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Machiavelli's Inversion:
The Political Institutionalisation of Social Conflict in Machiavelli's Republicanism

by

Piao Mao

ORCID ID 0000-0001-9635-3975

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

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This thesis investigates Niccolò Machiavelli's theory of internal conflict and its connection to contemporary agonism. Through an analysis of the internal conflicts in the *Discourses on Livy* and *Florentine Histories*, this thesis elucidates the nuanced connotations of Machiavelli's thinking on internal conflict. Machiavelli argues that the conflict between the plebs and the nobles played a crucial role in the freedom and power of the Roman Republic. This re-evaluation of social conflict challenges the prevailing negative perception of political conflict from the late Roman Republic to the Renaissance. According to Machiavelli, internal conflicts within a republic can never be completely eradicated and the key lies in how to regulate these conflicts through institutionalisation, thereby creating new institutions conducive to freedom and providing the republic with the strength to maintain and even expand itself. Notably, Machiavelli emphasises the interdependence and mutual influence between a republic's institutions and its customs or ethos. This was a crucial issue for Machiavelli because the entrenched factional politics in the Florentine Republic posed a crucial challenge to establishing a reasonable system for conflict regulation. However, it is also a theoretically important issue for us because it raises questions about contemporary forms of agonistic political theory. Agonism highlights the inevitability of competition in politics and endeavours to find constructive approaches to handle conflicts. However, existing agonism theories primarily focus on ethos rather than institutions, whereas reflecting on Machiavelli offers an opportunity to develop an institutionalised agonism that underscores the complementarity of ethos and institutions.

Table of Contents

Table of Tables

Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

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I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

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This thesis would not have been possible without the support and understanding of all those mentioned above.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations for Machiavelli's Writings (References to these three books are cited by book and chapter):

P =*The Prince*.

- Machiavelli, N. (1997), *Il Principe,* in Vivanti C. (ed). *Opere I: I Primi Scritti Politici*. Turin: Einaudi- Gallimard, 114-192.
- Machiavelli, N. (1998) *The Prince*. Translated by: Mansfield, H.C. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Machiavelli, N. (2019) *Machiavelli: The Prince*. Translated by: Skinner, Q. and Price, R. 2 edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

D = *Discourses* = *Discourses on Livy* = *Discourses on Livy Titus Livy's First Ten Books*.

- Machiavelli, N. (1997), *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, in Vivanti C. (ed). *Opere I: I Primi Scritti Politici*. Turin: Einaudi- Gallimard, 193-525.
- Machiavelli, N. (1989) *Discourses on Livy*. *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, Vol. I. Translated by: Gilbert, A. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Machiavelli, N. (1996) *Discourses on Livy*. Translated by: Mansfield, H.C. and Tarcov, N. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

FH = *Florentine Histories* (composed c. 1520– 25, published 1532).

- Niccolò Machiavelli, *Istorie Fiorentine*. Edited by Franco Gaeta (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962), 68– 577
- Machiavelli, N. (1988) *Florentine Histories*. Translated by: Mansfield, H.C. and Tarcov, N. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Livy = *History of Rome* (References to this are cited by book and chapter):

- Livy, Titus. 1919–26. History of Rome (Ab Urbe Condita), Books 1–10 (vols. I–IV), trans. B. O. Foster. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb).

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Political Order and Political Conflict

Aristotle, Cicero, the civic humanists of the Renaissance, and Rousseau (and, indeed, extending into Marx's vision of communism), when situated within the republican tradition, have consistently perceived political order as intrinsically tied to the promotion of social solidarity and the avoidance of factional conflict. Aristotle contends that a just and amicable community could be formed through the rule of law, the empowerment of the middle class, and the establishment of a mixed government (Aristotle, 2017). Cicero argues that safeguarding individual interests would lead the city to turmoil and disharmony, positing that only the preservation of the common good could establish harmonious order (Cicero, 2016). During the Renaissance, civil humanists held similar views on the issue of internal conflicts within the city-state. They often cited Sallust to emphasise the importance of concord in a republic, asserting that 'small states grow with concord, while even the greatest are destroyed by discord' (Sallust, 2010; Pedullà, 2018, p. 15). As per Rousseau's perspective, a republic can solely attain public happiness when its laws derive from the general will (Rousseau, 2018). This general will represents the collective and shared will of all citizens, originating from their relinquishment of personal interests and remaining consistent and equal for every individual.

