

Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence

Niccolò Machiavelli is the most prominent and notorious theorist of violence in the history of European political thought – prominent because he is the first to candidly discuss the role of violence in politics, and notorious because he treats violence as virtue rather than as vice. In this original interpretation, Yves Winter reconstructs Machiavelli's theory of violence and shows how it challenges moral and metaphysical ideas. Winter attributes two central theses to Machiavelli. First, violence is not a generic technology of government but a strategy that tends to correlate with inequality and class conflict. Second, violence is best understood not in terms of conventional notions of law enforcement, coercion, or the proverbial “last resort,” but as performance. Most political violence is effective not because it physically compels another agent who is thus coerced; rather, it produces political effects by appealing to an audience. As such, this book shows how in Machiavelli's world violence is designed to be perceived, experienced, remembered, and narrated.

YVES WINTER is assistant professor of political science at McGill University. His research is concerned with critical and historical approaches to violence and with conceptions of political order. His work has been published in *Political Theory*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, *Constellations*, *International Theory*, *Social Research*, and *New Political Science*.

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YVES WINTER

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Note on Texts Cited

Unless otherwise indicated, I have relied on the following editions and translations:

- CW *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, trans. Allan Gilbert, 3 vols. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).
- D *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*. In *Opere I*, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi Gallimard, 1997).
Discourses on Livy, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- EN *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli*, ed. Jean-Jacques Marchand, Mario Martelli, Francesco Bausi et al. (Rome: Salerno, 2001–17).
- FH *Istorie Fiorentine*. In *Opere III*, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi, 2005).
Florentine Histories, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).
- OP *Machiavelli: Opere*, ed. Corrado Vivanti, 3 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1997–2005).
- P *Il Principe*, ed. Giorgio Inglese (Turin: Einaudi, 2013–14).
The Prince, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Introduction

Violence has always been the *ultima ratio* in political action.

— Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

It has been and remains one of the abiding concerns of the Western political theorist to weave ingenious veils of euphemism to conceal the ugly fact of violence.

— Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision*

A POLITICAL THEORY OF VIOLENCE

Violence is sometimes depicted as a symptom of political disorder, of chaos, and even as an antonym of order. Hence the proscription of unsanctioned violence is often cited as one of the structural imperatives and historical successes of modern liberal states. On the flip side of the coin, maintaining a space in which violence is outlawed depends conceptually and empirically on the state's capacity and periodic deployment of overwhelming forms of repressive violence.¹ Thus the very order that is threatened by violence relies on it, both as a means by which it is instituted and as a mechanism of its reproduction. Violence, in other words, is both subject to orders and constitutive of them. The expression “orders of violence” is mine rather than Machiavelli's, but the word

¹ On this antinomy, see Étienne Balibar, *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1–24.

“orders” [*ordini*] figures prominently in the Machiavellian lexicon. It sometimes denotes rules or institutions and sometimes formations or ways of doing something. To think of formations of violence in terms of “orders” thus addresses not only violence’s constitutive implication in political order but also the ways in which it is organized, sequenced, and coordinated.

Political violence is not a uniform phenomenon. Some formations of violence seek to reproduce the status quo, others seek to transform it; some are ostentatiously exhibited, others are out of sight. To address these formations in a way that goes beyond platitudes requires a grasp of how, in each case, violence functions, what its internal logics and mechanisms are, whether violence is concealed or displayed, actual or latent, escalating or suspended. These diverse forms pose a challenge to political theorists. They suggest that attempts to theorize violence by subsuming its forms under a single conceptual umbrella are likely to disappoint. To treat violence in an undifferentiated way, whether as an evil to be proscribed from the political world or an all-purpose instrument stored in the cliché-ridden political toolbox, cannot account for the heterogeneity of its forms. Political violence is best understood as historically specific effects of strategies and tactics deployed against the background of a given balance of forces. This is what Machiavelli argued five centuries ago, and it remains true today. Rather than treating violence as an evil, Machiavelli demystifies it and views it as a political tactic. Proposing an embodied and materialist analysis of how violence operates, what its causes and effects, phenomenal forms, targets, mechanisms, and circuits are, he makes political violence thinkable. In doing so, he puts forward a historical and political perspective that deflates, depersonalizes, and de-moralizes violence in politics, three moves that are crucial for a political reckoning with questions of violence.

Machiavelli is an analyst, advocate, and critic of violence. As an analyst, he probes the causes, dynamics, and functions of violence in the formation and reproduction of states. As an advocate, he defends particular modes of violence – especially anti-oligarchic ones – as politically justified while denouncing gratuitous bloodshed. And as a critic, he offers an abiding challenge to moral and ontological approaches to political violence. A Machiavellian perspective calls into question a number of presuppositions that inform modern liberal and democratic political discourses. It challenges the idea that political violence is an index of social disintegration and political disorder. It calls into question the liberal vision of political modernity as an epochal effort to contain violence.

It disputes the identification of violence with tyranny and authoritarian government, just as it queries the romantic aspiration to evacuate violence from political life altogether. It casts doubt on the idea that violence can be conclusively separated from speech; that cruelty is an archaic and politically defunct mode of violence; and that violence marks the natural prehistory and founding rationale of the modern state, yet is overcome by the very form of that state. But it also questions the modern realist's conviction that violence represents a pre-political instrument of nature and as such, an inescapable last resort.

Everyone knows that violence can be used to kill and to maim and that the threat of physical violence compels people to do things they would otherwise refuse. But beyond these truisms, what do we know about the mechanics by which violence produces political effects? Political theorists and philosophers have frequently debated when and under what conditions violence is legitimate. They have sometimes, less frequently, asked what violence is. But they have rarely ventured into describing and analyzing the mechanisms of its production, circulation, and consumption. As a result, political theorists know a fair amount about the *when* of violence but little about the *what* and the *how*.

The debate about violence in contemporary political theory and philosophy is characterized by a peculiar conjunction: an explosion of discourse about violence coupled with a series of disavowals. While academic debates proliferate, violence is routinely *depoliticized*. That is to say, violence is relegated outside the domain of politics or treated as an unpolitical implement within. Let me briefly sketch four ways in which this depoliticization tends to take place: (1) marginalization, (2) technicization, (3) moralization, and (4) ontologization.

Marginalization. The most obvious manner in which violence is depoliticized is by representing it as alien or peripheral to the political sphere.² Theorists who regard discourse or persuasion as the characteristic medium of politics often depict violence as anomalous, exceptional, or pathological, as a mode of conduct at odds with the conventions of

² One version of such marginalization frames democracy as a fundamental opposite of violence. In Barrington Moore's words, "One quite strongly held opinion about the connection between violence and democracy holds that modern Western democracy is both an improved substitute for violence and altogether incompatible with any form of violence. Ballots are better than bullets, so the saying goes, and fortunate is the country that has learned to substitute free discussion for violence from either the right or the left." Barrington Moore, Jr. "Thoughts on Violence and Democracy" *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 29, no. 1 (1968), 1.

political life.³ The natural law tradition conventionally characterized the transition from the state of nature to society as a renunciation of natural violence. Thus violence is figured as an uncivilized or premodern relic, left behind or transformed at the proverbial threshold of the political world. Frequently represented as naked, crude, and mute, violence is considered as a product of pre-political nature. Sometimes, such naturalizations take the form of essentialist claims about human nature, for instance the idea that aggression is an immutable feature of human psychology; sometimes they take the opposite tack, depicting violence as fundamentally unnatural and inhuman; and at other times, they represent violence as an all-too-human weakness, a sort of character vice that demands therapy in the form of moral education.⁴ What unites these approaches is that they imagine violence as a pre-political vestige that needs to be channeled, diverted, or reworked.

Technicization. The type of philosophical liberalism that marginalizes violence along such lines is frequently ridiculed as naïve by authors who describe themselves as realists. Realist political discourse typically concedes – as a matter of course – that violence plays an important role in political life.⁵ In fact, many realists regard violence as such an obvious instrument in politics that they consider the entire debate about violence trivial.⁶ Yet by deeming violence banal and transparent, such authors also proceed to depoliticize it. When violence is treated as a “last resort” or

³ Habermas’s theory of communicative power which seeks to “strip . . . power of its violent substance by rationalizing it” is a perfect example. See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 188, see also 151, 182.

⁴ For some classic formulations of authors who derive violence from philosophical anthropologies, see René Girard, “Mimesis and Violence: Perspectives in Cultural Criticism,” *Berkshire Review* 14 (1979); Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, trans. Marjorie Kerr Wilson (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974). The idea that violence is a disruption of the natural order of things goes back to Aristotle. See Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. R. P. Hardie, and R. K. Gaye (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 230a29–b9, 253b33–255b35. For violence as a character vice with moral education as its antidote, see Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 141.

⁵ Kenneth Waltz writes: “In politics force is said to be the ultima ratio.” Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 113.

