

INTRODUCTION

Vulgarity and Virtuosity

MACHIAVELLI'S ELUSIVE "EFFECTUAL TRUTH"

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI would have undoubtedly secured enduring fame for any one of the roles he so adeptly performed during his life in and out of Renaissance Florence: diplomat, military strategist, civil servant, poet, playwright. However, it was in his capacity as political philosopher that Machiavelli earned eternal renown by sparking several of the most intense scholarly controversies and by inspiring some of the most profound political changes in Western history. Not without reason, many commentators consider Machiavelli the father of modern political thought or modern political science—some even ordain him the founder of “modernity” itself. Yet the specific meaning and precise objectives of his political writings remain elusive. Was Machiavelli an amoral proponent of tyranny or a stalwart partisan of liberty? A neutral technician of power politics or a devout Italian patriot? An anticlerical reviver of pagan virtue or a devious initiator of modern nihilism? Most simply, to what extent was Machiavelli a “Machiavellian”? These questions, among countless others concerning the fundamental core of the Florentine’s thought, will continue to generate contentious debates for as long as people reflect seriously on political affairs.

In this spirit, I intend the present study to serve as an endeavor in interpretation and counterinterpretation. The book offers original readings of crucial themes within Machiavelli’s three major—each,

in its own way, scandalous—political writings: *The Prince*, the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories*.¹ Moreover, this text challenges what I consider to be misguided interpretive efforts offered by three illustrious, widely influential appraisals of the Florentine's work. Building upon and elaborating arguments that I previously developed in the book *Machiavellian Democracy*,² here I further substantiate Machiavelli's consistent advocacy for a new form of muscular, populist politics conveyed across his three greatest works; and I show in detail how and why major interpretive schools of Machiavelli's political thought have either missed or deliberately obscured the radical extent of the Florentine's decidedly democratic form of republicanism. In particular, I confront suspect engagements with Machiavelli's political thought undertaken by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Leo Strauss, and scholars affiliated with the Cambridge School, especially John Pocock and Quentin Skinner.

This reconstructive cum critical engagement with Machiavelli's political thought and its reception explores the following themes: it demonstrates how Machiavelli conceives of the common people as an audience amenable or susceptible to persuasion, manipulation, and edification by "appearances and outcomes" (P 15); and, consequently, how he advises princes or republics to motivate and enlist the people to act as a formidable, historically novel, political force. The book likewise elaborates the Florentine's ideas concerning the advantages and limits of intense social conflict between common citizens and elites within the domestic politics of democratic republics, especially over the question of economic redistribution. Indeed, I analyze in considerable depth Machiavelli's diagnosis of how increasing socioeconomic inequality invariably generates political corruption in all republics—especially those that pursue empire. I further accentuate the institutional arrangements and constitutional forms discussed in *Machiavellian Democracy*—specifically, plebeian tribunates, legislative plebiscites, and popularly judged political trials—that Machiavelli thought most conducive to well-ordered popular government. Perhaps surprisingly, this book investigates the proper role that our notoriously impious author seemingly insists religious symbolism must play in every politics—princely or republican—that extensively enlists the power of the people.

My overriding intention is to explore and expound upon the explicit if still elusive goal of Machiavelli's major writings: specifically, what the Florentine identifies as the "effectual truth" of politics, and the nature of the peculiar affinity that Machiavelli establishes between, on the one hand, this more accurate and efficacious form of truth, and, on the other, the judgment of the common people, explicitly, "the vulgar" (P 15). Machiavelli's pursuit of the effectual truth, he declares, entails an orientation toward the world as it actually "is," rather than—in a way that bedeviled previous writers—how it "ought" to be. Machiavelli professes that his orientation toward the *is* of politics is motivated by a desire to provide something useful to his readers; that is, a motivation to provide advice for how political actors *should* behave having received and reflected upon the Florentine's unprecedentedly wise, if audacious and often outrageous, advice. Hence, Machiavelli's political thought does not simply supplant an idealist *ought* with a more realistic *is*; rather, it elaborates an entirely new ought for political thinking and practice—an ought in which the vulgar assume an unprecedented prominent role. Therefore, despite appropriating resources from ancient political practice, in which peoples played a vital civic and military function (if not necessarily from ancient political theory, in which, comparatively, they did not), Machiavelli's political thought represents nothing less than an entirely innovative vision for how politics and popular empowerment *should* be conceptualized and practiced in the future.