However, the great exception to this standpoint is Niccolò Machiavelli's republican theory in which the task of sustaining the republic and the free civic life that it embodies is seen as best accomplished through the (well-designed) political institutionalisation of socially rooted conflict. The central theme of Machiavelli's political philosophy pertains to the acquiring or (re)founding of the state and the maintenance of the state. This theme is not merely prevalent in his political writings, including *The Prince*, the *Discourses*, and the *Florentine Histories*, but it also encapsulates the core issues he explored throughout his lifetime of political practice. According to Machiavelli, the optimal strategy for state maintenance is to be a republic. The key to maintaining a republic, in his view, lay in effectively managing the inherent internal political conflicts between the nobles and the

plebs, which he saw as necessarily opposed social groups. Moreover, the conflict between the plebs and the nobles is the driving force and the reason why the republic maintains its freedom and retains its power. Rather than seeking to ameliorate (Cicero; Madison) or to overcome (Rousseau; Marx) the social sources of such conflict, Machiavelli argues that what is needed is to channel it in such a way that it will help to sustain the virtue of the republic and make the republic free and powerful. It can be said that reflections on political conflicts within the republic are at the heart of Machiavelli's political philosophy and theory of the state.

The central research question of the thesis addresses the motivation for, and form of, Machiavelli's inversion of the orthodox republican stance on political conflict between the nobles and the plebs.[1] What was the intellectual background of Machiavelli's position? What explains why Machiavelli sees the political institutionalisation of social conflict as a key resource for sustaining the free way of life of the republic? Why did Machiavelli express admiration for most of the conflicts in the Roman Republic but condemnation for most of the conflicts in the Florentine Republic? How should we interpret and evaluate Machiavelli's arguments for this heterodox position? What resources can Machiavelli's position offer contemporary political thought?

To ask these questions is also to be thrust into an interpretive debate concerning Machiavelli's political thought between three main views which I will label 'the republican', 'the radical' and 'the democratic'. In developing a cogent and coherent interpretation of why and how Machiavelli's supports institutionalised political conflict as a resource for the maintenance of the republic, the thesis will also aim to resolve some of the central disputes between these different interpretive stances on Machiavelli's political thought.

[1] Throughout this thesis I use 'conflict' consistently to refer to the clash of perceptions and behaviours between the nobles and the plebs. Machiavelli primarily uses 'tumult' (*tumulto*) to describe the disturbances and riots instigated by both factions during the progression of such conflicts (e.g., *D* I.2, I.6, I.52-54, 3.1; *FH* II.35-36; III.10-12), and 'enmity' (*inimicizia*) (e.g., *D* I.6, I.37; III.19; *FH* III.2) and 'discord' (*discordia*) (e.g., *D* I.8, I.46; *FH* III.11) to describe the hostile mindset prevailing between these opposing groups. He uses 'conflict' (*conflitto*) in the context of military confrontations between different communities (*D* I.15; III.14). To adhere to modern English language conventions, 'conflict' is adopted in this thesis. The term 'nobles' as used here corresponds to Machiavelli's *nobili*, *ottimati*, and *grandi*, while 'plebs' corresponds to Machiavelli's *plebe*, *popolo*, *molti*, and *multitudine*.

In our contemporary age of economic inequality and social polarization in existing democratic states, Machiavelli's arguments offer valuable insights and potential solutions for addressing our current predicament. The three interpretations of Machiavelli's thought—republican, democratic, and radical—are multifaceted. On one side, scholars scrutinize Machiavelli's texts within their historical contexts, while on the other side, there is a resurgence of interest in Machiavelli's ideas as a pivotal resource for contemporary political discourse. This thesis will critically examine the dynamic interaction between these dimensions within contemporary Machiavelli scholarship. Specifically, it scrutinizes the three existing interpretations of Machiavelli's theory of social conflict, identifying specific shortcomings associated with each perspective. Notably, I propose an alternative interpretation that frames Machiavelli's theory of social conflict as a form of institutionalised agonism, emphasising the dynamic interplay between ethos and institutions.

1.2 Note on Interpretation

The thesis not only provides a textual reading of Machiavelli's chief political writings, especially the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories*, but also pays special attention to the intellectual contexts of Machiavelli's ideas. Drawing on the linguistic contextualism approach advocated by scholars of the Cambridge School (Skinner, 1969; 2002a) , this thesis analyses not only Machiavelli's own writings but also the broader context of classical political philosophy and Renaissance humanism that intersect with his ideas. Influenced by Renaissance humanist thinking, Machiavelli was familiar with the ideas of classical authors. However, unlike many of his contemporaries, his preoccupation with political action led him to engage more readily with the historical works of figures like Livy and Sallust than with the theoretical treatises of thinkers like Cicero. Furthermore, I will be concerned with the history of Florence from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. The political structure and internal and external dynamics of the Florentine Republic significantly shaped not only Machiavelli's political career but also his political thought.

The thesis primarily centres its focus on the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories* as its key subjects, with relatively less emphasis on Machiavelli's most famous work, *The Prince*.

This choice is primarily motivated by thematic considerations. The core analysis revolves around internal political conflicts within republics, a theme distinct from the central concern of *The Prince*, which primarily focuses on how new princes acquire and maintain their states. Consequently, *The Prince* will only be referenced selectively for relevant insights.