⁶ Richard Tuck notes: “Of course, when the Roman texts were accorded overwhelming respect, as began to happen in fifteenth century Italy, Roman ideas about the need for a city to use relatively unscrupulous violence in the pursuit of liberty and glory naturally resurfaced in a strong form – most famously and distinctively in the case of Machiavelli. As we can now see, however, in this area he simply put very clearly indeed something which had always been present in the Roman texts, the character of which does not need further repeating.”

as the “ultima ratio” of politics, the implicit premise is that violence is tantamount to enforcement. It imposes a political will by coercing other actors to perform or desist from particular acts. Violence is thus regarded as a mechanistic cause; its various instantiations are presumed to be isomorphic, translatable into gradated expressions of potency and impact.⁷ Accordingly, violence poses primarily operational problems, and insofar as it is just a tool, there is little that is theoretically profound about it. In Hannah Arendt’s well-known words, violence is “incapable of speech,” which is why “political theory has little to say about the phenomenon of violence and must leave its discussion to the technicians.”⁸

Moralization. Violence is routinely represented as an evil. As such, moral and political philosophers have subjected it to endless debates about the conditions under which its use is permissible. From just war theory through the dirty hands problem, to the torture and ticking bomb controversies, there are entire genres of moralistic discourse that approach violence exclusively as a problem of justification.⁹ One of the characteristics of these debates is that they are astonishingly abstract and replete with esoteric thought experiments.¹⁰ Such abstraction triggers a third kind of depoliticization, because it obscures the contexts of power and domination in which violence is actually deployed, sanitizing the moral considerations of any contamination by political reality. In doing so, they typically bracket considerations of causes, dynamics, and implications. Often implied is a conception of violence as an apolitical or antipolitical acid that eats away

Tuck’s argument that Machiavelli is merely an echo chamber for the Roman adage that politics relies on violence is undercut by his obsessive invocation of a rhetoric of evidence. The rhetorical appeal to self-evidence (“of course,”...“naturally,”...“as we can now see,”...“simply,”...“very clearly indeed”) raises a question: If it is so obvious that unscrupulous violence is the natural means for liberty and glory, then why does this self-evident truth need an armada of adverbial amplifiers? See Richard Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Thought and International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

⁷ See Dustin E. Howes, *Toward a Credible Pacifism: Violence and the Possibilities of Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 2.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1990), 19.

⁹ Here I have in mind not the classic restatement of Just War theory by Michael Walzer, which deserves credit for its attempt to think through historical cases but rather recent work by revisionist authors. See, for example, Jeff McMahan, “Innocence, Self-Defense and Killing in War,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1994); David Rodin, *War and Self-Defense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

¹⁰ See for instance Frances Kamm, “Terrorism and Severe Moral Distinctions,” *Legal Theory* 12, no. 1 (2006); Jeff McMahan, “Torture in Principle and in Practice,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (2008).

at the normative foundations of social and political life. On this view, violence is an exogenous threat to moral life yet nonetheless susceptible to evaluation by the ledgers of moral philosophy.

Ontologization. Historically, the ontology of violence has frequently been framed in terms of a panoply of metaphysical binaries that oppose violence to nature, culture, representation, language, and logos. These metaphysical schemas depoliticize violence by definitional *fiat*, along the same lines as the marginalization discussed earlier. A philosophically more sophisticated version of ontologizing violence is advanced by Jacques Derrida (and favored by some strands of radical democratic theory) who regards violence as a condition of signification and of thought as such. Violence, on this reading, refers not to injury of a body or to any phenomena that supervene on preexisting nonviolent situations. Rather, violence is understood as originary, as isomorphic with the act of naming, classifying, and differentiating that is instituted through language.¹¹ Although this transcendental violence is sometimes distinguished from empirical instances, the equivocation suggests an ambiguity between the two that tends to dematerialize and mystify empirical violence. Historical formations of violence are emptied of political content and treated not as effects of concrete historical struggles but as derivative of a more profound originary violence.

Whether it is by dismissing, trivializing, moralizing, or dematerializing violence, these four faces of depoliticization have contributed to the current impasse in contemporary political theory: the proliferation of discourse about violence coupled with a peculiar disavowal. Machiavelli, I argue, offers a much-needed corrective of such views. He advances a materialist conception of political violence that eschews both liberal moralism and realist technicism without succumbing to ontologization. He contests the idea of violence as natural, naked, or crude and instead advances a conception of political violence that is constitutively entangled

¹¹ Empirical manifestations of violence are derivative of this primary violence, insofar as they presuppose moral categories that are inaugurated by the originary violence of language. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 106, 112; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 79–153. See also Rodolphe Gasché, *Deconstruction: Its Force, Its Violence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016); Elizabeth Grosz, “The Time of Violence: Deconstruction and Value,” *Cultural Values* 2, no. 2/3 (1998); Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), xv–xvii, 1; Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, “Avowing Violence: Foucault and Derrida on Politics, Discourse and Meaning,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 37, no. 1 (2011).

with symbolic supports, rituals, and dispositions. Political violence, Machiavelli insists, always involves mediation. While violence is always bodily, it is never immediate. These symbolic aspects are central to the ways in which violence produces political effects. Hence Machiavelli treats violence not as a natural residue but as variegated tactics that are subject to specific protocols, logics, and constraints.

TRAJECTORIES OF MACHIAVELLIAN VIOLENCE

This book is both about political violence and about Machiavelli. Machiavelli's preoccupation with violence is widely acknowledged but poorly understood by commentators. In a brief but important section of *Politics and Vision* (originally published in 1960), Sheldon Wolin highlights the originality of Machiavelli's thinking about violence. Noting Machiavelli's preoccupation with applying violence in a controlled way and dosing it appropriately, Wolin contends that he devised an "economy of violence, a science of the controlled application of force."¹² This idea of an *economy of violence* is central both to my argument about violence and to my interpretation of Machiavelli. Wolin's suggestive but overly condensed pages invite a more sustained and detailed investigation of the topic, yet so far, the Machiavelli scholarship has not delivered the goods. Over the course of the past five decades, some aspects of Machiavellian violence have been treated extensively in the literature: the concepts of the citizen-soldier, social conflict, spectacular executions, and key violent figures such as Romulus, Hannibal, Agathocles, and Cesare Borgia.¹³ While studies of these issues have shed light on various dimensions of

¹² Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 198. The task of a progressive politics, Merleau-Ponty wrote a decade prior, is to find a violence that subsides over time. On Wolin's reading, Machiavelli may well have been the first author in the history of political thought to articulate this idea. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: The Communist Problem*, trans. John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). On the formulation of an "economy of violence," see also Ettore Janni, *Machiavelli*, trans. Marion Enthoven (London: George G. Harrap, 1930), 282.

¹³ On the citizen-soldier, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); Timothy J. Lukes, "Martialing Machiavelli: Reassessing the Military Reflections," *The Journal of Politics* 66, no. 4 (2004); Ezio Raimondi, "Machiavelli and the Rhetoric of the Warrior," *MLN* 92, no. 1 (1977); Barbara Spackman, "Politics on the Warpath: Machiavelli's Art of War," in *Machiavelli and the Discourse of Literature*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Victoria Kahn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). On class conflict and tumults, see Filippo Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in*

Machiavellian violence, they are remarkably discontinuous with one another. In particular, the military studies tend to treat questions of war and military organization as separate from the scenes of cruelty from *The Prince*. J.G.A. Pocock's groundbreaking argument concerning Machiavelli's revival of republicanism stresses the importance of the citizen-soldier yet considers political violence solely as a question of who should bear arms.¹⁴ Similarly, most of the work on Machiavelli's militia project and his *Art of War* treats violence as unpolitical, as if the problem of military organization could be separated from the concerns with force and cruelty developed in the political works.¹⁵ The same goes for recent

Machiavelli and Spinoza (London: Continuum, 2009); John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Gabriele Pedullà, *Machiavelli in tumulto: Conquista, cittadinanza e conflitto nei 'Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio'* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2011). On executions, see Wayne A. Rebhorn, *Foxes and Lions: Machiavelli's Confidence Men* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 86–134. On Romulus, see Gennaro Sasso, "Machiavelli e Romolo," in *Machiavelli e gli antichi e altri saggi* (Milan and Naples: Ricciardi, 1986–1997), vol. 1. On Hannibal, see Robert Fredona, "Liberate Diuturna Cura Italiam: Hannibal in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli," in *Florence and Beyond: Culture, Society and Politics in Renaissance Italy: Essays in Honour of John M. Najemy*, ed. David S. Peterson and Daniel E. Bornstein (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2008); Jean-Jacques Marchand, "Da Livio a Machiavelli. Annibale e Scipione in *Principe*, XVII," *Parole Rubate: Rivista Internazionale di Studi sulla Citazione* 7, no. 13 (2016). On Agathocles, see Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 18–43; Victoria Kahn, "Revisiting Agathocles," *The Review of Politics* 75, no. 4 (2013); John P. McCormick, "Machiavelli's Agathocles: From Criminal Example to Princely Exemplum," in *Exemplarity and Singularity: Thinking Through Particulars in Philosophy, Literature, and Law*, ed. Michèle Lowrie and Susanne Lüdemann (London: Routledge, 2015); John P. McCormick, "Machiavelli's Inglorious Tyrants: On Agathocles, Scipio and Unmerited Glory," *History of Political Thought* 36, no. 1 (2015). On Cesare Borgia, see Gennaro Sasso, *Machiavelli e Cesare Borgia: Storia di un giudizio* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1966); Gennaro Sasso, "Ancora su Machiavelli e Cesare Borgia," *La Cultura* 7, no. 1 (1969); Jean-Jacques Marchand, "L'évolution de la figure de César Borgia dans la pensée de Machiavel," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte / Revue suisse d'histoire* 19, no. 2 (1969).