Yet, notwithstanding the infinite parchment, feather and ink devoted to commentaries on Machiavelli's writings, neither the descriptive nor the normative aspect of Machiavelli's populist political agenda has proven as easily ascertainable as the Florentine implies them to be.³ The readings and counterreadings presented in the six chapters that constitute this book (any of which, I concede, may be deemed a "suspect engagement") are intended to clarify Machiavelli's effectual conceptualization of the new "ought" of democratic politics. At the center of this novel conceptualization, analyzed in Part I, is the appropriate role that the people—the plebs, the many, the multitude, again, the vulgar—should play in the political world. I will argue that Machiavelli promotes the people as agents who must be empowered to act in the following politically salutary ways: the people, in both

principalities and republics, should serve as the ultimate arbiters of good and evil, the final judges of outcomes and appearances (chapter 1); the people of republics ought to relate to each other as free and equal citizens—not only politically equal but socioeconomically as well (chapter 2); the people must assert their necessary, salutary role as the guardian of liberty against predatory oligarchs and tyrants (chapter 3); and the people should be civically and militarily enabled by well-ordered laws and institutions to act in politically virtuous ways (chapters 1–3).

If Machiavelli himself serves as my interlocutor in Part I, major representatives of the interpretive tradition assume the role of intellectual adversaries in Part II. Here I focus on widely influential misapprehensions of Machiavelli's intentions regarding the people's proper role in a democratic republic (a *governo popolare* or *governo largo*): I demonstrate that Rousseau deliberately repudiates Machiavelli's democratic reconstruction of the Roman Republic as an emulable model for future large-scale republics; and that the Genevan replaces it with a constitutional model that both empowers wealthy citizens to outvote poorer ones and neutralizes the populist institution of the plebeian tribunate (chapter 4); I delineate the subtle and often blatant distortions of Machiavelli's texts perpetrated by Leo Strauss in his efforts to undermine Machiavelli's explicit arguments in favor of the people and to convert the Florentine into an advocate of enlightened oligarchic rule (chapter 5); and finally, I suggest that Cambridge scholars such as Skinner and Pocock attempt to shoe-horn Machiavelli's politics into a Ciceronian model of a harmonious mixed regime; one in which, contrary to Machiavelli's intentions, class conflict is minimized and the people, whose motivations these scholars deem just as dangerous to liberty as those of the nobles, are subordinated to elite domination (chapter 6).⁴

In short, Part I explicitly demonstrates that a fierce populism seeded all of Machiavelli's political writings, one that manifested itself in radically democratic institutional prescriptions, while Part II uncovers, through my interrogations of Rousseau, Strauss, Pocock, and Skinner, a common agenda running throughout Machiavelli's largely republican reception, one that approximates an aristocratic conspiracy to repress and obscure his emphatically democratic politics.⁵

Reading Machiavelli

The chapters that make up Part I accentuate Machiavelli's substantive political lessons, and they further serve as models for how to engage his texts—literally (or literarily), how to *read* them. In this sense, this book is not only an exercise in reading Machiavelli for political wisdom (although it certainly is that), but just as importantly, it is an exhibition of how to read Machiavelli as a practice, how to experience and reflect upon his mode of writing. Despite appearances to the contrary—appearances that the Florentine went to great lengths to conjure by writing deceptively accessible “how to” books—Machiavelli is not exclusively or perhaps even primarily a didactic thinker; he does not merely provide easily applied maxims for what to do in the political world, even if that is first and foremost what conventional wisdom attributes to him. Rather, Machiavelli offers multiple avenues for pursuing the effectual truth of politics—ways that accentuate if not the utter ineffability of effectual truth, then certainly its easily overlooked, concealed, obscured, elusory qualities.