In addition, in previous studies of Machiavelli's political thought, *The Prince* and the *Discourses* have typically received extensive attention, while the *Florentine Histories* and other works have been marginalized or overlooked. As McCormick observes, the *Florentine Histories* is generally considered one of Machiavelli's later works that reflects a more conservative stance (McCormick, 2018, p. 69). However, in recent years, increased scholarly attention has been directed towards works including the *Florentine Histories*, enriching our understanding of Machiavelli (e.g., Winter, 2012; Jurdjevic, 2014; Clarke, 2018; McCormick, 2018, pp. 69-106). I perceive the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories* as two interconnected works that share fundamental ideas. In both works, Machiavelli provides a comprehensive analysis and assessment of the qualities, behaviours, and interactions among the various social classes and factions within the Roman Republic and the Florentine Republic. Therefore, a thorough examination of these two texts is critical for grasping Machiavelli's theory of social conflict.

1.3 The Intellectual Context of Machiavelli's Thoughts

In a letter addressed to his friend Francesco Vettori shortly before his passing, Machiavelli expressed his profound affection, stating, 'I love Francesco Guicciardini, I love my native city more than my own soul' (Machiavelli, 1988, p. 249). This sentiment was prompted by the imminent threat faced by Florence in April 1527, as the army of Charles III, Duke of Bourbon, sought to plunder the city. At that critical juncture, Francesco Guicciardini emerged as the key figure who could potentially save the country with his troops, thereby evoking Machiavelli's heartfelt statement in the letter. The crisis that befell Florence in 1527 can be primarily attributed to the political realities and ideological turmoil that had plagued the city-states of Italy, including the Florentine Republic, since 1494. This period was marked by invasions from larger territorial sovereign states in other parts of Europe, such as France

(Guarini, 1990, pp. 69-96; Black, 2002). Machiavelli keenly recognized that he lived in an era of crisis and upheaval in Italy, and his political works can be regarded as direct responses to the turbulent political climate of his time.

Regarding the political challenges faced by Florence and Italy during Machiavelli's time, he offered various diagnoses in his writings. One of his criticisms was directed at the Christian Church, which he held partially accountable for Italy's predicament. Machiavelli argued that the Church's interference in secular affairs, coupled with its reliance on mercenaries, had led to a situation where Italian cities became dependent on mercenary forces (*P* XII). Moreover, he contended that the Church had sought to maintain a balance of power among the various Italian city-states, thereby impeding the unification of Italy (*D* I.12). The corruption within the papacy was another factor highlighted by Machiavelli, as it had contributed to moral decay and a loss of faith among the Italian population (*D* I.12). Of particular importance was Machiavelli's critique of Christianity's emphasis on humility, meekness, and detachment from secular affairs as the highest virtues. He believed that this focus on humility had led people to become weak, abandoning the greatness of spirit, physical strength, and the pursuit of secular glory valued in ancient religions (*D* II.2). In response to these concerns, Machiavelli proposes that the republic should draw inspiration from Numa, the legendary Roman king, and establish a secular religion that fosters a sense of citizen obedience to authority (*D* I.11).

Furthermore, Machiavelli contends that a significant reason for Italy's crisis is the states' increasing reliance on mercenary armies rather than their own army. The military is not only of utmost importance for principality: 'A ruler, then, should have no other objective and no other concern, nor occupy himself with anything else except war and its methods and practices, for this pertains only to those who rule.' (*P* XIV) The same holds true for republics: 'where the military is good, there must be good order; and too, it rarely occurs that good fortune will not be there'. (*D* I.4; c.f., *D* I.21, II.10, II.30, III.31) In contrast, Machiavelli criticizes mercenaries as not only useless but also highly perilous for states. Therefore, he hopes that Florence will learn from Rome, not only by cultivating its own army but also by granting citizenship to outsiders and conquered populations to bolster its army (Pedullà,

2018, pp. 145-80). Machiavelli himself played a leading role in the Florentine Republic's initiative to enlist peasants from the surrounding areas to establish a citizen militia. The triumph of the Florentine citizen militia in compelling the surrender of Pisa in 1509 brought considerable acclaim to Machiavelli as the architect of this strong and loyal citizen militia (Ridolfi, 1963, pp. 98-108; Viroli, 2000, p. 89).

Machiavelli demonstrated a keen awareness that any republic lacking political wisdom and military power would inevitably succumb to neighbouring states that outmatched its order. The republic, driven by the necessity for expansion, would inevitably engage in prolonged geopolitical confrontations with other states. Such an expansive state would rely on its own army. Consequently, arming the populace to build one's own army would invariably lead to unrest and conflicts. By selecting the Roman model over the Spartan model, the republic was bound to confront the challenges posed by the conflict between the plebs and the nobles (*D* I.6). Therefore, a wise politician should aspire to lofty ambitions and embrace the expansive model while simultaneously employing institutional mechanisms to regulate and mitigate conflicts.