¹⁴ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*.

¹⁵ See for instance Marcia L. Colish, "Machiavelli's Art of War: A Reconsideration," *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1998); Felix Gilbert, "Machiavelli: The Renaissance of the Art of War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy. From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Michael Mallet, "The Theory and Practice of Warfare in Machiavelli's Republic," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Mikael Hörnqvist, "Perché non si usa allegare i Romani: Machiavelli and the Florentine Militia of 1506," *Renaissance Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2002); Mikael Hörnqvist, "Machiavelli's Military Project and the Art of War," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge

studies about empire that have offered important correctives to the conventional and peaceful view of republicanism.¹⁶ As much as these interpretations highlight the imperialist character of Machiavelli's republicanism, they treat the issue of warfare apart from other formations of violence. What is missing from this scholarship is a systematic treatment of political violence, including its various formations and "orders," something this book seeks to offer.

It is not that scholars haven't recognized the weight of violence in Machiavelli's work. But patterns of depoliticization similar to those I identified in the broader literature – marginalization, technicization, moralization, and ontologization – are replicated in the Machiavelli scholarship. On one end of the spectrum are readers who marginalize Machiavelli's preoccupation with violence by confining violence entirely to *The Prince*, thus presenting a sanitized picture of the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories*. In this way, violence is associated with one regime type – tyranny – and cordoned off from Machiavelli's theory of republican politics.¹⁷ On the other end of the spectrum is the anti-Machiavellian tradition that ranges from Elizabethan attacks on the evil "Machiavel" to contemporary moralists. Sixteenth-century critics tended to worry about Machiavelli's heresies and his instrumental conception of virtue, whereas today he is reproached for glorifying violence and war.¹⁸

University Press, 2010). For interpretations of the military writings that pay more attention to the politics of violence, see Raimondi, "Machiavelli and the Rhetoric of the Warrior"; Spackman, "Politics on the Warpath"; Yves Winter, "The Prince and His Art of War: Machiavelli's Military Populism," *Social Research* 81, no. 1 (2014).

¹⁶ Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); Mikael Hörnqvist, "The Two Myths of Civic Humanism," in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Mikael Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ Hans Baron, "Machiavelli: The Republican Citizen and the Author of 'the Prince'," *English Historical Review* 76 (1961); John M. Najemy, "Society, Class, and State in the *Discourses on Livy*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 101–2.

¹⁸ On the sixteenth-century critics, see Sydney Anglo, *Machiavelli – The First Century: Studies in Enthusiasm, Hostility, and Irrelevance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Victoria Kahn, "Machiavelli's Reputation to the Eighteenth Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For the contemporary criticisms, see Gerhard Ritter, *Die Dämonie der Macht: Betrachtungen über Geschichte und Wesen des Machtproblems im politischen Denken der Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: H.F.C. Hansmann, 1947); Neal Wood, "Machiavelli's Concept of *virtù* Reconsidered," *Political Studies* 15, no. 2 (1967); Markus Fischer, "Machiavelli's Rapacious Republicanism," in *Machiavelli's Liberal Republican Legacy*, ed. Paul A. Rahe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006);

By attributing to him a noninstrumental conception of violence (a valorization of violence as an end in itself), these traditional moralists condemn Machiavelli as a promoter of evil. By contrast, Leo Strauss and some of his followers read him as a teacher of evil precisely because of his instrumental conception of violence and the attendant subversion of the classical connection between politics and ethics.¹⁹

To ascribe to Machiavelli an inversion of the conventional moral stance on violence, i.e. a defense of violence for its own sake, is to misunderstand his political project. This is evident, as Gennaro Sasso notes, when Machiavelli is compared to the classic figures in European political thought that stand for such an inversion of values: Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic* and Callicles in the *Gorgias*. Both Thrasymachus and Callicles defend the view that states are founded on violence and that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger. But this vision is a far cry from Machiavelli's. In Machiavelli's work, there is no evidence of Thrasymachus's insistence that injustice pays, that the unjust are happy, and that the just are unhappy.²⁰

Most modern scholars attribute to Machiavelli – rightly in my view – an *instrumental* conception of violence, but there is considerable disagreement about the nature of this instrument. Narrow views of instrumentality are advanced by readers who ascribe to Machiavelli a proto-scientific analysis of politics.²¹ This perspective, common in the postwar period,

Jacques Maritain, "The End of Machiavellianism," in *The Range of Reason* (New York: Scribner, 1952).

¹⁹ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 232–33; Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 6–28.

²⁰ Gennaro Sasso, "Introduzione," in *Il principe e altri scritti* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1963), xxx. A more persuasive version of the view that Machiavelli glorifies violence comes from readers who emphasize Machiavelli's gendered vision of the world and attribute his fascination with violence to his celebration of virility. Yet, while Machiavelli's deeply gendered perspective may account for his preoccupation with violence, it does not get at his theorization and analysis thereof. See Hanna F. Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Wendy Brown, *Manhood and Politics: A Feminist Reading in Political Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988); Cary J. Nederman and Martin Morris, "Rhetoric, Violence, and Gender in Machiavelli," in *Feminist Interpretations of Machiavelli*, ed. Maria J. Falco (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

²¹ Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd., 1940); Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1946), 116–62; Leonardo Olschki, *Machiavelli the Scientist* (Berkeley, CA: Gillick Press, 1945); Augustin Renaudet, *Machiavel: Étude d'histoire des doctrines politiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942); Luigi Russo, *Machiavelli* (Bari: Laterza, 1949).

regards Machiavelli as an unemotional engineer with a mechanistic notion of violence. While these interpretations have been largely discredited, some of their postulates – that Machiavelli regards violence as a sufficient means and its wielders as capable of controlling and calibrating violence’s effects – continue to flourish in recent scholarship.

The abstract conception of violence inherited from this literature has shaped the deadlocked debate about whether Machiavelli’s teachings are moral, immoral, or amoral. Much of this debate has centered on Benedetto Croce’s claim that Machiavelli separates politics and ethics and develops an anguished conception of the “autonomy of politics.”²² The interminable metanormative controversy about violence’s justifications is probably a symptom of our times, reflecting the apprehensions of a political liberalism that condones violence under exceptional conditions yet anxiously chews over possible justifications. Yet whether Machiavelli was an anguished soul who reconciled himself to the occasional use of wicked means to save the state or whether he in fact relished the use of cruelty is beside the point. As in the broader discourse of political theory, these disputes over the morality of violence have diverted attention from Machiavelli’s principal focus: rendering violence an object of critical reflection. The quest for moral lucidity is a distraction, because it tempts interpreters either to rescue Machiavelli from the seemingly evil things he says or to blame him for them. In the process, violence is normalized as the prosaic instrument of political order or treated as an exceptional response to conditions of necessity.

Two reasons are often advanced for Machiavelli’s preoccupation with violence. The first identifies violence as the indispensable means to govern people who do not spontaneously obey. While they can eventually be lured into docility, force is unavoidable to ensure compliance.²³ The second considers violence to be the outcome of a hopelessly partisan and partial conception of political reality. Violence, on this interpretation,

²² Benedetto Croce, *Politics and Morals*, trans. Salvatore J. Castiglione (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), 59. For a defense, see Federico Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, trans. David Moore (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 184. For important critiques, see Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 1979); Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue*, 6–52. For an overview, see Eric W. Cochrane, “Machiavelli: 1940–1960,” *The Journal of Modern History* 33, no. 2 (1961), 115.

²³ See for instance Skinner’s claim that Machiavelli is “an almost Hobbesian skeptic about the possibility of inducing men to behave well except by cajolery or force.” Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1:185.

results from the incessant conflict in a political world without a neutral and disinterested vantage point.²⁴ These two ideas – that force is necessary to ensure compliance and that politics is irremediably conflictual – are, I agree, central Machiavellian tenets. Nonetheless, they do not explain the sundry formations of violence Machiavelli observes and discusses in the life of states. Contrary to the opinions often attributed to him, Machiavelli does not offer a set of platitudes about the inescapability of violence in politics. Violence, for Machiavelli, is not the inevitable result of human nature.²⁵ Neither does it derive from a technical understanding of politics, from a belief that the state is an end in itself, or from an abstract notion of “the political.”²⁶ This puts him in an uneasy relation to the tradition that often claims him as its forebear: political realism.

MACHIAVELLI’S POPULAR REALISM

Machiavelli’s criticism of moral and metaphysical ideas has earned him the reputation of being the “first important political realist.”²⁷ And

²⁴ See, for example, Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 7. Some of the interpreters who have most strongly emphasized the conflictual character of Machiavelli’s conception of politics have been reticent to address violence conceptually. See Claude Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012); Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizio Boscaqli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Miguel E. Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli’s Theory of Political Freedom* (Dordrecht; Boston, MA: Kluwer, 2000).

²⁵ Contra Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 279; Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 156–57; Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli,” 41. As Lefort points out, Machiavelli seems quite indifferent to the idea of a pre-political human nature. Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 225. See also Yves Winter, “Necessity and Fortune: Machiavelli’s Politics of Nature,” in *Second Nature: Rethinking the Natural through Politics*, ed. Crina Archer, Laura Ephraim, and Lida Maxwell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 27–29.

