A memorandum was a text, often a letter, that contained both the analysis of a situation and explicit advice for action. It is relatively easy to encounter such documents in fifteenth-century Italian state correspondence. A variety of agents authored memoranda, merchants and soldiers as well as ambassadors and officials, scholars, ecclesiastics or lords, following or not an explicit request on the part of the receiver. The most frequent addressees were the princes and the rulers, especially the ‘new’ princes (that is, younger princes, or princes and officials that were new to their task, or those who had recently acquired or reacquired power over a territory and a people), who were thought to be in need of information and advice.

In a memorandum the gaze and explanatory ambition of the writer is higher and more general than it was usual in ordinary correspondence, but continued to stem from the observable facts, seldom venturing far into origin narratives or philosophical first principles, bound as it was by the urgency of advice-giving. Such a character of the genre produced a sort of mid-air authorial position, which presented itself as inductive, was rich in concrete examples and aimed to suggest useful truths.

Macro

It is in memoranda that is easiest to observe a slow coagulation of discourses on government and politics, which are, at least in part, new. Something like a repertoire of general, macronalytic truths pertaining to politics formed in the fifteenth century, here and there prefiguring the writings of the early sixteenth century. One of the most interesting and innovative fields of discourse concerned the relationship between statecraft and fiscality. The (negative) Machiavellian connection between the traditional princely virtue of liberality and taxation⁵, for example, appears in the *memoriale* addressed by a young Borso of Este, brother of the Marquis of Ferrara Leonello, to Alfonso of Aragon in the mid-1440s, when Alfonso was asserting his control over the Kingdom of Naples.

Prima quello che volemo tochare, Sacra Mayestà, el Signor mio fratello et io, è questo, e non pare a nui per modo alcuno cossa da esserve taxuta, anci prima de tute le altre esserve racordata: che nui intendemo la Mayestà Vostra essere de sua natura liberalissima, et intanto che quella mai non se retrova havere pure una

⁵ N. Machiavelli, *De principatibus*, a cura di G. Inglese, Torino 1995, ch. 16.
minima monicionzella de denari, et intanto uxa liberalità, che epa ad uno suo caxo et bixogno non poria mettere le mane alchune volte suxo 1000 ducati, ut sic dicamus.

Cossa che a nui dole, rencrese et pesa infino al cuore.

Non dicemo questo, Sacra Mayestà, perché nui vogliamo persuaderve ad essere misero et a non donare et uxare liberalità, sequendo che se convene ala Mayestà Vostra, ma per ricordare ala Mayestà Vostra che quella voglia mettere tale ordene ale intrade et spexe soe, che le pasino ordinatamente et cum li modi che sum convenienti.

Et ogni anno voglia fare uno cumolo de quigli dinari che ge pare sia possibile, raxonevelmente et cum honore dela Vostra Mayestà, el quale honore de’ fire preposto a tute le altre cosse.

Borso’s practical advice to Alfonso included the constitution, through regular savings, of a treasury fund of around 200,000 ducats to meet extraordinary expenditure and possibly launch an expedition to conquer the duchy of Milan, should the occasion present itself. Borso framed his practical advice in moral-political terms by evoking the theme of princely liberality. He censured (with a touch of irony) Alfonso’s ‘liberalissima natura’, recommending instead a ‘reasonable and honourable’ attitude (‘raxonevelmente et cum honore’) towards spending. For an Italian lord and future prince with extensive military experience such as Borso, the honour of a king required an orderly and solvent economic administration. Liberalitas, a royal virtue that Alfonso deliberately cultivated, ran against good government because it forced the king to tax his subjects more harshly and, Borso argued, less effectively. A parsimonious administration, instead, would bring to the king the security of a small war chest (monicionzella) and make his subject more willing to pay their taxes and lend him money:

E quando la Vostra Mayestà havesse qualche cumolo o monicionzella de dinari, che non poria ali subditì vostri essere ignota, epsi plu presto e mazormente ad ogni vostra voglia supplirian, vezando loro de non posere né dire né fare cum suo aconcio so no tanto quanto piazza ala Vostra Mayestà, per havere el modo, per la via de li denari ut supra accumulati, de farli fare, o volesero o non, tuto quello che ala Vostra Mayestà piacesse.