Furthermore, the persistent factional struggles and conflicts that had long plagued Florence and hindered the city-state's freedom and greatness played a crucial role in shaping Machiavelli's understanding of conflict. The humanists of the time generally recognized the value of harmony and condemned the destructive nature of conflicts within the community. And they believed that republics were more susceptible to conflicts and factional divisions compared to principalities, attributing such conflicts primarily to easily provoked plebeians. However, for these humanists, the magnitude of the threat posed by conflicts was so immense that it surpassed logical analysis and instead elicited generalized moral condemnation (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 10-26). Moreover, the discourse of civic humanism, in the style of Bruni, was also utilized by the oligarchy to maintain the legitimacy of their own rule. Dissatisfied with the classical tradition and civic humanism, Machiavelli sought to explore more nuanced approaches to understanding and addressing political conflict.

1.4 Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of six chapters: an introduction (chapter 1), four substantive chapters (chapter 2-5), and a conclusion (chapter 6). In chapter 2, I provide a critical analysis of three influential interpretative approaches to Machiavelli, which I will refer to as 'the republican', 'the radical', and 'the democratic', in order to set the scene for my own argument to identify the space with which it engages.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed analysis of 14 cases of internal conflict within the Roman Republic as presented in Machiavelli's *Discourses*. These cases are categorised as either institutional or extra-institutional and salutary or harmful. Through this in-depth analysis, I demonstrate that Machiavelli advocates for the institutionalisation of conflict within the republic, emphasising the crucial role of continuous institutional adaptation and innovation. In contrast to the republican and democratic interpretations, I argue that Machiavelli does not endorse solely either elitism or populism. Instead, he adopts a dual perspective of the nobles and the plebs, arguing that both the plebs and the nobles should serve the common good of the republic through their agonistic encounter.

In chapter 4, I will first explore the portrayal of Florence in the *Discourses*, highlighting how Machiavelli criticises the city and advocates for emulating Rome to attain freedom and power. Then, I will divide the history of Florence discussed by Machiavelli into three stages based on the diverse characteristics of internal conflict. Subsequently, I will conduct detailed analyses of representative cases from each stage. Through this analysis, I aim to demonstrate that Florence was plagued by the prevalence of factional politics and armed conflict, both in customs and institutions, resulting in unresolved and persistent internal conflict. I contend that the intertwined influence of customs and institutions in the Florentine Republic hindered its evolution into an inclusive republic for all its citizens.

In chapter 5, I argue that, in contrast to the republican interpretation, Machiavelli's thoughts on conflict constitute a decisive difference from the republican tradition. Furthermore, contrary to the democratic and radical approaches, I argue that Machiavelli does not fully endorse either elitism or populism. Instead, he adopts a dual perspective of the nobles and the people, emphasising how both the people and the nobles can equally

serve the common good of the republic through their competitive conflicts. Then, I will relate Machiavelli's theory of conflict to a significant branch of contemporary political theory, agonism, and attempt to demonstrate how Machiavelli's thought can provide a form of an institutionalised agonism that underscores the complementarity of ethos and institutions.

This thesis provides a rigorous elucidation of Machiavelli's theory of internal conflict by examining both his intellectual context and his extensive discussions of internal conflict events in the Roman Republic and the Florentine Republic. Building on this analysis, the thesis not only seeks to challenge, at least partially, the three prevailing interpretations of Machiavelli's political thought, but also undertakes a critical re-evaluation of the ongoing relevance of Machiavelli's theory of internal conflict in contemporary political discourse. The thesis argues that drawing upon Machiavelli's ideas, it is possible to construct an institutionalised framework for agonism that underscores the inherent complementarity of ethos and institutions. Such a framework has the potential to facilitate the development of a more inclusive republic that maximises the accommodation of diverse societal voices, actions, and struggles.

Chapter 2 Republican, Democratic, Radical Interpretations of Machiavelli

2.1 Introduction

More than five centuries after Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, the *Discourses*, and the *Florentine Histories*, his historical image has undergone significant transformations. He was once widely perceived as a 'teacher of evil' (Strauss, 1958, p. 9), and remarkably, *The Prince* was added to the Church's index of banned books a mere twenty-five years after its publication (King, 2009, p. 232). In sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare invoked Machiavelli's name to symbolise nefarious qualities such as greed, hypocrisy, and treachery (King, 2009, p. 232). Conversely, Alberico Gentili, a sixteenth-century Italian jurist, regarded Machiavelli as a strong supporter and advocate for democracy, arguing that he seemed to be guiding rulers but was actually educating the people (Viroli, 1998, pp. 114-15). Thinkers of subsequent centuries, including Spinoza, Diderot, and Rousseau, concurred with this perspective, deeming Machiavelli a champion of republicanism and liberty. Machiavelli's views on republicanism also exerted a notable, both direct and indirect, influence on the political ideologies and practices of the statesmen responsible for founding the American Republic (Thompson, 1995; Rahe, 2005). In the twentieth century, Machiavelli came to be seen not only as a precursor to revolution by left-wing theorists but also as an inheritor of republicanism. In recent decades, a substantial body of scholarship has unearthed democratic elements within Machiavelli's political philosophy, suggesting that he stood in opposition to the nobles while championing the cause of the common people.