²⁶ Machiavelli’s considerations have little in common with the abstract and schematic account of the political offered by Carl Schmitt (for whom violence is at once the instrument, effect, and manifestation of the logic of enmity that structures the political). See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²⁷ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis 1919–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1958), 63. See also Fischer, “Machiavelli’s Rapacious Republicanism,” 36; Steven Forde, “Varieties of Realism: Thucydides and Machiavelli,” *The Journal of Politics* (1992), 373, 387, 389; Grant B. Mindle, “Machiavelli’s Realism,” *The Review of Politics* 47, no. 2 (1985); Richard Bellamy, “Dirty Hands and Clean Gloves: Liberal Ideals and Real Politics,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010); Daniel R. Sabia, “Machiavelli’s Soderini and the Problem of Necessity,” *The Social Science Journal* 38(2001); Jonathan

indeed, if one were to seek a political tradition that challenges the depoliticization of violence diagnosed in the previous section, the tradition of political realism would seem an obvious choice. After all, Machiavelli shares some of the basic tenets of most realists: the preference for reality over wishful thinking, the emphasis on motivations and actions, and the recognition that political life is fundamentally conflictual.²⁸ Thus, international relations theorists such as E. H. Carr, Raymond Aron, and Reinhold Niebuhr pay tribute to Machiavelli as an important source for the realist tradition.²⁹

Political realists typically argue that politics – or a part thereof, such as international relations – falls outside the scope of morality. Echoing Carl Schmitt, Hans Morgenthau writes that “the political realist defends the autonomy of the political sphere, as the economist, the lawyer, the moralist maintain theirs.”³⁰ In Carr’s words, realists “hold that relations between states are governed solely by power and that morality plays no part in them.”³¹ While not all realists subscribe to Morgenthau’s or Carr’s views, many accept a version of the claim that politics is special and hence not subject to ordinary moral constraints. A special case can be made for “dirty hands theorists,” who defend the comprehensive scope of morality but concede that moral demands may be trumped by other considerations.³²

Haslam, *No Virtue Like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations since Machiavelli* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

²⁸ See for instance Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2; Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 9–13.

²⁹ Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 63; Robert McAfee Brown, ed. *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 123; Raymond Aron, *Machiavel et les tyrannies modernes* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 1993). This is not the case for Morgenthau, who regards Machiavelli as a utopian. Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Machiavellian Utopia,” *Ethics* 55, no. 2 (1945).

³⁰ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1954), 13, see also 15–16.

³¹ According to Carr, “The realist view that no ethical standards are applicable to relations between states can be traced from Machiavelli through Spinoza and Hobbes to Hegel.” Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, 153.

³² For the classic statement, see Michael Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1973). On the relation between dirty hands theorists and realists, see C. A. J. Coady, “The Problem of Dirty Hands.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Spring 2014 Edition: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/dirty-hands/>.

My view is that Machiavelli's relation to the realist tradition is more complicated than commonly recognized. Machiavelli, I argue, defends a particular and nonconventional form of realism. Against the tendencies of some realists to be ahistorical in their analyses, conservative in their prescriptions, and elitist in their orientations, Machiavelli offers a *historicist*, *radical*, and *popular* realism.

Historicism. Many realist thinkers acknowledge the historicity of politics; nevertheless, most treat violence as a universal and ubiquitous mechanism of coercion and insist on its inescapability in politics. IR realists routinely refer to violence (or "force" as is the preferred nomenclature) as a self-evident and universal instrument of foreign policy.³³ That violence or the threat thereof is an "intrinsic element of politics" seems to be a matter of consensus;³⁴ yet that the historical diversity of forms and logics of violence makes such claims rather dubious has not received much consideration.³⁵ The self-declared realists in contemporary political theory do not offer any consolation. They barely touch on violence, and when they do, it is to address questions of legitimacy or to piously recall that all legal and political order ultimately rests on violence.³⁶ By contrast, Machiavelli observes that timeless and ostensibly universal theorizations of violence are ultimately vacuous. One of his principal criticisms of his contemporaries is that they systematically overestimated the historical solidity of their present, an assessment that seems as pertinent today as it was five hundred years ago. Times change, as Machiavelli frequently notes, and so must the assessment of political strategies. As a thinker deeply concerned with the unpredictable vagaries of political life, one of Machiavelli's main theses is that the analysis of political violence must be conjunctural – that formations of violence need to be evaluated with respect to "the quality of the times" [*la qualità de'tempi*], that is to say, in terms of the particular relations of forces

³³ Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, esp. 191–202.

³⁴ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 33.

³⁵ There are exceptions. For more historically attuned versions of IR realism, see the essays in Duncan Bell, ed. *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁶ See for instance Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," 163–64, 174; Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed*, 62–63; Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 34–35. Bellamy adds more depth to the discussion, but his claim that the "prime Machiavellian lesson concerns the need to remove all political rivals and their armed supporters from the scene, often with the use of extreme force" flattens the political distinctions Machiavelli draws between popular and elite violence. Bellamy, "Dirty Hands and Clean Gloves," 425.

at work in a given historical moment (P 25; D 3.8).³⁷ And thus his realism is distinctly historicist.³⁸

Radicalism. Along similar lines, Machiavelli does not share conventional realism's partiality to the status quo. As Antonio Gramsci points out, Machiavelli's realism is misconstrued as "superficial and mechanical" if one interprets him as defending the status quo instead of what might be or what ought to be.³⁹ True, Machiavelli famously accords priority to the "effectual truth" over the "imagination" (P 15). Yet *verità effettuale* is not synonymous with the present state of affairs. If it were, Gramsci writes, it would confine readers to their present and prevent them from seeing "beyond their own noses." A political actor of Machiavelli's ilk takes sides and seeks to "create new relations of force." Such an actor has no choice but to move beyond the status quo and deal in ideals and representations. According primacy to the effectual truth, then, is not to prioritize "is" over "ought" but to evaluate whether the ideals that animate a political project are abstract or concrete. Abstract ideals, fashioned by historically arbitrary wishful thinking, are a far cry from concrete ideals, informed by analyses of existing social forces. A political actor who promotes an abstract ideal is guilty of the cardinal Machiavelian sin: letting go "of what is done for what should be done" (P 15). By contrast, a political actor who defends a concrete ideal seeks to bring about a new equilibrium by strengthening socially operative forces considered progressive. Such an actor is grounded in what Gramsci, in a tweak to Machiavelli's terminology, calls the "*realtà effettuale*" but seeks

³⁷ Hence Althusser's claim that Machiavelli is the "first theorist" of the conjuncture. Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 1999), 16, 18. Although the concept can be traced back at least to Diderot (where "conjuncture" is defined as the temporal coincidence of various circumstances that reciprocally affect and modify one another) in the Marxist literature, "conjuncture" refers to the way that the political balance of forces at a given historical moment renders certain tactics effective and others futile. See Denis Diderot, *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751–1772), s.v. "conjoncture". <http://encycopedie.uchicago.edu>. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 177–78; Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1970), 311; Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 250.

³⁸ Behind the repeated references to *nostrī tempi, quelli tempi, presenti tempi* is an analysis of political conditions that points to the various forces that shape a constellation. Jean-Claude Zancarini, "Une philologie politique. Les temps et les enjeux des mots (Florence, 1494–1530)," *Laboratoire italien. Politique et société* 7 (2007), 63.

³⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), 3:1577–78.

to overcome and transform that reality. The “ought” in this scenario is concrete; it is “the sole realistic and historicist interpretation of reality, the only history in action and philosophy in action, the only politics.” Machiavelli was a radical realist, not in the sense that his books brought about a wholesale transformation of his immediate present – an abstract fantasy – but that they interpret that reality in terms of the possibilities of its transformation.

Unlike some strands of realism that have no patience for representational categories, Machiavelli’s realism is not opposed to imagination. On the contrary: It presupposes a political actor’s ability to represent and imagine a different reality but anchors this imagination in the concrete forces that define the present.⁴⁰ Such a realism differs from the “superficial and mechanical” kind in two respects: It acknowledges the role of the imagination in envisaging alternative political arrangements and it underscores the importance of interpretation, insisting that political reality does not manifest itself transparently but requires interpretation. Because such a realism does not presume that reality is an unmediated category, it implies that a grasp of political reality depends on a set of interpretive skills and a degree of political literacy. Hence Gramsci’s conclusion that Machiavelli’s work is an exercise in political pedagogy.

Populism. Conventionally, realism is understood as a pedagogy for statesmen, as offering an education for rulers, highlighting the importance of leadership. Machiavelli, by contrast, puts forward what Gramsci calls a “popular realism.”⁴¹ Popular realism purveys a pedagogy for the people. It differs from conventional realism by turning realism into an anti-elitist force. Power, Machiavelli insists, can be shared. Like many contemporary scholars, I regard him as much more invested in republican and democratic politics than the conventional realist perspective allows. At the heart of his political project is the idea of political freedom. Freedom is incompatible with the relations of domination ingrained in monarchic and oligarchic regimes. It requires, Machiavelli

⁴⁰ Viroli glosses such a view as a “realism with imagination” and Del Lucchese refers to Machiavelli’s “radical realism.” Maurizio Viroli, “Machiavelli’s Realism,” *Constellations* 14, no. 4 (2007), 466; Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza*, 15. See also Joseph Femia, “Gramsci, Machiavelli and International Relations,” *The Political Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2005).