The many difficulties that Machiavelli's texts pose to interpreters—which, of course, account for the myriad interpretations generated over the centuries—emulate the challenges presented by politics' effectual truth. Both the textual and secular realities central to Machiavelli's concerns can only be apprehended through acts of spotting, pursuing, penetrating, and digesting the following elements of his writings: confusing, jarring twists and turns in otherwise straightforward narratives; biblical, classical and contemporary allusions, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit; surprising, often ear-splitting silences; individual actors who transmute from positive to negative political examples and then back again; violent imagery meant to immediately shock readers, and subtle misdirection that readers only recognize as such long after the fact; historical events, great and small, directly invoked or silently implied—I could, of course, go on and on. For all the editorializing and explication concerning his own intentions and lessons that famously characterize Machiavelli's writings, our author, by and large, leaves the literary techniques just mentioned, and the pedagogical objectives for which

they are employed, for readers themselves to ponder and interpret with no commentary supplied by the Florentine himself.

Allow me to provide a sense of how I employ this hermeneutic approach to Machiavelli's writing in subsequent chapters. As I illustrate in chapter 1, once the reader detects that Machiavelli's narrative of Cesare Borgia's career—to which he devotes more space than any other in *The Prince*—is presented as a story in which a holy father sends his son to redeem, to bring peace to, his people, then chapter 7 begins to open up in new, exciting, even titillating respects. All of a sudden, religious tropes or images jump out and impose themselves on the reader in potentially subversive ways: one begins to discern within the chapter's confines the presence of the crucifixion, the transfiguration, a circumcision, a bloody sacrifice that atones for political sins, an empty tomb, even St. Paul—all of which signify Machiavelli's beliefs concerning the appropriate covenants that should characterize prince-people relationships.

Moreover, as I indicate in chapter 2, when one realizes that Machiavelli presents the Gracchi's career in the *Discourses* in such a way that that he may be read as both endorsing and criticizing the ill-fated Roman tribunes' redistributive agenda, the reader is compelled to doggedly pursue what Machiavelli actually means when he repeatedly declares that republics must keep the public rich but the citizens poor. At the end of this interpretive expedition, one discovers a radical answer to perhaps the most controversial question within the Roman-Florentine republican tradition: political liberty requires genuine economic equality. Furthermore, as I suggest in chapter 3, once readers appreciate that one of the most frequently quoted passages in the entire *Florentine Histories* (concerning the Florentine people's unwillingness to share offices with the nobles) occurs just a mere few paragraphs after Machiavelli has demonstrated this to be a deeply inaccurate assessment of events, they are encouraged to begin rethinking the entire relationship of words and deeds in that book—a reconsideration which reveals that Machiavelli, perhaps more often than not, seems to undermine his own expressly declared evaluative judgments throughout the entire *Histories*.

Through such readings, I endeavor to show how playfully and seductively Machiavelli goes about educating his readers; I attempt to

show how pleasurable, perplexing, and beguiling the careful reading of Machiavelli's political writings can be; how he so often leaves us satisfied and stupefied—but, since human edification is his ultimate goal, never permanently so (P 15; D I preface). Machiavelli does not encourage play for the sake of play—reading Machiavelli is certainly fun, but it stands as no less a gravely serious endeavor for that fact. Indeed, reading Machiavelli is all the more serious—often deathly serious—since the pleasure of reading him animates within his interpreters the desire to further, and ever further, pursue the substantive truth of political outcomes and ends.

Learning how to read Machiavelli appropriately serves as an education in how to act effectively in the political realm—this applies not only to leaders or prospective leaders, but also to peoples, who in well-ordered republics, Machiavelli declares to be “princes” (D I.58). Machiavelli's writings encourage the people to further sharpen the inclination, which he already attributes to them, to judge phenomena by their “appearances and outcomes” (P 15); specifically, he encourages people to enhance this judgment by better apprehending the essential nature of the outcomes and to avoid being deceived by the glamour of the appearances. Therefore, by writing in the manner described above, Machiavelli, I would suggest, trains his readers in the practice of Machiavellian *virtù*. It would not be entirely far-fetched to venture that the qualities of a virtuous reader mirror the Florentine's descriptions of the *virtuoso* political actor.⁶