I classify the prevailing interpretations of Machiavelli in recent fifty years into three categories: 'republican', 'radical', and 'democratic'. The republican interpretation originated with Hans Baron and was subsequently applied and developed by scholars including Skinner, Pocock, Viroli, Erica Benner, and others in various ways. In the face of setbacks and challenges encountered by classical Marxism, left-wing theorists like Gramsci, Althusser,

Lefort, and Negri endeavoured to construct a radical revolutionary Machiavelli and draw intellectual inspiration from him. Scholars dissatisfied with the republican interpretation and influenced by the radical interpretation, such as McCormick, Winter, and Pedullà have explored the democratic and populist aspects of Machiavelli's thought. It is worth noting that these three interpretations are Janus-faced with one side looking to the scholarly interpretation of Machiavelli's texts in their historical contexts and the other side looking to the revival of Machiavelli's thought as a key political resource for contemporary political thinking. Critically elucidating and disentangling these three interpretations is pivotal in establishing the foundational framework for my own argument.

2.2 The Republican Interpretations

In the field of Machiavellian studies and the history of Western political thought, the rise of the republican paradigm has been notable since the mid-twentieth century (Rodgers, 1992). The origin of this paradigm can be traced back to Baron's pioneering work on Renaissance civic humanism. Baron identifies the values inherent in Bruni-style civic humanist thought, including the pursuit of liberty, patriotism, political engagement, and the common good, highlighting that it as a novel ideology distinct from medieval or early Renaissance political thought. He emphasises that Machiavelli actively engaged in the debates surrounding Renaissance civic humanism and that his republican ideas were significantly influenced by humanists like Bruni (Baron, 1961; 1966; Hankins, 1995).

Building upon Baron's foundational insights, scholars of the Cambridge School, notably represented by Skinner, underscore the continuity of the concept of civic humanism and interpret it as a republican tradition that permeates the history of Western political thought.[2] Within this tradition, Machiavelli is considered to occupy a crucial position (Pocock, 1975; Skinner, 2002b). According to Skinner, Renaissance republicanism generally embraces and reaffirms Roman republican thoughts represented by thinkers such as Cicero and historians such as Tacitus. Machiavelli's innovations, therefore, must be comprehended within the framework of this Roman republican tradition. Skinner (1990a, p. 141) succinctly

[2] For an introduction of the Cambridge School, see Major (2005); Whatmore (2015).

encapsulates Machiavelli's idea of republicanism in the form of two connected propositions:

> First, that no city can ever attain greatness unless it upholds a free way of life; secondly, that no city can ever uphold a free way of life unless it maintains a republican constitution. With this statement of the case, Machiavelli not only presents a wholehearted defence of traditional republican values; he also presents that defence in a wholeheartedly traditional way.

Moreover, Cambridge School scholars have effectively reintroduced historical ideas about republican liberty and civic engagement into contemporary discussions of normative political theory. They have vigorously challenged the negative concept of freedom in the liberal tradition and have sought to construct a new theory of republican freedom (see 5.1.1 for more).

While scholars of the Cambridge School generally regard Machiavelli as a proponent of republicanism, their interpretative emphases vary. Skinner advocates the neo-Roman interpretation of Machiavelli, which places emphasis on Machiavelli's concept of freedom and how the republic attains virtue and liberty through legal mechanisms. In partial contrast, Pocock introduces the virtuoso interpretation of Machiavelli, which centres on the notion of *virtù*, particularly in relation to military virtues. Additionally, Viroli presents the *politico* interpretation, underscoring the distinction between the art of politics and the art of the state.

2.2.1 The Neo-Roman Reading

Skinner's interpretation of Machiavelli is based on his influential and controversial methodological essay, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' (Skinner, 1969; 2002a, pp. 57-89; 1978, pp. ix-xv). Skinner points out the problems of previous methods and proposes a new approach, often referred to as 'linguistic contextualism'. This method aims to unravel the meaning of a text and the author's intentions by delving into the historically constructed discursive space within which the author was situated during the act of writing.

Skinner's methodology revolves around three key components: firstly, an examination of the political and social issues addressed by the text; secondly, an exploration of the intellectual resources drawn upon by the author to develop their argument; and finally, an analysis of the text's intervention in the political landscape of its time (Skinner, 2002a).

Skinner argue that Machiavelli's social context is defined by the rise of the Italian city-states and their experiences with self-governance and monarchical rule, while the intellectual context encompasses the traditions of rhetorical studies and scholastic philosophy (Skinner, 1978). In this specific context, Skinner identifies Machiavelli's continuity with the tradition of Renaissance civic humanism, as well as the originality he demonstrates in partially diverging from it.

