

# Book Reviews

## On Machiavelli as Plebeian Theorist

John McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli* (M. Stears)

Gabriele Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult* (J. Barthas)

Yves Winter, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (A. Woodhouse)

*Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspects Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics*, by John McCormick.  
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. 288 pp.

These are difficult times for democracy, both in practice and in theory. As our Twitter feeds bring news of ever-more egregious political abuses across the democratic world, the shelves at airport bookshops groan under the weight of books from established scholars predicting the end of the democratic age. The villain in most of those accounts is populism, a political movement that wraps itself up in the rhetorical grab of anti-elitism and denounces expertise both in the form of technical know-how and the supposed virtuous self-restraint of conventional elite liberal democratic practice.

John P. McCormick's *Reading Machiavelli* explodes into this intellectual context with breath-taking force. For McCormick the problem in democratic theory is that it has been too tempted by comfortable elitism and too sceptical of the judgement of the common people themselves for far too long. Democrats have allowed themselves to turn a blind eye to the abuses of the elite, apparently convinced that as long as there are 'free and fair' elections, then everything is all right. The reality, however, is that democracies have been hollowed out for decades now, with few truly participatory mechanisms constraining the behaviour of those at the top of the political pile and their ever-growing disregard for the temper,



opinions, experiences and interests of those at the bottom. *Reading Machiavelli* does not say this directly, of course. McCormick's stated interest here is not in contemporary democratic theory or practice but in correcting what he sees as centuries of misreading of Machiavelli, from Rousseau to Strauss and Skinner. But the argument is utterly compelling nonetheless, even to those of us with only a passing interest in the history of political thought per se.

As in his earlier *Machiavellian Democracy*, McCormick presents a Machiavelli that stands midway between the brutal amoral realism of the undergraduate imagination and the other-worldly, historically inclined, neo-Roman Republican of Cambridge School scholarship. 'Machiavelli's political thought does not simply supplant an idealist *ought* with a more realistic *is*', McCormick tells us, 'rather it elaborates an entirely new ought for political thinking and practice' and that is 'an ought in which the vulgar assume an unprecedented prominent role' (3). It is an argument he prosecutes with rare brilliance and with utter determination. On page after page here, we learn how to see Machiavelli as a 'pleasurable, perplexing, and beguiling' advocate of the fundamental political role of the people themselves (7), whether it is by advocating the military arming of the people themselves (just as did George Orwell – a great Machiavellian author – in England in the early years of the Second World War) or by praising 'extraelectoral devices and practices' in a 'democratic reconstruction of ancient Rome' that owed nothing to the senatorial elitism endorsed by others and (almost) everything to popular tumults (204).

McCormick's book, then, is a sensational account of a 'rough and tumble populism' that is truly anti-elitist, not just rhetorically so. It presents a real new option for our contemporary political imagination. The choice facing us, McCormick enables us to see, is *not* between the passive, complacent, elite-driven politics that has gone by the name of democracy for decades or the corrupt, narrowly self-interested and oligarchical movement that is so often called populism today. Instead, it is between both of those and a genuine alternative: one that respects the integrity, honesty and capacity of ordinary people and is willing to create political institutions that enable them genuinely to hold elites to account.

Despite this brilliance, *Reading Machiavelli* is a book with a handful of less compelling idiosyncrasies. The decision to structure the book around detailed responses to earlier Machiavelli

scholarship gives it an air of scholarly abstraction that is strangely ill-suited to its message. There is already a distancing effect from being so close to a series of historical texts, but the approach here exacerbates that sense of being several steps removed from the pressing issues of a troubled time. While McCormick will convince most that studying Machiavelli is rewarding, he may have less luck convincing people that studying those who study Machiavelli is equally important. This is all the more so given that McCormick finds little to praise in most – but not all – of those with whom he is in conversation here, describing them collectively as having a ‘suspect engagement with Machiavelli’s political thought’. This distancing finds its way into the prose too. Throughout the text McCormick is frequently found describing what he is doing or is going to do – ‘I argue’, ‘I suggest’, ‘I conclude by’ – rather than just getting on and doing it. These turns of phrase are out of character with the convention-busting energy of the book. They also just slow it all down. At one point he is even to be found politely asking the reader’s permission to begin a section with an ‘allow me to’. None of this detracts seriously from what makes the book worthwhile, but it does leave the impression that one more edit would have turned it into an even more exhilarating read than it already is.