Readers, peoples, and princes must first examine apparent and surface statements or states of affairs in Machiavelli's writings, then drill down into the deeper truth of his lessons, without being distracted, let alone shamed, by the judgment of previous writers or “the few.” This mode of learning especially entails appreciating lessons concerning the art of reversal, of adaptation to context, which, without much exaggeration, largely characterize the very essence of Machiavellian *virtù*.⁷ Readers must examine concrete events and individual exemplars when reflecting upon Machiavelli's rules or maxims in order to consider the effectually true status of such circumstances and the actual success or failures of his figures rather than merely accept his overt evaluations of them; they must constantly return to Machiavelli's previously invoked examples and to his

historical sources to comprehend what he may be including, excluding, amplifying, or distorting, and, most importantly, why.

In what follows, I demonstrate how Machiavelli encourages readers to engage his texts in the ways that he enjoins people to interrogate political phenomena; Machiavelli bids readers, subjects and citizens to engage with all of the aesthetic elements of effectual truth. His mode of writing creates an environment in which readers participate in the vibrant intellectual-sensory habitus of his books, in much the same way as he encourages the citizens of republics, and even the subjects of principalities, to do; thus, adding new dimensions to thinking about and to acting within the world as it “is” as opposed to, in a traditional sense, how it “ought to be.”

I generally call the kind of writing performed by Machiavelli “literary-rhetorical” in character, and I rather steadfastly resist the term “esoteric writing.” Leo Strauss is, of course, the interpreter most lauded and reviled for reading Machiavelli as an esoteric writer; conversely, the Cambridge School is perhaps not unfairly accused of exhibiting a certain tone-deafness when evaluating the full political ramifications of his literary, allegorical, allusive form of writing.⁸ In chapter 5, I show how Strauss does not, as he professes, employ esoteric reading to understand Machiavelli “as he understands himself,” but rather to exploit apparent ambiguities within the Florentine’s texts in the service of a pre-determined ideological agenda. On the basis of questionable evidence, Strauss asserts that Machiavelli, contrary to his own declarations, ultimately refused to depart from the “aristocratic or oligarchic republicanism of the classical tradition.”⁹ Cambridge scholars, whom I discuss in chapter 6, refer to historical context to more or less affirm Machiavelli’s maxims as he states them, encouraging readers to take them at face value or as largely consonant with established intellectual-philosophical traditions. These scholars seldom persevere in efforts to understand how Machiavelli’s literary allusions and concrete examples consistently undermine these precepts and further upset their relationship with extant traditions; how thereby the Florentine often engenders radically qualified, and indeed more effectually truthful, reformulations of those seemingly simple maxims.

Rousseau, for his part, was among the first interpreters to suggest that Machiavelli did not always mean exactly what he wrote, espe-

cially regarding principalities; and yet when treating Machiavelli's views on republics, Rousseau completely obliterates Machiavelli's explicit and implicit recommendations with respect to well-ordered popular government. Failure to heed the peculiar qualities and difficulties that characterize Machiavelli's writings (as well as a certain habituation to aristocratic norms) may partly explain what leads such vaunted interpreters astray. Thus do the two halves of the present study speak to each other: the chapters of Part I demonstrate how to read Machiavelli in a way that evades the insufficiencies of the three interpretations that I subsequently critique in Part II.

It would be difficult to overstate the influence that the Straussian and Cambridge schools of Machiavelli interpretation (addressed in Part II) have wielded internationally over the past five decades.¹⁰ Strauss, on the one hand, and Pocock and Skinner, on the other, have established truly vast intellectual empires¹¹—and yet, their respective students and disciples have seldom interacted with each other in meaningful ways. The present study may in fact stand as the first monograph that substantively engages both schools of thought, the first that takes equal and sustained aim at each of these two powerful hermeneutic traditions. Although the Straussian and Cambridge schools are most often understood to represent diametrically opposed ideological and methodological orientations, I demonstrate here that they share a common discomfort with Machiavelli's rough and tumble populism, with the democratic implications of his thought, and, perhaps not least of all, with his frequently expressed conviction that elites must be periodically held accountable through spectacular acts of violence.