According to Skinner, *The Prince* shares both commonalities and differences with 'mirror-for-princes' works that were popular during that era. These shared values are partly derived from the early civic humanists and partly their innovations (Skinner, 1978, pp. 118-28). The former part consists of three aspects: (1) the idea that heroes should strive for maximum honour, glory, and fame; (2) the recognition that the capriciousness of fortune is the primary obstacle to achieving glory, which underscores the necessity for (3) the ruler to possess the indispensable quality of confronting fortune, namely, *virtù*. In terms of the new factors, firstly, security and peace replaced liberty and justice as the main values in political life; secondly, there is an increased emphasis on the differentiation between the *virtù* of the ruler and that of ordinary citizens. Machiavelli saw the *virtù* of the ruler as a force of astonishing creativity, while the people are depicted as more inclined to meek obedience.

Skinner argues that the analysis of the commonalities between Machiavelli and mirror-for-princes writers enables us to dispel the classic misconception that *The Prince* is entirely self-contained and pays no attention to contemporaneous ideas. It is only when these shared values are made clear that we can better appreciate Machiavelli's originality.

Machiavelli's originality, or his critique of the political theories of his contemporaries, is manifested in two main ways (Skinner, 1978, pp. 128-38). First, he emphasised the importance of a prince having their own army more than humanists did. Second, while humanists stressed that the prince should possess virtues essentially the same as Christian

virtues (including generosity, kindness, being loved by people rather than feared, keeping faith, etc.), Machiavelli, grounding his argument on 'the effectual truth of the thing', points out that the harsh reality of political life often require princes to act not in full conformity with traditional moral norms but even to reverse them and engage in morally questionable actions. A truly virtuous prince is a person with a 'flexible disposition', meaning they must be able to choose to do good or evil 'as fortune and circumstances dictate' (Skinner, 1978, p. 138). In other words, the prince will be guided 'by necessity rather than by justice' (Skinner, 2002b, p. 147).

Thus, the prevailing view that Machiavelli' originality lies in the total separation of politics from morality and the emphasis on the independence of politics is not entirely correct. These most revolutionary arguments of *The Prince* actually serve a more traditional and shared value, which is that the proper goal for a prince to achieve is honour. The main difference between Machiavelli and his contemporaries lies in 'the nature of the methods they took to be appropriate for the attainment of these ends' (Skinner, 1978, pp. 134-35).

In his analysis of the *Discourses,* Skinner takes similar steps. He contextualises it within the theme of 'the survival of republican values', highlighting not only Machiavelli's continuity with the republican tradition but also his original contributions (Skinner, 1978, pp. 180-86). Skinner argues that the political value most emphasised in the *Discourses* is freedom, that the greatest difficulty with freedom is corruption, and that the way to overcome corruption is to cultivate civic virtue through the laws (Skinner, 1990a; 2002b, pp. 160-85). The Roman Republic serves as the most illustrative example. Through the maintenance of existing laws and the creation of new ones to adapt to changing circumstances, Rome successfully preserved itself against corruption for centuries, thereby safeguarding its freedom, independence, and achieving the highest glory.

According to Skinner, Machiavelli's conception of freedom encompasses two levels: the communal and the individual. At the communal level, political power must be held by the entire citizenry, not concentrated in the hands of a few oligarchs or foreign rulers. At the individual level, every citizen should actively engage in political life and contribute to the establishment of institutions that safeguard individual freedom. In this sense, Machiavelli's

concept of freedom aligns with negative freedom, but it is intrinsically tied to the civic duties of citizens. Achieving this form of negative freedom necessitates the cultivation of specific civic virtues that enable citizens to fulfil their public responsibilities (Skinner, 2002b, pp. 186-212).

In contrast to his contemporaries and the republican tradition, who believed that civic virtue could coexist harmoniously with the recognized Christian and moral virtues, Machiavelli severs the necessary connection between *virtù* and traditional virtue. Skinner contends that Machiavelli's virtue equates with all the qualities required in practice 'to save the life and preserve the freedom of one's country' (Skinner, 1978, p. 184). This implies that, on occasion, citizens may need to act unjustly in the service of the Republic, with necessity supplanting justice as the guiding principle of action. Skinner admits that Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* is an 'epoch-making break' with the classical analysis of cardinal virtues. However, he underscores that this is Machiavelli's only point of contention with his Roman predecessors, and the remainder of his examination of *virtù* and its connection to liberty retains an 'impeccably Ciceronian in character' (Skinner, 2002b, pp. 208-9).

According to Skinner, Machiavelli posits that the vast majority of citizens are not naturally virtuous. Therefore, the republic is susceptible to corruption, which occurs when citizens prioritize their personal interests over the common good (Skinner, 2002b, pp. 161-69). Corruption typically arises from social inequality and manifests in two primary ways: citizens neglect their public duties due to idleness, and ambitious individuals exploit the instruments of public liberty for personal gain. In most cases, however, the leading cause of corruption is the deliberate deceit and manipulation by political leaders. These leaders have consistently succeeded in deceiving the average citizen into prioritizing personal gain over the public good, often through the distribution of wealth. Machiavelli holds a rather pessimistic outlook on the potential transformation of this self-serving and corruptible human nature. Whether through education, the example set by eminent citizens, or the manipulation of religious beliefs, it proves challenging to shift individuals from their inherent selfishness to a voluntary commitment to the common good. Therefore, the politicians of the republic must acknowledge the reality that citizens are prone to corruption and, based on

this premise, devise strategies to prevent the detrimental consequences this inclination may have on political liberty.