I remember the first time I read McCormick’s *Machiavellian Democracy*. It was one of those moments when texts that I had long struggled with suddenly made sense and when my appreciation of contemporary politics became clearer and richer. Many of those who are new to McCormick and who begin with *Reading Machiavelli* will no doubt have a similar experience. It is a bracing book from a scholar who knows that there is far more to the democratic imagination than either the pessimists or the optimists of our own time are willing to acknowledge. It should both open minds and steel hearts, and I can think of no greater praise for an engaged political theorist than that.

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*Machiavelli in Tumult. The Discourses on Livy and the Origins of Political Conflictualism*, by Gabriele Pedullà. Translated by Patricia Gaborik and Richard Nybakken. Revised and updated by the author. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. XIX + 284 pp.

*Machiavelli in Tumult* pertains to an interpretive current that recognises Machiavelli as the founder of a ‘plebeian philosophy’ and praises him for it: a ‘decisive anti-aristocratic stance is probably the real underlying theme of Machiavelli’s life and work – and the one that connects the *Discourses* to *The Prince*’ (142); ‘in fact Machiavelli’s approval of civil conflict should be considered the axis around which the two wheels of his biography (and work) turn: his efforts to reform the Florentine army through the creation of a popular militia, and his struggle to limit the power of the Florentine aristocracy’ (6).

Therefore, *Machiavelli in Tumult* focuses on the sources, the internal meaning, the historical significance and the theoretical value of one of the most scandalous theses in Machiavelli’s *Discourses* – that is to say, that political conflicts grounded in a social division between the few and the many are, under certain conditions, crucial to the development of an accomplished civilisation; hence, the empowerment of the masses, which both results from and produces conflicts, is to be regarded as an essentially positive thing, functional to a healthy political life. Once the level of social and economic inequality becomes too extreme and the people’s powers too weak and disincorporated, there is hardly any hope against total decay except the emergence – rare throughout history – of a radical leader and revolutionary action.

By emphasising Machiavelli’s view on the ‘positive function’ of conflicts, *Machiavelli in Tumult* is not perhaps without precedents. In its more general terms, the view expressed in *Discourses* book 1, Chapter 4 has since the 1950s been key to the development of a subfield in sociology, where the motto ‘institutionalization of conflict’ was forged (cfr. Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, New York, 1956). As related to the *Discourses on Livy*, this motto now competes with the oft-quoted apothegm on Machiavelli’s discovery of the ‘autonomy of politics’ with *The Prince*. Here as elsewhere – in Pedullà’s own words (about the repetitive

calls to concord in pre-Machiavellian political discourses) – ‘the challenge lies much more in the *how* than in the *what*’ (22). One has to admit that, more often than not, Machiavelli’s conflictualism is not understood in its author’s own terms. For instance, his unparalleled positive interpretation of the function of the Tribunes of the plebs in Ancient Rome is rarely recalled and not even identified as crucial by a scholar such as the French philosopher Claude Lefort, who did much to valorise Machiavelli’s theory of conflict as an alternative to any ideology of consensus (his 1972 book in French was translated in 2012 as *Machiavelli in the Making*). To the contrary, Pedullà displays an unprecedented wealth of research and analysis to make his case and to give an institutional substance to the theory developed in the *Discourses*.

After an introduction framing the huge intellectual ambitions of the book, both in terms of historical investigation and conceptualisation, there are seven chapters, followed by two indexes. The volume also contains a dozen figures and tables, bringing complex analysis into a schematic form of expression. Chapter 1 sketches the philosophical foundations of the classical and, most specially, renaissance discourses on unity and concord. Chapter 2 analyses Machiavelli’s demystifying response to it and how, in that undertaking, he was led to reinterpret in depth the history of Ancient Rome by focusing on the Tribunitian function. Chapter 3 is dedicated to Machiavelli’s attempt to reconcile freedom and terror by formulating a theory of dictatorship inspired by the Roman experience. Chapter 4 elucidates the specificity of Machiavelli’s doctrine of the ‘mixed constitution’, explaining how it differs from its ancient version and why it is incompatible with any theory of the balance of powers. Chapter 5 presents Machiavelli’s conception of citizenship and shows how, given that war is an irreducible element of international relations, he argues in favour of an extension of civil and political rights to subalterns and foreigners. Chapter 6 uncovers a historical work that helped Machiavelli immensely in framing his new interpretations of Roman history: the *Roman Antiquities* by the Greek rhetorician Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Livy’s coeval. Finally, Chapter 7 proposes an interpretive survey of the (sometimes invisible) legacy of Machiavelli’s theory of conflict in subsequent political thought until today.