Faint traces of the unconventional nature of such piece of advice are in the exculpatory little proviso ‘We do not say so, Sacred Majesty, because we want to persuade you to be a miser…’, but the relationship of confidentiality

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7 Matarrese, Sulla lingua volgare della diplomazia estense.
and friendship presupposed by the memorandum and several times evoked authorised the otherwise transgressive content of the advice.

Another Machiavellian theme, the usefulness or danger of government through party⁸, is often encountered in fifteenth-century memoranda, intersecting the fundamental, older dilemma of government between consensus and coercion, «an sit melius amari quam timeri». Borso’s memorandum insisted that it was preferable to found one’s power on ‘the love of the subjects’ («de forteze de li stati consisteno sequondo nui principalmente in lo amore deli subditi, et de questo se ne vede mile exempli et experientie, et e converso el desfacimento deli stati et divixione de quigli è non havere lo amore deli subditi»)⁹ while recognizing that Alfonso may be choosing ‘force’ as an alternative strategy in his newly conquered kingdom.

The Sforza lordship over Genoa is particularly instructive in this respect because of the peculiar nature of Genoese subjection and the constant and detailed flow of correspondence between the rulers and the ruled, which produced an unusual amount of informative-advisory texts. The Milan-Genoa correspondence in those years is one of those cases where the distinction between internal and external, formal and informal diplomacy is impossible, or at the very least unhelpful, since the subject Genoese republic enjoyed in reality a great degree of institutional, financial and political autonomy¹⁰. Francesco Sforza, his wife Bianca Maria and son Galeazzo Maria, or the first secretary of the duchy of Milan, Cicco Simonetta, all found themselves at several points during the second half of the fifteenth century in the position of a ‘new prince’ of Genoa, as conquerors, recent heirs or regents. Many of the authors of memoranda, moreover, were not Milanese officials or ambassadors. Their professional backgrounds are interesting: Biagio de Gradi, for example, was a Lombard merchant resident in Genoa, who acted regularly as informer for the Milanese government and was even nominated, on a couple of occasions, ambassador of the Genoese to Milan. He wrote frequently and frankly about the political situation in Genoa, particularly during periods of turbulence. His was one of the memoranda on parties and public opinion, which were probably requested as a set by Cicco Simonetta in May 1476 – other memoranda were composed by men who held offices in Genoa with the placeat the Sforza government. Biagio’s experience as a merchant enabled him to add to his descriptions general considerations about the peculiar nature of the city, its

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⁹ Matarrese, Sulla lingua volgare della diplomazia extense.
unique geographical position and uniquely mobile population of long-distance merchants and seafarers, and advocate, as a consequence, a specific style of government. Genoa was a city «nel sostenimento dela quale non bixogna tropo homini d’arme né cavali, ma la bona volontà de li homini, per esser situata differentialmente da tute le altre cità del mondo» \(^{11}\). Coercion, in the form of a large military contingent, would be of no use there, because the Genoese were always on the move in Europe and the Mediterranean, always better informed than their rulers. The city could only be governed through the consensus produced by the «bona voluntà» of men, where the word «volontà» designated partisan opinion. His conclusion was shared by others in Genoa, where the doges were described as governing not as «signori naturali» but «cum la volontà de’ citadini et specialiter deli amixi», that is, through consensus and factional alliances.\(^{12}\)

Another Genoese, Gioan Capello, an otherwise little known notary working for an economic office of the republic, produced a short set of Ricordi sharply disagreeing with the strategy of government through party. The Milanese lords (in his case probably Bianca and/or Galeazzo Maria, in the period immediately following Francesco Sforza’s death in 1466) needed to ensure that at least some of those selected for office in Genoa be people who loved them and loved the city, because «l’amor tuto conduce», love guides all things. Earning such love did not require an alliance with the Genoese parties, however.