Skinner argues that Machiavelli's approach to addressing the issue of corruption hinges on the coercive power of the law, which works by 'stopping other people from unfairly interfering with our freedom to pursue our own ends' (Skinner, 2002b, p. 174). Law is invariably accompanied by the threat of punishment, acting as a deterrent against corrupt behaviour. In his examination of Roman history, Machiavelli analyses various ways in which a citizen can pose a significant threat to the freedom of others and proposes corresponding laws as countermeasures (Skinner, 2002b, pp. 174-75) . One scenario involves a citizen assuming supreme authority, in response to which limitations on the tenure and scope of such authority must be established (*D* I. 43; III.24). Another circumstance relates to the wealthy, who, as previously mentioned, employ their riches to corrupt the population. Machiavelli's remedy includes the purging of feudal lords within the commonwealth (*D* I.55) and maintaining a general state of poverty among citizens to avert inequality (*D* I.37; III.25). Furthermore, Machiavelli emphasises the necessity for a specialized authority dedicated to safeguarding the liberties of citizens (*D* I.5).[3]

More importantly, Skinner points out that the law can be regarded as a liberating agency, compelling citizens to achieve freedom (Skinner, 2002b, p. 177). By enforcing and guiding citizens to act in specific ways, the law transforms their inherently self-interested

[3] Skinner's analysis of *D* I.5 is particularly revealing in the context of his interpretation, which overlooks the different dispositions of plebs and nobles, as well as the conflict between them. The chapter is entitled 'where the guard of freedom may be settled more securely, in the people or in the great; and which has greater cause for tumult, he who wishes to acquire or he who wishes to maintain'. Skinner asserts that the central argument is that 'what is most of all needed is a special magistracy charged with the specific duty of upholding the liberties of the citizen against any who would seek to interfere with them' (Skinner, 2002b, p. 175). However, as the title implies, the chapter primarily revolves around the differing dispositions of the plebs and the nobles, and the question of who should bear the responsibility of guarding liberty. Machiavelli argues that republics should draw lessons from Rome and entrust the guardianship of liberty to the plebs, granting them positions akin to the plebeian tribunes (*D* 1.6). Simultaneously, he highlights that 'he who wishes to maintain' (often the nobles) poses a greater threat to the republic. In other words, 'any who would seek to interfere with them' primarily refers to the nobles, and 'a special magistracy' refers to the plebeian tribunes. Therefore, Skinner's interpretation overlooks the essence of Machiavelli's discussion, reducing it to a commonplace observation. More discussion in 3.5.1.

behaviour into service for the common good, neutralizing corrupt conduct. Although citizens still act out of self-interest, through the guidance of the law, they can produce results that promote the common good, unintended by individuals.

Skinner cites two examples from the *Discourses* to illustrate this argument. The first example is the political conflict between the plebs and the nobles. By introducing both the plebs and the nobles into the political system, the Roman Republic established a political structure similar to bicameralism. In this system, the two opposing groups acted in their own interests, keeping checks and balances on each other to prevent the enactment of laws that favoured only one party. This arrangement thus preserved the liberty and common good of the republic. Machiavelli claim that all laws promoting liberty emerged from the conflict between plebs and nobles (*D* I.4), showing that class conflict did not undermine the republic but, in fact, strengthened it. Skinner notes that because civil discord was traditionally considered the most serious threat to political freedom, Machiavelli's praise of tumults 'was not merely to sneer at the current admiration for the Venetian constitution; it was also to question one of the most deeply-rooted assumptions in the whole history of Florentine political thought' (Skinner, 1978, p. 182).

The second example concerns the religious practices of Rome (Skinner, 2002b, pp. 180-3). Machiavelli points out that human religious susceptibilities could easily pose a threat to the good order of a society. He suggests that Christianity, in particular, could have a corrupting influence on civil life by promoting idleness and leading believers to prioritize personal salvation and the happiness of the afterlife above all other considerations. Given that people are motivated by self-interested religious motives, it is possible to enact laws to direct this fear and hope in a direction conducive to the common good. To achieve this, two key steps are necessary: first, to promote the religious conviction of the people, as the opportunity to make use of this piety is only available if the people are pious; and second, to establish the absolute sanctity of oaths. For ordinary citizens, the fear of angering God by breaking an oath consistently outweighs other selfish tendencies. Leaders can thus compel people to act in a truly virtuous manner by requiring them to take oaths.