The following remarks provide my provisional sketch of what Machiavelli presents as the effectual truth of virtuous politics, and the central role played by the vulgar within it, across his three major political works, *The Prince*, the *Discourses*, and the *Histories*.

Virtue, the Vulgar, and the Effectual Truth of Politics

Machiavelli's most famous work, *On Principalities* (1513), or, as it was subsequently titled, *The Prince*, announced a dramatic break with political doctrines anchored in traditionally moral and religious systems

of thought. Unlike his classical or medieval predecessors, who took their political bearings from transcendentally valid or divinely sanctioned conceptions of justice, Machiavelli oriented himself, again, to the “effectual truth” of politics; that is, a politics oriented to how the world actually “is” rather than how it “ought” to be. Indeed, Machiavelli’s brutally realistic advice seems intended to brazenly contravene all previous, socially respectable forms of political reflection. For instance, he boldly declares that it is safer for a prince to be feared rather than loved (if he must choose between these two forms of regard) because subjects love at their own pleasure while they fear at the pleasure of a prince. Moreover, Machiavelli steadfastly insists that violence and cruelty are necessary means of effective political action (even if their deployment must be circumscribed meticulously to avoid unintended, deleterious consequences for a prince’s rule). Apologetically inclined commentators, such as Quentin Skinner (whose interpretation I will address in chapter 6), attempt to soften Machiavelli’s radically severe political advice by consistently emphasizing, at the risk of morally sanitizing his lessons, the qualifications of the Florentine’s doctrines contained in the preceding parentheses.¹²

Highly indicative of his unrepentantly disreputable and unorthodoxly realist approach to politics, Machiavelli blatantly rejects the ideal of philosopher kings whose perfect judgment might be even remotely approximated by the educated, wealthy, and prominent noblemen of worldly cities.¹³ Exemplifying his profoundly anti-elitist political orientation, Machiavelli insists that there exist no few best men whose wisdom, prudence, or love of the common good can be counted upon to settle, with impartial justice, political controversies and crises. Defying the aristocratic preferences of previous philosophers and historians, as he states in the *Discourses* (D I.58), Machiavelli recommends in *The Prince* that individual princes militarily arm the vulgar common people, in whom the noble quality of *onestà* (honesty, decency, or justice) actually resides, and crush at every opportunity self-styled nobles or *grandi*, whose ambitious and avaricious motivations and machinations offer little more than oppression for the people and insecurity for a prince (P 9).

Machiavelli’s preference for political arrangements that empower the people and contain elites was evident in his political career long

before he expressed it in his major writings. During his extensive service to the Florentine Republic (1494–1512), for which Machiavelli performed vital administrative, diplomatic, and military duties, he revealed himself to be a staunch defender of the city’s popular assembly, the Great Council, and an outspoken advocate of a citizen militia. The republic’s aristocrats despised the Council and insisted on altering the militia so as to render it, in quality and size, less alarming and intimidating to themselves. When the republic was overthrown through an aristocratic coup, foreign intervention, and Papal intrigue that returned the Medici family to power, Machiavelli responded by writing to the restored princes, delicately advising them to betray their untrustworthy allies among the nobility and to align themselves instead with the recently disempowered Florentine people.¹⁴ For his troubles, Machiavelli was implicated in an anti-Medici conspiracy, tortured, imprisoned, and subsequently confined to internal exile. Several years later, Machiavelli repeated his advice that the Medici ultimately re-empower the Florentine people at the expense of the family’s aristocratic friends in an understudied but important memorandum on constitutional reforms.¹⁵ As we will observe in chapter 5, Leo Strauss—often ingeniously but always illegitimately—attempts to reverse Machiavelli’s class partisanship from the side of people to that of the nobles.