⁴¹ Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, 3:1691.

suggests, political participation and shared rule.⁴² Following a distinguished tradition of readers that includes Gentili, Spinoza, Harrington, Rousseau, and Gramsci, I read Machiavelli as a democratic theorist of popular freedom.⁴³ Without romanticizing the people, he observes that the ends of the many are more “decent” [*onesto*] than those of the few (P 9), which is why his abiding concern is the popular state and the social and historical conditions under which it can be established and reproduced.⁴⁴ Popular and democratic government is preferable to its alternatives on grounds of freedom and the common good [*il bene comune*] (D 2.2) – not because the people always make judicious policy

⁴² Contra elitist interpretations that consider only the “few” to be competent political actors and contra neo-republican scholars who attribute to Machiavelli a thin conception of freedom as non-domination. For examples of elitist interpretations, see Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 180–83; Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, 307; J. Patrick Coby, *Machiavelli's Romans: Liberty and Greatness in the Discourses* on Livy (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), 254–56. According to Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner, the commitment to non-domination that Machiavelli ascribes to the people is a desire for security (Pettit) and protection from interference (Skinner), not an eagerness to rule. From this perspective, self-government and political participation have at best instrumental rather than intrinsic value, insofar as a republican regime is better equipped than others to guarantee security and protection from interference. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28; Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 197. By contrast, Mark Jurdjevic compellingly argues that Machiavelli, especially in his late work, conceived of political action and participation as an end in itself. Mark Jurdjevic, *A Great & Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Machiavelli's Florentine Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 70–78.

⁴³ Alberico Gentili, *De legationibus libri tres*, trans. Gordon J. Laing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1924), III.9; Benedictus de Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 5.7; James Harrington, “A System of Politics,” in “*The Commonwealth of Oceana*” and “*A System of Politics*” (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), §21, 293; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, and Other Later Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.6; Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, 3:1690. See also McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*; Vatter, *Between Form and Event*; Miguel E. Vatter, *Machiavelli's The Prince: A Reader's Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza*; Filippo Del Lucchese, “Machiavelli and Constituent Power: The Revolutionary Foundation of Modern Political Thought,” *European Journal of Political Theory* (2014); Filippo Del Lucchese, *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Christopher J. Holman, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

⁴⁴ As Althusser notes, “the prince's practice is unintelligible if it is not appreciated that this state is a state rooted in the people, a popular state. The popular character of the state determines the prince's political practice.” Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 81.

or because the many are inherently incorruptible. And while Machiavelli does not advance a comprehensive vision of the good, by *bene comune* he means more than just preserving the state.⁴⁵

This popular perspective has implications for interpreting political violence. Machiavelli's realism is popular, because he differentiates forms of violence both in terms of their objectives and in terms of their provenance. Violence in the service of shared power is not the same as violence in the service of usurpation. And violence from above cannot be equated to violence from below. Kicking down is not the same as punching up, and the strategies available to elites differ from those available to the plebs. Elites tend to have resources at their disposal that allow them to assemble significant military and political forces to pursue their objectives. By contrast, plebeians must rely on numbers and on targeting elite privileges and social standing.

For Machiavelli, the degree and incidence of violence varies, and the primary determinant of that variation is political and socioeconomic inequality. Violence is the product of political dynamics that are centrally connected to inequality and class conflict. The more unequal a state is, the more violence it will need in order to reproduce its social and political formation. Machiavelli offers three reasons for treating violence as a function of inequality. First, he associates violence not with a generic technology of government but with struggles over the basic structure of social and political orders. All social orders, he asserts, are composed of two antagonistic classes – the people and the *grandi* – each animated by distinct aspirations or humors [*umori*]: the people by a desire not to be oppressed, and the *grandi* by an appetite to command and dominate (P 9; see also D 1.5; FH 2.12). By *grandi* Machiavelli means not just the hereditary nobility but anyone who benefits from economic and political privilege, whether that privilege is based on birth, wealth, power, or prominence. Accordingly, Machiavelli calls the *grandi* by a variety of different names, sometimes labeling them *ottimati*, *nobili*, *signori*, *potenti*, *ricchi*, and *gentiluomini*.⁴⁶ While the conflict between these asymmetric dispositions can be directed into nonviolent outlets and does not always precipitate bloodshed, it forms the background structure for all incidences

⁴⁵ Christian Nadeau, "Machiavel: Domination et liberté politique," *Philosophiques* 30, no. 2 (2003), 324.

⁴⁶ This lexical range testifies less to the sundry sources of elite status than to their equivalence. Alfredo Bonadeo, "The Role of the 'Grandi' in the Political World of Machiavelli," *Studies in the Renaissance* 16(1969), 10–12.

of political violence. By emphasizing what Filippo Del Lucchese has called the “conflictual structure of reality,” Machiavelli proposes a schema that makes political violence thinkable not simply as a last resort but also as a series of heterogeneous strategies of concrete struggles.⁴⁷

The second reason why violence is a function of inequality has to do with Machiavelli's understanding of corruption. For Machiavelli, corruption is not the result of moral decline but of inequality, and to the extent that violence tracks political decay, it is a symptom of such inequality rather than of moral turpitude. Early fifteenth-century humanists such as Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) and Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) had regarded private wealth as a means for civic virtue, but by the early sixteenth century, the Florentine intellectual circle in which Machiavelli was a prominent participant had developed a much more critical perspective on private fortunes.⁴⁸ Free cities, Machiavelli argues, need to keep the public rich and the individual citizens poor – an idea that would have been inconceivable to Bruni or Bracciolini.⁴⁹ Socioeconomic equality, Machiavelli contends, is a condition for a “political and uncorrupt way of life” (D 1.55). Inequality, by contrast, causes corruption and decay. It subverts public life, establishes unaccountable forms of social power, and introduces patron–client relationships that erode and ultimately ruin political freedom (D 1.7, 1.17, 3.22, 3.28).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Del Lucchese, *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli*, 41. See also Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*.

⁴⁸ See Felix Gilbert, “Bernardo Rucellai and the Orti Oricellari: A Study of the Origins of Modern Political Thought,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 12 (1949).

⁴⁹ Machiavelli's assessment in *Discourses* 1.37 is foreshadowed by Guicciardini's *Discorso di Logrognò*. See Francesco Guicciardini, “How the Popular Government Should Be Reformed [Discorso Di Logrognò],” in *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 230–32. Quentin Skinner remarked on the gulf separating the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century republicans on this point. See Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 1:170.

⁵⁰ Contra Pocock, who advances the baffling claim that for Machiavelli, “inequality . . . connotes neither inequality of wealth nor inequality of political authority – there is no reason to suppose that Machiavelli objected to either.” Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, 209. Gisela Bock follows Pocock in denying the relevance to Machiavelli of inequality of wealth but concedes his concern with inequality of status. Gisela Bock, “Civil Discord in Machiavelli's *Istorie Fiorentine*,” in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 189. For critical perspectives, see Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 77–85; Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza*, 70; Amanda Maher, “What Skinner Misses about Machiavelli's Freedom: Inequality, Corruption, and the Institutional Origins of Civic Virtue,” *The Journal of Politics* 78, no. 4 (2016).

Third, because of their oligarchic ambitions, the most serious danger to freedom comes from the *grandi*.⁵¹ Their intrinsic desire to dominate can never be entirely satisfied because domination, unlike freedom, has no obvious terminus and can always be further intensified. Thus, the ambitions of the great give rise to incessant intra-elite struggles as well as to relentless attempts to seize more power and wealth, usurp public offices, and procure clients. Elite ambitions fuel both oligarchic and anti-oligarchic violence. And while he deplores the former, Machiavelli often defends the latter as both appropriate and legitimate. It is impossible, Machiavelli writes, to “satisfy the great with decency and without injury to others” (P 9), which is why he categorically recommends that states be built on popular rather than elite support. The *grandi* have both the motivations and the resources to deploy violence for their political objectives. Unless their aspirations to oppress are curbed by the power of the people or by a popular prince, the predictable outcome is endemic violence. As an anti-oligarchic, even democratic, populist, Machiavelli expresses a strong preference for broad-based republican government. Yet his appraisal of the social and political power of elites leads him to argue that under conditions of severe inequality, a principality with a popular base is preferable – on grounds of freedom – to an aristocratic republic.

Hence violence, for Machiavelli, is not an abstract constitutive feature of politics or the state but has social and historical determinations. Set against the background of a social theory of conflict, he makes violence intelligible as elite and popular strategies. Rendering violence intelligible as event, mechanism, and strategy of a popular politics is one of Machiavelli’s signal contributions to political theory. His commitment to popular freedom and anti-oligarchic politics is thus central to his account of violence.