Secundo: che dicto sia d’alguni e consegiato, attenta la volubilità de Genoa, de stringerse con una parte e con quella reger. Errano costuro che prendano lur fondamento dal passato, nel qual tempo chi regía, per trovarse da sé debile, gli era necessario atacharse con una delle parte, sequendo il dicto Si vis regnare divide etc., et con una parte coniuncto reger fin che potia. Sequitare nunc tal via pestifero consegio saría. La raxon è che Vostra Segnoria è da sé proprio de sé robusto potere che non bisogna atacarse con ulla parte, et eo maxime che tolti sono porti, Finaro, Saona, Pisa, unde se causava turbacione dil non pacificare, tolti sono etiam li atachi de capellaci a Vostra Segnoria concatenati, sensa i quali perturbare già non si pote. Richi nostri figurati a 6 e avessati a comandare so cum luro. Concatenata fosse Vostra Signoria, tiranzare elli vorrian e quei lur essere lo Segnore. Dil che inconveinente seguiria che mezani 5 4 3 se disdigniaran, ecca (sic) disorden cum periculo. Aver cortisie, suo gradu e dignitade, civile sed non segnorile, suficia a richi. Dar audacia ad inferiori doa razò non è utile consegio. Messer Lois governatore franzozo de ciò pati e se destruxe, per dare ad inferiori audacia. Mezani 5 4 3 in numero assai, men passionati, i quali la cità fru[ct]ano, se graverian. Che li extremi capo e coda non stei

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\(^{11}\) Archivio di Stato di Milano, Sforzesco, 963, Biagio de Gradi to Galeazzo Maria Sforza, Genoa, 6 February 1476.

\(^{12}\) See Ferente, *Gli ultimi guelfi*. 
The Ricordi of Gioan Capello, pervaded by the lexicon of professional experience, particularly in fiscal matters, offer a strikingly original analysis of the relationship between government and parties in Genoa. The Sforza princes should ignore the advice of those who, on the basis of the past experience of Genoese doges and French governors, recommended to establish an alliance (concatenarsi) with one party. The dukes of Milan were independently strong and did not need such an alliance to govern: control of ports such as Finale, Savona and Pisa would sever the links between the Genoese party leaders (cappellacci) and their followers. The rich should content themselves with social distinctions of a civil, not a lordly nature (civile sed non segnorile). If the Milanese government established an alliance with them, the rich would exploit it to ‘tyrannise’. To rely on ‘the inferiors’ was also not useful advice: once they gained boldness (audacia) they might destroy the Milanese government as they had done with the French one in 1461. Capello suggested instead to take particular care of the middle class (mezani), the most productive part of the city, those who were neither the ‘rich’ nor the ‘inferiors’. He disregarded moral and political labels for the social orders to adopt a neutral, technical definition: the mezani were the taxpayers in the middle, those belonging to the fiscal bands 5, 4 and 3; the rich were those on band 6, and the ‘inferiors’ those in the lowest two bands. Those in the middle were more numerous and less passionate (that is, less factious) and the Milanese government should avoid causing their resentment by favouring one of the two extremes, ‘the head and the tail’ of the social body. ‘Love guides all things’ he had written earlier, but here he recommended to keep all the ruled ‘equalmente in timore’, in a state of equal fear. The concluding sentence of this section of his Ricordi borrowed from the language of maritime commerce: ‘he who can be the full owner and lord of the ship should not make himself a shareholder’.

The Machiavellian yearning for a leader who would unify Italy, too, has a considerable (if still largely uncharted) pre-history in fifteenth-century Italy. Borso of Este’s memoriale explicitly invited Alfonso of Aragon to make himself ‘re de Italia’, whatever he might have intended in practical terms.

Vui sapiti, Sacra Mayestà, che stato tene el Duca de Milano in Lombardia, e sapiti che lui è Signore senza figlioli, dela età che è, et è de vita, complexione, costumi et

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14 This is how I propose to interpret Capello’s elusive text. In Genoa, where nobles and popolo were treated as fiscally distinct categories (see H. Sieveking, Studio sulle finanze genovesi nel Medioevo e in particolare sulla Casa di San Giorgio, tr. it. a cura di O. Soardi, vol. II, Genova 1906, pp. 136-138), all the groups cited by Capello, including the «richi», must be intended, I think, as internal to the popolo.
ordinato como sapiti; et el quale è a tali termini conducto che senza fallo veruno non è possible ch’el viva quattro o sei anni quando mai plu.