*Machiavelli in Tumult* surpasses each and every previous work dedicated to the topic by considering a much larger range of authors,

ancient historians and Renaissance humanists alike. Anyone interested in a learned reading of Machiavelli must take it into account. Although the book requires time and patience, it is a generous companion to the *Discourses*, and the reading proves most rewarding. Indeed, *Machiavelli in Tumult* is probably the most refined and profound book in English on Machiavelli since John M. Najemy's *Between Friends* (1993) on the genesis of *The Prince* and Machiavelli's 1513–1515 epistolary.

Najemy himself, reviewing the Italian original edition of *Machiavelli in Tumult*, published in 2011, both praised a 'masterful book' that 'should top the reading lists of all scholars in the field' and suggested that its erudition risked obscuring sometimes 'the crucial reason why Machiavelli considered conflicts essential to republics and liberty' (*Renaissance Quarterly* 67, 2014, 992–993). Having discussed the Italian edition at quite some length myself (*Rivista storica italiana* 2, 2015, 552–566), I observe now that Pedullà has measurably updated his work for the English translation: he has strengthened certain arguments, clarified his relation to Lefort's interpretation and radicalised his own view of Machiavelli's 'anti-aristocratic stance'. In that undertaking he has benefited, among other things, from a detailed engagement with John McCormick's *Machiavellian Democracy* (2011) and Filippo del Lucchese's *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli* (2015). Perhaps, most of all, Pedullà has benefited also from his own commentary and editorial work on Machiavelli's *The Prince* (2013), whose English translation is now announced as forthcoming from Verso.

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*Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence*, by Yves Winter.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 230 pp.

In the opening pages of *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence*, Yves Winter outlines four ways in which modern political theorists, despite their eagerness to talk about it, have managed to depoliticise violence. Whether it is by placing it in opposition to politics itself ('marginalization'), regarding it as straightforwardly instrumental ('technicization'), viewing it as evil ('moralization'), or, most

curiously, treating it as primarily a function of language ('ontologization'), contemporary political theory is struggling to grasp the concept (3–7). Winter proposes that Machiavelli's political thought offers a way out of this theoretical dead end and into a space where a properly political analysis of violence once again becomes possible.

As Winter shows throughout this carefully argued, theoretically sensitive and deeply engaging study, to read Machiavelli on violence is to be brought back down to earth; violence is physically enacted by humans on the bodies of other humans under a given set of historical circumstances. Machiavelli thus provides a commonsensical 'corrective' to the strange dematerialisation of violence occurring in some of today's political theory (6) – a useful point, though perhaps not such a profound one. Yet Winter richly demonstrates that Machiavelli's understanding of how violence operates politically is anything but trivial. While his procedure is always to begin with the *physical* instantiation of violence in history, Machiavelli is also persistently concerned to reveal its *phenomenological* effects, not on the persons subjected to violent acts, but rather on those experiencing them as spectators. For Winter, Machiavelli's demystification of violence largely consists in revealing how the symbolic meanings attached to it can further its practitioners' political aims.

Whereas previous studies have touched on violence insofar as it relates to other Machiavellian topics – such as citizenship, social conflict, political executions, leadership, war, and empire – here Winter lays out the first 'systematic treatment of political violence' in Machiavelli's thought (9). The interpretative framework that Winter imposes comprises a 'conceptual typology' of Machiavellian violence (Chapters 1–3) and an analysis of the concepts in action in the major examples of violence that Machiavelli theorises (Chapters 4–6).