THE STRUCTURE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Machiavelli’s distinctive approach to violence becomes clear if he is compared to the theorist who is often cited as his heir and who has

⁵¹ Russell Price, “Ambizione in Machiavelli’s Thought,” *History of Political Thought* 3, no. 3 (1982), 401; McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*.

offered the most influential characterization of the modern state: Max Weber.⁵² In his lecture “Politics as a Vocation,” Weber famously argues that “the modern state can be defined sociologically only by the specific means that is peculiar to it: namely, physical violence.”⁵³ For Weber, violence has three defining characteristics: It is (1) an instrument, (2) a product of nature, and (3) an inescapable feature of the political. These three features are encapsulated in the claim that violence is the “specific” and “decisive” means of politics.⁵⁴ Lest readers conclude that politics is entirely overshadowed by violence, Weber qualifies his point concerning the importance of violence with two provisos. First, violence is neither the only nor the typical instrument of government, and second, political associations are not the only ones that use violence as their means. Yet violence is peculiar and “indispensable” to the character of a political organization because it “is always the last resort when others have failed.”⁵⁵ Thus for Weber – and many contemporary social and political theorists follow him on this point – violence is a potentially hazardous but ultimately trivial feature of politics. It is hazardous, because its injudicious exercise by irresponsible political actors can undermine the legitimacy on which its successful monopolization rests; yet it is trivial to the extent that it is never an end in itself, always subject to calculations of instrumental rationality, and invariably coercive in function.⁵⁶

⁵² Frazer and Hutchings offer an insightful analysis of the concept of violence as developed by Machiavelli, Clausewitz, and Weber. While I concur with the defense of the distinctively *political* character of violence in the work of these three authors, in my view the differences between the three are more salient than Frazer and Hutchings allow. Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, “Virtuous Violence and the Politics of Statecraft in Machiavelli, Clausewitz and Weber,” *Political Studies* 59, no. 1 (2011).

⁵³ Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 33, trans. mod.

⁵⁴ Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, 84, 89. In *Economy and Society*, Weber refers to violence furthermore as the “specific” and “indispensable” [*unentbehrlich*] means of a political organization. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 54–55; Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1980), 29–30, see also 514.

⁵⁵ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 54–55.

⁵⁶ Andreas Kalyvas is right that implicit in Weber’s argument is a recognition that “the subterranean meanings lurking below the use of . . . violence” are essential to the state and to politics more broadly. Yet unlike Kalyvas, I think Weber stops short of theorizing these subterranean meanings. Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 41.

Because of its focus on the instrumental and coercive aspects of political violence, I call Weber's position a "coercive instrumentalism." In contemporary social science, social and political theory, and political philosophy, coercive instrumentalism is the dominant position. Presupposed by both realist and liberal conceptions of violence, coercive instrumentalism treats violence as a species of coercion and regards it as the ultimate "last resort" means available to a political association.⁵⁷

Weber neglects to specify why violent coercion is the ultimate instrument available to political associations, an omission that is revealing because it insinuates that the answer is self-evident. Yet Weber can only omit an explanation for why violent coercion serves as the elementary instrument of politics by tacitly assuming as uncontroversial a highly contestable premise: that violence is a residual instrument of nature and that the propensity to inflict injury or death is a fundamental element of the human condition.⁵⁸ This claim treats political violence as the effect of an essential anthropological propensity rather than the result of an immanent political dynamic. Implicit is a view of violence as radical negation, defined by the capacity to kill and destroy. What this perspective neglects (and Machiavelli, by contrast, highlights) is the historical diversity and productivity of forms of violence. By positioning violence as a product of nature, coercive instrumentalists avoid the question of how violence acquires social and political determinations.

What coercive instrumentalists fail to see is that coercion is not the universal paradigm of political violence but a very specific, modern, configuration. Coercion is distinguished by its dyadic structure: It involves an agent using threats to force another agent to do something against their will. It takes the figurative form of a duel, evoked by Weber's definition of power as the ability to exercise "one's will despite resistance."⁵⁹ Yet this figure of the duel, while evocative, obscures more

⁵⁷ In "Politics as a Vocation," Weber shifts seamlessly between the terms *Gewaltsamkeit*, *Gewalt*, and *Zwang*, betraying a schema of violence that is isomorphic with coercion. Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, 33, 29.

⁵⁸ "Violent social action is obviously something absolutely primordial. Every group, from the household to the political party, has always resorted to physical violence when it had to protect the interests of its members and was capable of doing so." Weber, *Economy and Society*, 904.

⁵⁹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 53, see also 926. In what is a remarkable parallel, Clausewitz describes war in analogous terms, as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will." Just as Weber conceives of political violence as essentially dyadic, pitting agents against one another in a contest of coercive capacities, so Clausewitz imagines war as "nothing but a duel on a larger scale." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael

than it clarifies. One of the lessons readers can learn from Machiavelli is that most forms of political violence, whether deployed by states or other actors, do not take the form of a contest of two wills. A Machiavellian understanding of violence challenges the dyadic picture of coercion in three important respects. First, violence, for Machiavelli, is not only an instrument but also an act of signification. Second, violence is not a sufficient means but one that is mediated by the passions.⁶⁰ And third, the model of political violence is not dyadic but triadic.

Most political violence is effective not because it physically compels another agent who is thus coerced; rather, it produces political effects by appealing to an audience. It is uncommon for political violence to function as a transitive instrument and to take a single direct object as its target. Most forms of political violence are designed to be seen or at least to leave behind visible traces, even when they take place in the secrecy of the torture chamber. Rarely is political violence aimed at a target's will; more typically, it is destined for the senses and the passions of an audience. In this sense, political violence is not coercive, because the body on which it is administered is not its ultimate target. As Machiavelli demonstrates time and again, political violence is a performance, elaborately staged, and designed to be perceived, experienced, remembered, and narrated.

The spectacular, sensory, graphic, dramatic, and iconic dimensions of violence are central to how it generates political effects. This renders violence both more powerful and more limited than the Weberian picture would suggest. It is more powerful because the passions function as multipliers, propagating violence's effects. It is more limited because it challenges the fantasy of mastery that is implicit in liberal and realist conceptions of violence. While the perception, experience, memory, and narration of violence can be choreographed, they can never be fully controlled, rendering the deployment of political violence much more volatile than standard accounts of coercive instrumentalism might suggest. This unpredictability is compounded by the multiple passions evoked by violence. Because Machiavelli does not see in death and in

Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 75. See Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 290.

⁶⁰ I use the term "passions" rather than "affect," "feeling," or "emotion" because it evokes the trans-individual and social scene of political desire. See Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 4-5.

bodily pain the ultimate negation and bareness of life, his account of the passions stimulated by violence is more capacious than the ordinary focus on fear. Unlike realists or liberals who connect violence primarily to fear, Machiavelli argues that violence also generates a variety of other politically relevant passionate responses, including desire, hatred, and solidarity. Hence the response to violence is much more difficult to script than one might otherwise assume.

Scholars have yet to reckon with the extent to which violence for Machiavelli is not a transparent and uniform strategy but part of a political pedagogy. Central to this pedagogy is the theatricality of violence – the ways in which violence is staged and represented. On this topic, rhetorical approaches to Machiavelli have made important contributions, yet one of the limitations is that the “rhetoric” that has been analyzed is almost exclusively Machiavelli’s, that is to say the relation between the Machiavellian text and its readers.⁶¹ In terms of his study of violence, it is worth looking at Machiavelli not just as a practitioner of rhetoric but also as an *analyst* of the rhetorical and performative dimensions of violence. To think of political violence in terms of performances is to highlight its theatrical and communicative aspects – the ways in which forms of political violence are interlaced with practices of representation. Machiavelli understood that the effectiveness of political violence can only be assessed by asking how violence is seen by a third party. The upshot of this insight is that any meaningful account of political violence has to look at violence not just from the perspective of its immediate target but also from the vantage point of a wider audience.

If political violence is a performance, then subjects who want to be agents must be able to interpret violence, and to do so requires a certain measure of literacy. On this topic, Machiavelli recounts the story of Piero Albizzi, a fourteenth-century Florentine nobleman, who was hosting a banquet when someone sent him a silver goblet filled with sweets and a hidden nail (FH 3.19). When the nail was discovered, the guests at the banquet came up with an elaborate explanation. Rather than probing the most obvious scenarios, that the nail found its way into the goblet by mistake or that it represents a threat against Piero, those present regarded it “as a reminder that he should drive a nail into the wheel [of fortune]; since fortune had led him to the top, if it were to continue in its circle it

⁶¹ Victoria Kahn, “Virtù and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli’s Prince,” *Representations* 13 (1986); Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric*; Rebhorn, *Foxes and Lions*; Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 73–113

could only drag him down to the bottom” (FH 3.19). The nail, in short, allegorizes the need to act in sync with fortune, or as Machiavelli puts it elsewhere, in accordance with the quality of one’s time. Machiavelli declines to further comment on this story, but from his description it is clear that the Florentine elites are sophisticated readers of allegories.

But what about the people? Can the common people match the refined exegetical skills of the *grandi*? Machiavelli has little confidence in people’s natural capacities. Political virtues, he insists, are not natural – they are learnt and practiced. Freedom and political judgment necessitate training in the art of the state, which is also an art of interpretation. To respond politically to a situation requires, as Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo notes, “a degree of political literacy that is attained and cultivated by way of difficult encounters, experiences, and actions.”⁶² As I show, especially in Chapter 1, Machiavelli offers a political pedagogy, an education on how to read violence, so that the people may hone their interpretive aptitudes and rise to the challenge. The scenes of violence that puncture his work are part of this didactic project: They provide lessons in political literacy.⁶³ They offer a popular education in the interpretation of violence that is of use to the people in advancing a politics of freedom.