... Nui non vedemo ch’el sia potentia ale parte de Italia che meglio et più facilmente possa intrare et ottenire questo stato, quando potrà la Vostra Mayéstà, vogliandose governare et fare como desopra è dicto e como la può, e como qui gli racordaremos, cum la mezanità del Signore mio fratello, el quale confina col dicto stado et ège vicino, et in epso la Casa da Est è meglio voluta et più amata quaxi che non è Dio, a parlare in questa forma.

... E non è dubio alcuno che la Vostra Mayéstà non sia Re de Italia. L’è vero che li Venitiani sum a questo stato vicini, como è el Marchese mio fratello et vostro figliolo, e sum potenti, e seriano quigli che seriano cusì presti como verun altro ad intrare in questo stato e Signoria del Duca, se potessero. Ma bene che loro gli sia vicini e siano potenti, sum in epso non che ben volsuti ma odiati oltra modo, e non solum in lo stato che tene lo duca, ma in tuto quello che loro tengono in terra, perché loro lo hanno desfacto per fare bona Venexia. El ducha de Savoglia anchora lui è vicino a questo stato del Ducha de Milano, e forsi che anche a lui andarà per la mente de intrare in epso per cupidità de farse mazore che lui non è.

... Et anche nel vero la potentia del ducha de Savoglia non è da fire comperata cum la potentia dela Vostra Mayéstà, perché quella dela Vostra Mayéstà è molto mazore dela soa. Et anche, a dirlo ala Vostra Mayéstà, lui non è amato dal Lombardi per cossa alchuna, e pare a loro ch’el non sia homo che meriti tale stato per multi respecti, et maxime per havere generalmente li Lombardi in odio li Savoglini. Anchora, Sacra Mayesta, poria essere ch’el Conte Francesco per la cupidità che ha de farsi grande, forsi anche perché ha la figliola del Ducha de Milano per dona, si etiam perché fu facto dela Chaxa deli Visconti, forsi anche perché el ducha gli prometta lasarlo suo herede, cercharà de succedere anche lui et intrare in lo dicto stato.  

Borso offers a bird’s-eye overview of the political situation in Italy – the duke of Milan ill and without male heirs, the duke of Savoy close to Milan but not powerful and not much loved, the Venetians the most powerful neighbours but the object of hatred in Lombardy, count Francesco Sforza desirous of greatness and married to the daughter of the duke – as the objective state of affairs that should encourage Alfonso to set his sights on Milan and take action (with the interested support of the House of Este), seizing the opportunity that very soon would present itself.

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15 Matarrese, Sulla lingua volgare della diplomazia estense.
The rich and long-lasting correspondence between the Florentine citizen and diplomat Angelo Acciaioli and the rulers of Milan (that is, duke Francesco Sforza and Cicco Simonetta) from the late 1440s to the early 1470s reveals the alternating fortunes of ideas and plans about the need for a unifying force, or even a «re d’Italia» – a political solution increasingly seen as alternative to the presence of ‘foreign’ (especially French) dynasties in the peninsula.

In 1449, in one of his first ricordi to Francesco Sforza – not yet duke of Milan but already a powerful military leader who controlled vast areas of Lombardy – Acciaioli included the sketch of a plan for a new power balance in Italy:

Besogna che la Illustre Signoria Vostra non pensi solamente alli presenti pericoli, ma alli advenire, et ricordative che altre volte io ve ho dicto queste parole, che ad vuy era necessario fare uno Signore in Italia, el quale fosse si grande, che ve defendesse da ogni altro, et che questo fundamento non era da fare con la Illustre Ligha. Cussì vi dico hora, alla Illustre Signoria Vostra bisogna intrigare altri nelle cose de Ytalia. El Re de Ragona non me pare apto ad questo, perché non me pare potente ad resistere a alla Illustre ligha, la quale subito se collegarebbe con Io Re Renato et co l’altri franzosi. Appresso io so certo della captiva conditione, nella quale se trovano li subditii soy de Catalogna, et nella paura che stanno, che armata de Franza et de Ispagna non entrino in quello Reame, quale subito saria perduto. Et venendo de Franza, dove so stato ben veduto, de’ facti loro ho inteso assay. Et habbiate che sonno potentissimi signori et hanno havuto Ast et portando singularissimo amore alla Signoria Vostra como fanno, che volesse Dio che già doy anni la Signoria Vostra me ce havesse lassato andare in servitio vostro, che so certo che le cose vostre non sarebbono in questi termini.