Machiavelli’s *Discourses* (c. 1513–19) and *Florentine Histories* (c. 1520–25) clearly exhibit the author’s admiration for popular government, even if, ever intriguingly, these works generally affirm rather than repudiate the moral and practical lessons of *The Prince*.¹⁶ The “nearly perfect” (if still ultimately flawed) ancient Roman Republic is Machiavelli’s primary subject in the *Discourses*, while the embarrassingly disordered, medieval Florentine republic takes center stage in the *Histories*. In Rome, a prudent and virtuous founder, Romulus, organized the poor into armed legions and collected the wealthy in a senate (P 6; D I.9). In so doing, Romulus insured that future class conflicts between plebeians and patricians, which Machiavelli deems natural and inevitable (P 9, D I.4–5), would produce two salutary institutions: an office, the plebeian tribunate, dedicated to the welfare of the common people, and large citizen assemblies in which the people themselves freely discussed and directly decided legislation

and political trials (D I.2–8, D I.16, D I.58). I will delineate in chapter 4 Rousseau’s elaborate attempt to undermine Machiavelli’s democratic renderings of Rome’s institutions.¹⁷ For Machiavelli, such orders, created and sustained by intense but productive class conflict at home, as well as unprecedented territorial expansion abroad, herald Rome’s singular greatness and its at least provisional value as a model to be emulated by all subsequent republics.¹⁸

To be more specific, in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli praised Roman institutions, undergirded by a full-scale citizen military, that both resulted from and then effectively re-channeled class-conflict: notably, the consulship and the tribunate—magistracies with year-long tenures of office reserved for, respectively, elite and common citizens; additionally, a senate and popular assemblies that kept noble and plebeian citizens unified among themselves and politically fixated on their natural class adversaries; and, finally, political trials where the entire citizenry renders judgment over individuals accused of political crimes—the closest real-world approximation, in Machiavelli’s view, to fully objective political judgment.

By contrast with Rome, Machiavelli demonstrates in the *Histories* how badly ordered were both popular and aristocratic institutions in Florence. The Florentine people were constituted by the semipublic/semiprivate institutional arrangements of the guild community, arrangements that reveal themselves to be politically deficient in two ways: the city’s merchants and artisans, the *popolani*, were dispersed among twenty-one competing major, middle, and minor guilds; and the guild community excluded the vast majority of the city’s free-born, able-bodied male population, mostly employed as wool carders known as *ciompi*, *sottoposti*, or plebs. These disenfranchised and exploited workers proved amenable for cooptation by the city’s ancient nobility (the *magnati* or *grandi*) against the guilds, or by a prospective tyrant like Walter Brienne, the so-called Duke of Athens, against the city as a whole. Moreover, in Machiavelli’s Florence, rather than a proper senate, the dominant aristocratic institution was the semipublic/semiprivate Guelf Party, comprised of only half the city’s nobility, which pursued domination over both rival Ghibelline nobles and common guildsmen. In a very un-Roman fashion, these adversarial, aristocratic Guelf and Ghibelline parties pledged loyalty to

foreign entities, respectively, the Papacy and the German emperor, who periodically re-instigated social strife within the city.

In the *Histories*, Machiavelli illustrates how one Florentine individual after another emerged with the prospect of assuming the role of virtuous founder, for example, Giano della Bella (discussed in chapter 3) or Walter Brienne; yet each ultimately demurred from fully arming the entire people civically and militarily in good Roman fashion such that social conflicts (not only between classes but especially among families and factions) persisted in episodically destructive rather than constructive ways. A “wise legislator,” Machiavelli insists, could have imposed an appropriate constitutional order upon the Florentine Republic (FH III.1), which might have properly institutionalized social conflict along “natural” class lines (FH II.12). Instead, the city’s either naively “good” leaders, like Giano della Bella, or imprudently “bad” leaders, like Walter Brienne, permit or encourage social discord to persist in ever more chaotic and variegated ways: specifically, intense conflicts among rival family cliques; between Guelf and Ghibelline nobles (and then “Black and White” Guelfs); between the so-called popular nobles of the richest guilds and middle class citizens of the middling/lower guilds; and, finally, through conflicts between various elite groupings and the city’s plebeians, who were neither enrolled in nor represented by occupational guilds of their own. Machiavelli exhaustively chronicles how the republic’s bleakly defective ordering and chronically tepid leadership resulted in its gradual enfeeblement: a steady decline measured ultimately by the civic corruption typified by the rise of the Albizzi oligarchy (1382) and the Medici principate (1434), as well as by geopolitical decline ultimately ratified by the invasion of Tuscany by the French in 1494 and the Spanish in 1512.