Chapter 1 elucidates Machiavelli's concept of spectacular violence by scrutinising the vivid description in *The Prince* of Cesare Borgia's execution of his lieutenant Remirro de Orco. Far more than simply a proto-Weberian lesson in the necessity for would-be state-makers to monopolise force, Winter argues that Machiavelli presents the Orco episode as a study on the public consumption of violence; it is the people's imaginative and passionate response to



the drama of Orco's dismembered corpse left in the piazza, just as much as the violent act itself, that helps secure Borgia's new political order.

Chapters 2 and 3 attend more closely to Machiavelli's conceptual language. Winter points out that although Machiavelli sometimes employs the term *violenza*, it is the concepts of *forza* and *crudeltà* that structure his thinking about violence. In line with Quentin Skinner's classic interpretation, Winter recognises that Machiavelli speaks his politics in a 'neo-Roman' idiom: for the Roman binary of *vis/violentia* (force/violence), Machiavelli substitutes that of *forza/crudeltà* (force/cruelty). As Winter observes in Chapter 2, classical, medieval and Renaissance authorities had typically associated an overreliance on *vis* with tyrannical rule, and thus Machiavelli's insistence that *all* successful forms of government depend on the regular deployment of armed force within the state represents something of an innovation, as does his contention that force must work in concert with legal and religious sources of authority. But as we discover in Chapter 3, more radical by far is Machiavelli's embrace of cruelty. Whereas Ciceronian and Senecan orthodoxy required a blanket condemnation of *crudelitas*, Winter explains that Machiavelli's consequentialist morality permits him to distinguish between 'well-used' and 'badly used' cruelty. For Machiavelli, *crudeltà* is violence that *appears* to be excessive and irrational, yet this does not mean that cruelty cannot follow its own 'peculiar logic', which Winter calls 'the rationality of irrationality' (110): making people *think* that you have gone too far is sometimes just what is needed. While the humdrum cruelty performed by tyrants is counterproductive, foundational or revolutionary cruelty can be well used, particularly, Winter suggests, when serving an anti-elitist politics.

Chapter 4 continues to highlight Machiavelli's interest in theorising violence's symbolic power, here at foundational political moments. Romulus's murder of Remus and Brutus's execution of his sons constitute 'transgression[s] that cannot simply be justified by a schema of expediency' (118): foundational violence clears the field of opponents, but it also addresses an audience through a 'poetics of cruelty' that narrates and memorialises the basic act of political ordering (140). Winter underlines the monarchical nature of Machiavelli's conception of state-founding, but *Discourses* book



1, Chapter 2, in which the state gets its initial push from the bottom-up as a scattered population bands together and selects its own 'head' (*capo*), could receive more attention.

The book's final two chapters examine the role of violence in the radically populist brand of republicanism that Winter attributes to Machiavelli. In Chapter 5 Winter rightly insists that the creation of enduring institutions that can deploy publicly authorised violence against elite attempts at state capture is a fundamental component of Machiavelli's theory of political freedom. Moreover, Winter appreciates that the dependency of freedom on violence does not only apply for Machiavelli within the free state's borders, noting the 'indisputably imperial . . . character' of his republicanism (166). Yet there remains some hesitancy to acknowledge the unpleasantness of Machiavelli's vision of the imperial republic: Winter claims that Machiavelli believes 'republics are better off seeking allies rather than subjects' (163), but as *Discourses* book 2, Chapter 13 confirms, the Roman imperial model that Machiavelli so heartily recommends involves the fraudulent conversion of pseudo-allies into 'slaves' (*servi*). Chapter 6 extracts a theory of insurrectionary popular violence from Machiavelli's account of the Ciompi revolt in the *Florentine Histories*. Winter argues plausibly that Machiavelli is broadly supportive of the use of force and, indeed, cruelty in plebeian attempts to wrest some political power from the hands of entrenched elites, though Machiavelli is of course not unconcerned by the prospect of the free state unravelling into a civil war resolved only by monarchical domination or foreign conquest. Here Winter's gloves really do come off: 'Machiavelli treats plebeian violence as a legitimate strategy, and . . . is right to do so' (183–184). The chapter thus provides a fittingly combative finale to this sharply stimulating and provocative study.

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