Acciaioli’s vision was broader than usual: his precocious diplomatic career at the papal court and to the king of France enabled him to speak authoritatively about the situation in France and Catalonia, the specific constraints and ambitions of the European players in addition to the Italian ones, to conclude that it was necessary to «make a Lord in Italy, who would be greater than any other»: this would be a stronger foundation for Francesco Sforza’s rule than a league of states. His advice went unheeded; the Italian League, not a great foreign lord, became the foundation of Sforza (and Medici, and Aragonese) power for half a century.

Nearly twenty years later, having changed his mind a couple of times, Acciaioli produced his last memorandum for an anonymous addressee (in all likelihood

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16 On Angelo Acciaioli see Ferente, Gli ultimi guelfi, ch. 2.
17 Archivio di Stato di Milano, Sforzesco, 37, Nicodemo Tranchedini to Francesco Sforza, Florence, 12 June 1449, ex cifra.
Borso of Este, then Marquis of Ferrara) in the spring of 1467, while in exile from Florence after the failed anti-Medicean attempt of 1466. As a political loser and an exile he had less credibility and a tarnished reputation; his distance from the main theatre of the events limited his ability to hear the ‘words and practices’ and understand the ‘reasons’ that would confirm or contradict his judgement and advice.

He was still able and willing to offer his assessment of the Italian political situation, however.

Given the situation of Italian powers at the time, only Venice appeared to Acciaioli to have the resources, the leverage (the *bastoni*, another Machiavellian word) and the opportunity to become leader in the peninsula. The laborious diplomatic equilibrium among five major and a number of lesser powers

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18 Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Mediceo Avanti il Principato*, LXVIII, 89, cc. 97-98, Angelo Acciaioli to anonymous [but Borso d’Este], Rome, 6 April 1467.

19 *Ibidem.*
achieved with the Italian League seemed to him unstable and unsustainable. The League propped up regimes whose foundations and authority were weak. Galeazzo Maria Sforza, duke of Milan, whom Acciaioli knew well, was an unstable personality. Ferdinand of Aragon in Naples lived in fear of another revolt of his barons and another expedition of the Angevin pretender. The nobles and the people were in those lands changeable and ill-disposed. Florence had lost, with the latest round of exiles, some of its wisest men (among whom Acciaioli undoubtedly counted himself). Pope Paul II lacked reputation and power, Genoa was terribly diminished in its maritime might, Siena and Lucca were simply irrelevant.

The author had obvious personal stakes in the subversion of the political and diplomatic status quo but his analysis in this passage preserved the detached posture of the professional analyst, and eschewed appeals to moral principles or personal preferences. Strengths and weaknesses, the potential and plausibility of the course of action he was recommending are presented as exclusively rooted in the contemporary state of things, the ‘conditions’ as they were in the present («conditioni in che… sono al presente»).

**Micro**

The bird’s-eye overview of the current state of affairs (in a region, in Italy, in Europe, in ‘the world’), the ‘powers’ big and small, their intentions and interests, is one of the most characteristic features of diplomatic memoranda of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The need to report on a plural and changing situation, where many actors and circumstances must be understood individually but also considered in their actual or potential interaction, contributed to a vision of politics as a world of complexity.

The famous second half of the first chapter of Francesco Guicciardini’s *History of Italy*, which contains the description of the balance of powers in Italy at the time of Lorenzo de’ Medici, reveals the filiation from diplomatic language quite evidently.