Machiavelli’s descriptions of virtually every major Florentine figure in the *Histories* invite a comparison with his account of a Roman or an ancient leader in an earlier work.¹⁹ Most pointedly, Machiavelli presents Giano della Bella as a civic leader confronted with the opportunity to become a Romulus, Moses or a Brutus: a defender of his own set of laws that concomitantly protect and benefit his people (D I.9; III.3, III.30; FH II.13). According to Machiavelli, those virtuous ancient leaders understood that new laws and the people’s liberty

must be secured by the blood of “the sons of Brutus,” aristocratic abusers of the people and intransigent opponents of founders or reformers (P 6; D III.3, III.30). On the contrary, Machiavelli suggests that an undifferentiated notion of “goodness” prompts Giano to exit the city rather than, as did Moses or Brutus, resort to the force necessary to effectively enact his laws and ensure the enduring welfare of the common citizens of Florence—even though the armed people appear twice at his door begging for him to do so and pledging to him their military support.²⁰ In chapter 3, I demonstrate how Machiavelli maintained, throughout all his major political writings, a positive assessment of the common people’s *virtù* and *onestà*; I contest scholarly orthodoxy which asserts that in the *Histories* our author presented the Florentine people and plebs to be civically and martially inferior in comparison with their ancient counterparts.

The *Discourses* and the *Histories* do, of course, present readers with striking contrasts, two of which are relevant here: firstly, Machiavelli repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the ancient Romans would consistently kill their own family members for the sake of civic well-being (e.g., Brutus, Virginus, Manlius Torquatus, among others), while the medieval Florentines constantly disrupt civic order by maiming or killing other citizens on behalf of aggrieved family, clan, or party members. And, secondly, rather than conquering other Italians militarily and vanquishing German, French, and Spanish enemies in battle, as the Roman Republic continually did, Florence, in Machiavelli’s account, is conquered by these very same former subjects of that virtuous ancient republic. The political well-being of the Florentine Republic is consistently undermined (often through the pernicious or clueless meddling of the Roman Pontiff) by the German emperor and by French and Spanish monarchs.

Especially emblematic of Machiavelli’s views on the salutary effect of institutionalized social conflict is his vivid account of Florence’s Ciompi Revolt in Book III of the *Histories*. Since the city’s oppressed woolworkers had no recourse to plebeian tribunes who might air their grievances and were unable to confront directly Florence’s wealthiest and most prominent citizens assembled in a proper senate, the *ciompi* were compelled to pursue the city’s elites house to house in a series of destructive but not especially bloody riots. These distur-

bances produced no longstanding progressive gains for Florence's poorer citizens, but rather facilitated conservative consolidation of power among the city's richest families (FH III.24).²¹ From such entrenched oligarchic arrangements, Machiavelli shows how Cosimo de' Medici and his family successors—falsely presenting themselves as defenders of the people—rose to the ranks of commercial princes.²² Rather than arm citizens, the Medici rendered the latter mere economic clients, definitively corrupting the city's civic life and ensuring its disastrous military dependence on foreign powers and mercenary warlords (FH IV).²³

Why were Rome's founders and civic princes so virtuous and Florence's so hesitant and inept, especially with respect to arming the people civically and militarily? Throughout his writings, Machiavelli sometimes directly and sometimes more subtly blames Christianity for the weakness of modern republics and their leaders: unlike the teachings of previous, more robustly *political* belief systems, Christian tenets encourage passivity, subservience, and deferral of punishment to the next world—and, perhaps worst of all, such precepts promote an inflexibly undifferentiated view of “the good” among modern would-be founders and reformers (P 15; D III.1). These precepts seem to inhibit modern peoples and princes from behaving in the “bad” ways that actually prove salutary for political life. Ancient armed populaces often took matters into their own hands to discipline and punish those who commit sins against the public; moreover, ancient princes like Moses and Brutus never hesitated to eliminate rival threats to their new modes and orders that guaranteed the liberty and longevity of their peoples and polities.