One of the curiosities of late Renaissance Florence is that symbols that were traditionally associated with popular freedom and republican government were systematically coopted by elites. Representing themselves as champions of freedom, wealthy families used these symbols to build large patronage networks. Patrons would assist their “friends” with debts, dowries, and commercial activities; they would use their influence to ease access to political office and help with litigation. Through such largesse, patrons secured the loyalty of non-elite clients and their families, building expansive networks of power and authority.⁶⁴ No family was more successful at assembling a broad faction than the Medici, who appropriated the symbols of Florentine republicanism to portray themselves as

⁶² Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, *Political Responsibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), xvii, see also 215–16, 251–56.

⁶³ Recent scholarship has emphasized Machiavelli’s role as a teacher of interpretation. See Nancy S. Struever, *Theory as Practice: Ethical Inquiry in the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 147–81; Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric*, 18–43; Pedullà, *Machiavelli in tumulto*, 93. Dante Germino notes that Machiavelli’s work spreads “political knowledge to elites and non-elites alike.” Dante Germino, “Machiavelli’s Thoughts on the Psyche and Society,” in *The Political Calculus: Essays on Machiavelli’s Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Parel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 76.

⁶⁴ Dale V. Kent, *The Rise of the Medici: Faction in Florence, 1426–1434* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

champions of freedom.⁶⁵ This is the context for Machiavelli's political pedagogy. When the emblems and codes conventionally associated with popular freedom are appropriated by Florence's leading families, the capacity to accurately identify political symbols becomes a crucial political skill. Under these conditions, political literacy means being able to analyze and evaluate events, situations, and forces with respect to the kinds of political projects they advance.

THE ROMAN VOCABULARY OF VIOLENCE

A cursory look at Machiavelli's terminology makes clear that he does not have a concept that corresponds to what a twenty-first century English speaker might call "violence." From Roman political theory, Machiavelli inherits a pair of concepts – *vis* and *violentia* – which structure theoretical considerations of violence during the classical and medieval periods.⁶⁶ *Vis* means physical force and referred to both legal and illegal forms of violence.⁶⁷ *Violentia* [vehemence, impetuosity] and the associated verb *violare* [to outrage, dishonor] have a narrower semantic range, referring to destructive force and connoting a violation. Unlike *vis*, *violentia* always signifies a transgression, and in postclassical usage, *violentia* is nearly always identified with *iniura*, unlawfulness, and injustice.⁶⁸

On the one hand, Roman law recognized certain forms of private and public force as legitimate.⁶⁹ On the other hand, especially in the late republic, Roman political theorists increasingly regarded the use of *vis publica* to be a great danger to Roman political life. Both Cicero

⁶⁵ Alison Brown, "De-Masking Renaissance Republicanism," in *Renaissance Civic Humanism*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Sarah Blake McHam, "Donatello's Bronze 'David' and 'Judith' as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence," *The Art Bulletin* 83, no. 1 (2001).

⁶⁶ I am grateful to Peter Stacey for his helpful comments on the relation between *vis* and *violentia*.

⁶⁷ Andrew Lintott, *Violence in Republican Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22–23.

⁶⁸ Fritz Kern, *Gottesgnadentum und Widerstandsrecht im früheren Mittelalter: Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Monarchie* (Munster and Cologne: Böhlau, 1954), 143 n307.

⁶⁹ That force could legitimately be repulsed by force [*vim vi repellere licet*] was considered a precept of the *ius naturale*, and under Roman civil law, the use of violence to secure one's legal or natural rights was permissible. August Friedrich Pauly and Georg Wissowa, eds. *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1890–1980), s.v. "vis."

and Seneca – the principal philosophical authorities for the Florentine humanists – treat *vis* as corrosive of moral and political life.⁷⁰ As Cicero writes in *De legibus*, “There is nothing more destructive for states, nothing more contrary to right and law, nothing less civil and humane, than the use of violence [*agi per vim*] in public affairs in a duly constituted republic [*composita et constituta re publica*].”⁷¹ But what counts as a “duly constituted republic?” Cicero was no pacifist, and as much as he abhorred violence in principle, he had little qualm about justifying its liberal use against political enemies. In Andrew Lintott’s words, Cicero “exemplifies the incongruous attitude of most Romans to violence in politics . . . You may disregard the constitution and employ limited violence to resist violence on the ground that the law of the jungle now prevails, but you must not use too much violence as that will permanently destroy the state whose laws you are disregarding.”⁷²

Machiavelli’s theory of violence constitutes a critical engagement with his Roman sources.⁷³ Like most Renaissance authors, Machiavelli maintained the conceptual distinction between *vis* and *violentia* inherited from Roman political theory. Akin to the Latin *vis*, Machiavelli’s *forza* has no normative charge. It stands for forms of actions associated with arms; it is synonymous with “armed force” or simply “arms” and connotes a technical quality grounded in physical or military strength. Yet in contrast to the Roman Stoics, who were markedly ambivalent about *vis* – disavowing it in principle while defending it in practice – Machiavelli takes a much more pragmatic stance. Rejecting Cicero’s moralistic (and hypocritical) disavowal of *vis*, Machiavelli emphasizes its constitutive nature. *Forza*, he argues, is a primary mechanism by which princes acquire and lose states or by which republics acquire and lose subject cities. More generally, *forza* is a euphemism for Machiavelli, one that refers to the deployment or threat of physical violence, to the infliction of injuries, and to executions. It describes, as I argue in Chapter 2, a generic, instrumental modality of

⁷⁰ Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History*, 179; Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 1:88–94; Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 48.

⁷¹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth and on the Laws*, trans. James E. G. Zetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 172, trans. mod.

⁷² Lintott, *Violence in Republican Rome*, 62.

⁷³ On Cicero’s influence on Machiavelli, see Marcia L. Colish, “Cicero’s *De Officiis* and Machiavelli’s *Prince*,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* (1978); J. J. Barlow, “The Fox and the Lion: Machiavelli’s Reply to Cicero,” *History of Political Thought* 20, no. 4 (1999). As Barlow rightly points out, Machiavelli inverts Cicero’s conclusion nearly point for point.

political violence, where violence appears as a versatile and malleable technique to be deployed in different contexts for different ends.

Like the Latin *violentia*, Machiavelli and his contemporaries used *violenza* to refer to injustice.⁷⁴ *Violenza* is associated with criminal behavior, with a lack of legitimacy, and with unjust force used against free cities and institutions (FH 2.34). To hold a state with violence [*tenere con violenza*] is to hold it without the legitimacy of lineage, investiture, or popular support (FH 5.3).⁷⁵ When Machiavelli refers to a government as *insopportabile e violento* (FH 7.4), to an unjust war as *violento* (FH 5.8), or to a proposed coup d'état as *troppo violento* (FH 4.30), he indexes not the physical force and arms that were deployed but the lack of political legitimacy and the disregard for republican institutions and democratic practices. Because of this moral and legal baggage, *violenza* in fact plays a minor role in Machiavelli's political works and is eclipsed by other terms, notably *forza* and *crudeltà*.

Crudeltà is a more complex term in Machiavelli's lexicon. It characterizes actions that inflict gratuitous and shocking forms of injury. In contrast to force, cruelty is a decidedly non-euphemistic category. It refers to an essentially offensive, provocative, and often scandalous mode of violence. Unlike force, it has a more complicated instrumental valence. Cruelty involves a transgression that strategically elicits shock and awe. It often appears irrational and senseless, but this appearance is part of its *modus operandi*. In contrast to force, cruelty systematically violates the symbolic terms of the socio-political order. Unlike force, which is subject to a logic of efficiency, Machiavellian cruelty inflicts violence beyond what is objectively necessary. This surplus, however, is not redundant. It is class-specific, directed against the privileges and expectations of the *grandi*, and constitutes, as I argue in Chapter 3, a challenge to the terms of social hierarchy. This challenge makes cruelty a formidable political strategy and renders Machiavelli's theorization (and defense) of *crudeltà*

⁷⁴ Contra Frazer and Hutchings, who argue that Machiavelli uses *violenza* "when referring to personal and excessive acts of physical violence." Frazer and Hutchings, "Virtuous Violence," 70n3.

⁷⁵ We find the same usage, for example, in Coluccio Salutati's fourteenth-century treatise *On Tyranny*, where *violentus* is used as a synonym for *tyrannicus* or in Francesco Guicciardini's *Dialogue on the Government of Florence* (written in the 1520s), where *governo violento* is synonymous with *governo usurpato* to indicate an illegitimate regime. Coluccio Salutati, *Political Writings*, ed. Stefano U. Baldassarri, trans. Rolf Bagemihl (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 115; Francesco Guicciardini, *Dialogue on the Government of Florence*, trans. Alison Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 158–59.

one of his most significant innovations in the discourse of political violence. In the history of Euro-Atlantic political theory and philosophy, cruelty has rarely been accorded serious consideration. By contrast, Machiavelli develops a theory of cruelty as a type of physical violence that traffics in appearances and that deploys these in a calculated manner.