E conoscendo [Lorenzo de’ Medici] che alla repubblica fiorentina e a sé proprio sarebbe molto pericoloso se alcuno de’ maggiori potentati ampliasse più la sua potenza, procurava con ogni studio che le cose d’Italia in modo bilanciate si mantenessino che più in una che in un’altra parte non pendessino: il che, senza la conservazione della pace e senza vegghiare con somma diligenza ogni accidente benché minimo, succedere non poteva.

Concorreva nella medesima inclinazione della quiete comune Ferdinando di Aragona re di Napoli, principe certamente prudentissimo e di grandissima estimazione; con tutto che molte volte per l’addietro avesse dimostrato pensieri ambiziosi e alieni da’ consigli della pace, e in questo tempo fusse molto stimolato da Alfonso duca
di Calavria suo primogenito, il quale malvolentieri tollerava che Giovan Galeazzo Sforza duca di Milano, suo genero, maggiore già di venti anni, benché di intelletto incapacciissimo, ritenendo solamente il nome ducale fusse depreso e soffocato da Lodovico Sforza suo zio; il quale, avendo più di dieci anni prima, per la imprudenza e impudichi costumi della madre madonna Bona, presa la tutela di lui e con questa occasione ridotte a poco a poco in potestà propria le fortezze, le genti d’arme, il tesoro e tutti i fondamenti dello stato, perseverava nel governo; né come tutore o governatore, ma, dal titolo di duca di Milano in fuora, con tutte le dimostrazioni e azioni da principe. E nondimeno Ferdinando, avendo più innanzi agli occhi l’utilità presente che l’antica inclinazione o la indegnazione del figliuolo, benché giusta, desiderava che Italia non si alterasse; o perché, avendo provato pochi anni prima, con gravissimo pericolo, l’odio contro a sé de’ baroni e de’ popoli suoi, e sapendo l’affezione che per la memoria delle cose passate molti de’ sudditi avevano al nome della casa di Francia, dubitasse che le discordie italiane non dessino occasione a’ francesi di assaltare il reame di Napoli; o perché, per fare contrapeso alla potenza de’ viniziani, formidabile allora a tutta Italia, conoscesse essere necessaria l’unione sua con gli altri, e specialmente con gli stati di Milano e di Firenze.

Né a Lodovico Sforza, benché di spirito inquieto e ambizioso, poteva piacere altra deliberazione, soprastando non manco a quegli che dominavano a Milano che agli altri il pericolo dal senato viniziano, e perché gli era più facile conservare nella tranquillità della pace che nelle molestie della guerra l’autorità usurpata. E se bene gli fussino sospetti sempre i pensieri di Ferdinando e di Alfonso d’Aragona, nondimeno, essendogli nota la disposizione di Lorenzo de’ Medici alla pace e insieme il timore che egli medesimamente aveva della grandezza loro, e persuadendosi che, per la diversità degli animi e antichi odii tra Ferdinando e i viniziani, fusse vano il temere che tra loro si facesse fondata congiunzione, si riputava assai sicuro che gli Aragonesi non sarebbono accompagnati da altri a tentare contro a lui quello che soli non erano bastanti a ottenere.

Essendo adunque in Ferdinando, Lodovico e Lorenzo, parte per i medesimi parte per diversi rispetti, la medesima intenzione alla pace, si continuava facilmente una confederazione contratta in nome di Ferdinando re di Napoli, di Giovan Galeazzo duca di Milano e della republica fiorentina, per difensione de’ loro stati; la quale, cominciata molti anni innanzi e dipoi interrotta per vari accidenti, era stata nell’anno mille quattrocento ottanta, aderendovi quasi tutti i minori potentati d’Italia, rinnovata per venticinque anni: avendo per fine principalmente di non lasciare diventare più potenti i viniziani; i quali, maggiori senza dubbio di ciascuno de’ confederati ma molto minori di tutti insieme, procedevano con consigli separati da’ consigli comuni, e aspettando di crescere della altrui disunione e travagli, stavano attenti e preparati a valersi di ogni accidente che potesse aprire loro la via allo imperio di tutta Italia: al quale che aspirassino si era in diversi tempi conosciuto molto chiaramente; e specialmente quando, presa occasione dalla morte di Filippo Maria Visconte duca di Milano, tentorono, sotto colore di difendere la libertà del popolo milanese, di farsi signori di quello stato; e più frescamente quando, con guerra manifesta, di occupare il ducato di Ferrara si sforzorono. Raffrenava facilmente questa confedera-
zione la cupidità del senato viniziano, ma non congiugneva già i collegati in amicizia sincera e fedele: conciossiacosché, pieni tra se medesimi di emulazione e di gelosia, non cessavano di osservare assiduamente gli andamenti l’uno dell’altro, sconcidendosi scambievolmente tutti i disegni per i quali a qualunque di essi accrescere si potesse o imperio o riputazione: il che non rendeva manco stabile la pace, anzi destava in tutti maggiore prontezza a procurare di spegnere sollecitamente tutte quelle faville che origine di nuovo incendio essere potessino\(^{20}\).