Indeed, Machiavelli laments, Christian populaces suffer too long rather than instantaneously avenge ill treatment by abusive elites; as his narration of the Ciompi Revolt makes plain, when finally provoked to the point of a desperately spirited response, the *ciompi* strike out against their oppressors in undisciplined and ineffective ways. Florentine princes like the Medici, Friar Girolamo Savonarola and Machiavelli's own patron, Piero Soderini—all of whom maintained concrete ties of one kind or another with the Roman Catholic Church—seem hamstrung internally by Christian morality or externally by the Church's secular power from acting decisively to

establish and maintain a healthy civic republic on the Arno (P 6; D I.52, III.3, III.9, III.30). In particular, Machiavelli avers, Christian princes seem especially incapable, on the one hand, of arming the people with little more than platitudes attesting to their goodness, and, on the other, of eliminating the metaphorical “sons of Brutus” who forever threaten “a free and civil way of life”: that is, oppressive-minded elites who detest the people’s liberty, bitterly resent their participation in politics, and oppose any reformer who attempts to limit their own aristocratic power and privilege.²⁴

However, Machiavelli’s reconstruction of Cesare Borgia’s career, as I will discuss in chapter 1, raises the possibility that certain aspects of Christianity may prove congruent with ancient pagan practices and might serve as the basis of future virtuous princely and popular politics. As we will observe, while Borgia’s anxiety over eternal damnation, and hence his inclination to believe in the possibility of forgiveness, may have ultimately spelled his political doom, other quasi-Christian aspects of his “spirit,” Machiavelli intimates, portend significant political success. For instance: the commitment to the people’s welfare signaled by the killing of one’s own sons by both Brutus and the Christian God; the necessity of sins being paid for, to a spectacular extent, in this world and not the next (not merely once, but repeatedly); the necessity of scapegoating individuals such that princes take credit for good outcomes and that political rivals incur blame for the often obnoxious means deployed to achieve them; and the promise and experience of a real, if always qualified, domestic peace that serves to forge an intimate relationship between princes and peoples.

Speaking more transhistorically, scholars often blindly misapprehend Machiavelli’s concrete impact on practical politics and constitutional forms in the modern world. After all, the “republicans” of the broad Enlightenment era drew upon the Florentine’s prescriptions in a highly selective fashion: they only partially adopted his call for neo-Roman full militarization of the people, and they almost completely rejected the democratic institutions and practices that Machiavelli hoped would be demanded by such newly armed citizenries. They explicitly rejected, as exemplified by the case of Rousseau (chapter 4), Machiavelli’s call for modern plebeian tribunates, and for assem-

blies in which common citizens themselves freely discuss and equitably enact public policy. Instead, the framers of modern constitutions opted exclusively for offices filled through general elections, in which the people might choose the most wise and prudent (in reality, the richest and most prominent) individuals, and for elected assemblies of notables that would purportedly represent the interests of common people in a faithful and effective manner.²⁵

Machiavelli achieved perhaps his greatest practical influence, and hence earned his greatest infamy, in literatures associated with “reason of state,” a phrase he never used.²⁶ Architects of the European absolute monarchies appropriated Machiavelli’s apparently cynical, amoral doctrines, but decisively severed these from his own normative, populist cum democratic concerns. They successfully elevated individuals to the status of national monarchs—Tudors, Stuarts, Valois, Hapsburgs and Hohenzollerns—and certainly helped subordinate traditional aristocracies to these dynasts’ authority. But by relying on professional militaries and by endorsing representation of the public’s interest, modern state-builders failed to empower the people to the full extent that Machiavelli recommended. The economic dependence of these modern princes—and, notably, of the bureaucratic states that succeeded them—on newly emerging capitalist aristocracies would leave the citizens of modern republics without robust recourse to the military or civic arms that the Florentine thought eternally necessary for the defense of their liberty against rapacious elites.²⁷ In chapter 2, I argue that Machiavelli prescribed socioeconomic conditions of substantive equality for the realization of liberty within well-ordered popular governments; and, in fact, that he directly attributed the collapse of the world’s greatest democratic republic, ancient Rome, to its failure to stem the otherwise inevitable rise of economic cum political inequality.