Forza and *crudeltà* set up the scaffolding for my argument in the first part of the book, and I devote a chapter to each. While these terms are not always used consistently, they convey what I call two distinct *modes* of political violence. Imbued with their own mechanisms, protocols, and logics, each mode gives rise to distinct political effects. Cruelty and force are not new terms. As so often, Machiavelli doesn't invent these categories anew but instead appropriates existing ones, radically transforming their sense and meaning.⁷⁶ In contrast to *violenza*, *forza* and *crudeltà* are terms that qualify the materiality, appearance, and political effects of violence rather than its legal or moral grounds.

INTERPRETIVE CROSSROADS

This book offers an interpretation of Machiavelli's text that challenges both those who attribute to it a moderate republicanism and those who see in it the kernel of modern *raison d'état*. Yet my aim, in doing so, is not to substitute an ostensibly more authentic rendition of Machiavelli's political beliefs for the ones that currently circulate. My interest is in the lines of thought the text opens up and makes available. Texts in the history of political thought are shaped by the conditions of their production, by the languages, vocabularies, and historical archives available at the moment of their composition, and by the legacies and traditions through which they are read. Part of the reconstructive work of expounding Machiavelli's political theory of violence consists in identifying the legacies, problems, and rationales that inform the texts. By contextualizing the work in this way, lines of thought open up that may exceed the intentions of the author and that may not even have been fully discernible to him.⁷⁷

I take as a starting point Machiavelli's vocabulary and historical context. Words matter and so do historical conditions of possibility.

⁷⁶ See Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza*, 67.

⁷⁷ Even Pocock recognizes that historical actors are never fully "in command of the 'meaning' of [their] own utterance." J. G. A. Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24.

Yet to begin with terminology is not to yield to the reduction of political theory to semantics.⁷⁸ By focusing on Machiavelli's vocabulary, I accept a couple of key contextualist claims: that the range of concepts and arguments available to an author are historically limited and that texts are concerned with problems specific to their time. Yet as much as I acknowledge a debt, it is also necessary to recognize the limitations of the contextualist paradigm. Machiavelli emphasizes the groundbreaking character of his own work, and even though he uses a conventional vocabulary, he frequently wrenches terms from their established meanings and imparts an original sense to them. Moreover, there are indications that he intended his work not for his contemporaries but for an audience of future readers.⁷⁹ Accordingly, to read his writings solely from the vantage point of his immediate addressees is to imprison them in an interpretive straightjacket.

The divergence between Machiavelli's lexicon and that of a twenty-first century reader tells contemporary readers nothing about whether they can learn anything from his texts for their own time. But it does allow readers to face up to a basic interpretive truth: The questions that readers bring to historical texts are not the author's but those of their own period. And this is as it should be. It is neither necessary nor desirable to dissolve past texts into their – linguistic, cultural, social, or political – contexts. To read Machiavelli's text in view of what it can teach twenty-first century readers about violence while conceding that this question may have been incomprehensible to the author is to acknowledge a historical difference but not an unbridgeable chasm.

Even though Machiavelli, in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, articulates a set of political principles concerning the use of violence in politics, the explicit claims about how violence should be deployed are notoriously unclear. Moreover, they are often inconsistent with the scenes and episodes that function as their ostensible examples or that provide the

⁷⁸ The linguistic approaches to Machiavelli that became popular in the 1950s and 1960s have contributed much to our understanding, even though they have not provided the methodological panacea their pioneers had anticipated. See, for example, Fredi Chiappelli, *Studi sul linguaggio del Machiavelli* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1952); J. H. Whitfield, "On Machiavelli's Use of Ordini," *Italian Studies* 10(1955); J. H. Hexter, "Il principe and lo stato," *Studies in the Renaissance* 4(1957); Giorgio Cadoni, "Libertà, repubblica e governo misto in Machiavelli," *Rivista internazionale di filosofia del diritto* series III, 39 (1962); Marcia L. Colish, "The Idea of Liberty in Machiavelli," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32, no. 3 (1971).

⁷⁹ Catherine Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 6, 21.

dramatic structure for the historical narratives. To take a famous example, chapter 9 of *The Prince*, “Of the Civil Principality,” sets out to describe a nonviolent mode of becoming prince. In Machiavelli’s words, the civil prince comes to power using neither “crime nor other intolerable violence.” Yet the chapter cites as the sole successful specimen of such a civil prince Nabis, who became ruler of Sparta by executing the last two claimants of the royal dynasty. Not only did Machiavelli’s sources – Polybius and Livy – both consider Nabis a brutal despot, but so apparently did Machiavelli, at least in *Discourses* 3.6 where he refers to him as a tyrant.⁸⁰ Leaving aside the tension between *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, how does killing the pretenders to the Spartan throne qualify as a nonviolent mode of becoming prince? What makes it different from the acts of Agathocles, which Machiavelli in the previous chapters qualifies as criminal?

One could pile on the illustrations. Puzzles such as these require readers to look not only at what Machiavelli explicitly says about the role of violence in politics but also at the illustrations, figures, and narrative devices in his work. Philosophically inclined readers tend to privilege conceptual argument over narrative, the “general rule” over the particulars. By contrast, I pay special attention to the examples – the scenes and episodes that purportedly illustrate the conceptual claims. As it turns out, the examples often do not fit the theoretical arguments they are meant to epitomize, and the reader is left to adjudicate whether to follow the abstract claim or the illustration. My tendency is to go with the latter, in keeping with what I regard as Machiavelli’s method. In his text, there are three kinds of examples: those that illustrate a claim and corroborate it, those that contradict and complicate a claim, and those that substitute for a claim, which the reader is expected to inductively derive.

OVERVIEW

The orders of Machiavellian violence encompass both a conceptual typology and analyses of specific formations of political violence. I treat the taxonomy of violent modes in Chapters 1–3 and the formations that exemplify these modes in Chapters 4–6. The first half of the book offers an analysis of spectacular violence (Chapter 1), of force (Chapter 2), and

⁸⁰ Livy, 34.27; Polybius, *Histories*, trans. William. R. Paton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922–1927), 13.6–8.

of cruelty (Chapter 3). The second half of the book maps these modes onto the main formations of violence that Machiavelli analyzes: founding violence (Chapter 4), reproductive violence (Chapter 5), and plebeian violence (Chapter 6).

There is nothing quite like a memorable execution to disempower oligarchic elites and to simultaneously gratify the multitude. Accordingly, this book begins and ends with violence as spectacle. Chapter 1, "Spectacle," focuses on the famous scene in chapter 7 of *The Prince* that recounts the execution of Cesare Borgia's deputy, Remirro de Orco. Against the conventional Weberian readings of that scene, I interpret Machiavelli's Cesare as using violence to address the political passions and the imagination of his Romagnol subjects. In Machiavelli's narration, Cesare's assassination of Remirro becomes a detective story, a puzzle that the audience is invited to piece together.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine Machiavelli's terminology. Turning to his taxonomy of violence, they distinguish the two principal modes of political violence. Chapter 2, "Force," reconstructs Machiavelli's concept of force and contrasts it with contemporary models of coercion. I contend that force is an unstable and precarious mode of action that is stabilized when mediated through law and religion. Force is most effective when it operates not as an alternative to consent but when it directly manufactures such consent.

Chapter 3, "Cruelty," untangles Machiavelli's concept of cruelty. It puts forward an interpretation of cruelty as a quintessentially anti-oligarchic tactic. I regard Machiavellian cruelty as a type of physical violence that traffics in appearances: It refers to seemingly irrational violations of social status and dignity. Machiavelli inherits this notion of cruelty from the Romans, specifically from Seneca, but he transforms the Roman idea in crucial ways.

Chapter 4, "Beginnings," offers an analysis of cruelty as a transitional strategy. The chapter focuses on the violence of founding moments, especially on two central founding myths of Rome. Machiavelli turns the violent beginnings of Rome into a paradigm for founding and regenerating republics, which raises the question of what such "founding violence" means. Against empiricist and transcendental accounts of founding violence, I argue for a materialist interpretation that highlights the role of political memory.

Chapter 5, "Institutions," investigates forms of republican violence. Renaissance humanists traditionally regarded republics as peaceful alternatives to the repressive and conspiratorial violence that rattles principalities.

Machiavelli challenges this perspective by insisting that republics both partake in the political violence that defines the life of all states and unleash distinctive forms of violence of their own. This chapter looks at how violence is embedded in institutions and practices that assure the political reproduction of republican orders, in particular class conflict, punishment, and imperial warfare.

Chapter 6, “Tumults,” turns from institutional and state-organized forms of violence to insurrectionary practices. Focusing on the notorious 1378 revolt by plebeian wool workers known as the Ciompi, the chapter examines how – in Machiavelli’s rendition – the event’s protagonists theorize insurrectionary violence. Unlike most of his predecessors or contemporaries, Machiavelli takes seriously the plebs as political actors along with legitimate interests, objectives, and strategies. In Machiavelli’s telling, the Ciompi justify their rioting on resolutely partial and anti-universalist grounds, a point that interpreters frequently cite as evidence that Machiavelli regarded such violence as illegitimate. I disagree. Challenging current trends that rehabilitate plebeian politics insofar as they are harbingers of liberal democratic universalism, I argue that Machiavelli offers a compelling, unapologetically partisan, and antagonistic model of plebeian politics.