Guicciardini’s stately prose owes its architecture to the models of classical historiography but his analytical procedure here is that of a diplomatic report, where the author describes in detail, both individually and in their reciprocal connections, the circumstances, purposes and actions of the main political powers in Italy, and presents the situation from a detached and all-encompassing point of observation. Guicciardini’s historical-political analysis (but not the resulting political judgement) echoes the one sketched by Angelo Acciaioli more than a half century earlier. An axis of weakness linked the destinies of Milan, Florence and Naples, while Venice was the greatest of the Italian powers, and the only one with plausible ambitions of peninsular leadership. With the portrayal of a system in tension Guicciardini presented peace and political equilibrium as the result not so much of shared objectives or prevailing policies, but of behaviors locally inspired by different and contrasting motives.

Guicciardini’s ‘panoptic’ gaze, accumulates detail, strives to convey as full a picture as possible. This cognitive attitude, which is so evident in the *History of Italy*, is, it can be argued, a product of his experience as a diplomat, and, at least in part, of a transfer of procedures from the diplomatic language into historiography. Guicciardini’s posture is an exercise in the understanding and depiction of complexity. It is the response to the challenge presented by the super-abundance of information engulfing Italian chanceries at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Transported outside the confidential realm of diplomatic correspondence, however, Guicciardini’s habit of seeing complexity took a different significance, became disturbing. Some readers thought that it merely revealed the corruption in the author’s own eye. Well before De Sanctis’s romantic castigation of «the man of Guicciardini»\(^{21}\), Guicciardini’s moral reputation was inferior to his reputation as historian but also connected to his way of writing history. Michel de Montaigne wrote about the *History of Italy*: «De tant d’ames et effets qu’il juge, de tant de mouvements et de conseils, il n’en rapporte jamais un seul à la vertu, à la religion, à la conscience […] Cela me fait craindre qu’il y ait un


The unpleasant suspicion seemed to be confirmed when Guicciardini’s collection of personal papers and particularly the pieces of advice to self that he called *Ricordi* were first published in the nineteenth century.

The readers of Guicciardini have continued to find his gaze irresistible and troubling in equal measure. Francesco De Sanctis located precisely in Guicciardini’s «perspicacious eye» the force before which «the whole ancient edifice collapses, and nothing remains of the Middle Ages»

But to the romantic nationalist Guicciardini’s disenchanted and sharp vision, the mature product of a «highly civilized society», made the man «limp» (*fiacco*), corrupt, morally inferior, in its «impotence», to the paragon Machiavelli. (As Riccardo Fubini has shown, the historical judgement on Guicciardini’s morality was for De Sanctis a way to tackle Burckhardt and criticise the Burckhardtian vision of the Renaissance in its relation to modernity – De Sanctis’ saw decline where Burckhardt saw rebirth).

Antonio Gramsci found himself in agreement with De Sanctis. He saw in Guicciardini’s cognitive attitude a form of flat scepticism, and, importantly, recognised in it «the diplomatic habit»:

For Gramsci the error was to confuse politics and diplomacy: in politics «the voluntarist element has a much greater importance than in diplomacy. Diplomacy sanctions and tends to conserve the situations created by the clash of state politics». Of the diplomat, «a subaltern, subordinate, executive-bureaucratic profession», Guicciardini had the scepticism and the meanness,

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«scettico e gretto» – nothing of the greatness of Machiavelli’s pessimism, «or better, realism».

When Roberto Ridolfi published Guicciardini’s biography in 1960, the debate on Guicciardini’s ‘morality’ had already begun to change, but it was still somewhat a discovery that this morally ‘limp’ author had been a good citizen, a lover of his country, a loyal ambassador and an incorruptible governor of a difficult area of the Papal States. During his long career, Guicciardini had been more of a ruler than Machiavelli ever was – both men, in any event, had belonged, amid contradictions and hesitations, to the developing class of professional servants of the state, in an age when politics and diplomacy, as fields of discourse, were in truth hard to separate.

In Guicciardini’s case the complexity he trained himself to see in the social and political world mirrored and contributed to shape a complex subjectivity, at least in authorial terms. Given the volume and diversity of his writings not clearly destined for publication, Guicciardini’s penchant for reflexivity cannot be ascribed to the constraints of a given literary genre. On the contrary, he seemed to favour genres where the author’s place is not confined to a single position, where his subjectivity was multiple and divided: the dialogue, the Ricordi and the advice and the Consolatoria addressed to self, or the fictitious judiciary debate about his own life in Accusatoria and Defensoria. One can see there, perhaps, how Guicciardini’s professional habit of dissecting the ‘conditions’ of human behavior, his attention for the individual perspective and the multiplicity of motives and intentions that shape reality through their interaction, was also, in a moment of forced inactivity, turned inwards towards an understanding of the subjective process of knowing. The ability to see the flux of things and the lack of general rules in the world around him was a source of intimate «torment», for it could push him, and those he advised, towards error or paralisis. De Sanctis’ dismay at ‘so much wisdom together with so


28 F. Guicciardini, Ricordi, a cura di G. Masi, Milano 1994, n. 156: «Io sono stato di natura molto resoluto e fermo nelle azioni mie. E nondimeno, come ho fatto una resoluzione importante, mi accade spesso una certa quasi penitenza del partito che ho preso: il che procede non perché io creda che, se io avessi di nuovo a deliberare, io deliberassi altrimenti, ma perché innanzi alla deliberazione avevo più presente agli occhi le difficoltà dell’una e l’altra parte, dove, preso el partito, né temendo più quelle che col deliberare ho fuggite, mi si presentano solamente quelle con chi mi resta a combattere; le quali, considerate per se stesse, paiono maggiore che non parevano quando erano paragonate con l’altra. Donde seguita che a liberarsi da questo tormento bisogna con diligenza rimettersi innanzi agli occhi anche le altre difficoltà che avevi poste da canto». 
much impotence\textsuperscript{29}, had already been Guicciardini’s dismay, since the latter had always recognised, in the complexity of reality, the need for decision, and ultimately for action. Understanding without action is useless, «come avere uno tesoro in una arca con obligo di non potere mai trarlo fuora»\textsuperscript{30}.

The reflection on how to think and how to decide occupies most of Guicciardini’s Ricordi and Guicciardini’s theory of knowledge has deservedly been the object of extensive and renewed interest in the last twenty years. It is perhaps still worth of mention, however, that one of his few normative statements about the specificity of historical writing resorted to the metaphor of the gaze: «scriverle, in modo che così avessi tutte le cose innanzi agli occhi chi nasce in una età lontana come coloro che sono stati presenti: che è proprio el fine della istoria»\textsuperscript{31}. «To have all things before one’s eyes» is to know reality and to write about it is history. Originating, at least in part, in the practice of diplomacy, Guicciardini’s approach was not sceptical as much as microanalytical and actor-centered and found in historiography its most congenial outlet.

\textsuperscript{29} De Sanctis, L’uomo del Guicciardini, pp. 227, 220.

\textsuperscript{30} Guicciardini, Ricordi, n. 34. «Uomo d’azione ed a un tempo portato da invincibile bisogno a chiarire a sé medesimo le ragioni e i modi dell’azione», in M. Fubini, Studi sulla letteratura del Rinascimento, p. 167.

\textsuperscript{31} Guicciardini, Ricordi, n. 143.