2.2.2 The Virtuoso Reading

In *The Machiavellian Moment,* Pocock traces the origin of Renaissance republicanism to Aristotle's theory of republicanism, which are rooted in the concepts of 'civil life' and 'active life' and argues that the same ideological schema was echoed by British and American thinkers during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Pocock, 1975). Thus, Pocock not only presents a republican narrative that spans the entirety of Western political thought but also offers a compelling challenge to the traditionally dominant liberal approach in explaining several pivotal points of modern politics, including events like the English Civil War and the founding of the United States.

Pocock employs a 'formal and analytical' approach, involving extensive theorization and abstraction of the themes explored in *The Prince* (Pocock, 1975, p. 157). He interprets *The Prince* as an analytical study of innovation and its consequences, with its central theme revolving around the question of 'whether there is any *virtù* by which the innovator, self-isolated from moral society, can impose form upon his *fortuna* and whether there will be any moral quality in such a *virtù* or in the political consequences which can be imagined as flowing from its exercise' (Pocock, 1975, p. 157). Based on the relationship between *virtù* and *fortuna*, innovators are categorized into two distinct types: legislators and prophets represent the ideal innovators, whose *virtù* exhibits minimal dependence on *fortuna*, while the new princes encompass those who do not meet this minimal dependence (Pocock, 1975, pp. 161-75). Legislators and prophets can establish enduring stability by giving form to matter (the people) that lacks a pre-existing form, whereas the new princes, dealing with a people who already have stable customs, can only establish states by replacing the old form with a new one. The state , in this context, is a limited form of government that possesses only partial legitimacy, compelling the new prince to adopt a short-term perspective and continue to act and innovate. In order to establish a long-term order and institutionalise the charisma, one must turn to the *Discourse*s. In this sense, *The Prince* constitutes a transition to Machiavelli's republican thought and is therefore integrated into the genealogy of republicanism.

Pocock argues that the central theme of the *Discourse*s revolves around the

confrontation between citizenship and fortune (Pocock, 1975, p. 157), with a focus on the harmony between the armed *virtù* of and the political virtue of citizens (Pocock, 1975, pp. 194-204). Under the imperative of necessity, the republic must opt for an expansion mode to sustain itself, which necessitates arming plebs, tolerating internal conflict, and making concessions to the plebs (*D* I.6). Machiavelli strongly disapproved of the republic's reliance on mercenaries and advocated for the establishment of a civic militia, as this part-time military service by citizens with family businesses ensured the preservation of independence and autonomy. In essence, only good citizens can become good soldiers, and vice versa. Military discipline, akin to civic religion, served as a vehicle for socialization, compelling citizens to cultivate virtue and prioritize the public good as the highest good. Rather than actively participating in decision-making mechanisms, Roman plebeians, under the influence of civic religion and military discipline, were indoctrinated to dedicate themselves to their homeland. This depiction aligns with both Machiavelli's innovator who exemplifies virtue and Aristotle's citizen who prioritizes the common good. In Pocock's words, 'The Roman plebs display *virtù* in demanding their rights, virtue in being satisfied when their demands were granted' (Pocock, 1975, p. 203).

Furthermore, Pocock's analysis highlights how Machiavelli's discussion of corruption serves to underscore the significance of armed virtue for political virtue (Pocock, 1975, pp. 204-11). Machiavelli attributes the moral root of corruption to inequality, where special interests overshadow the public good, and customs are eroded by power. The societal conditions for corruption arise when the majority of people no longer have the will and ability to take up arms. Therefore, in order to eliminate corruption, 'there must be the political conditions which permit the arming of all citizens, the moral conditions in which all are willing to fight for the republic and the economic conditions…which give the warrior a home and occupation outside the camp and prevent his becoming a ….mercenary' (Pocock, 1975, p. 210). Republics that use mercenaries can avoid corruption if they refrain from external expansion, but republics that choose to arm the plebs and expand externally, once they allow citizen soldiers to become dependent on power, are destined to corruption - just as in the case of the Roman Republic.

Pocock argues that the militarisation of civic life in the *Discourse*s is the underlying factor that makes it more morally subversive compared to *The Prince* (Pocock, 1975, pp. 213-18). It is in response to fortune that Machiavelli founds the republic on the virtue of armed citizenship, which essentially transforms civic participation from a matter of Aristotelian knowledge to a matter of will. An armed popular republic has the capacity to both defend itself against external threats and enhance internal relations through a disciplined and dynamic will. Such republics can also harness a wider array of virtues than principalities, rendering themselves more adaptable to changing fortune. To acquire moral and civic virtues, a republic needed to demonstrate the virtues of the new prince on a more complex level, wholly rejecting Christian-style virtues like humility and forgiveness. Pocock contends that Machiavelli's republic no longer possessed a dimension of grace, and its virtues were no longer universal. Virtue itself self-destructs when it's exclusively tied to military virtue and entangled in the dynamics of the secular conflict between liberty and empire. This was the case with the Roman Empire, which annihilated all the republics and free city-states by its own might, ensuring their virtues could never be reinstated, and subsequently leading to the decay of its own virtues.

2.2.3 The *Politico* Reading

Viroli also takes a republican approach (Viroli, 1992; 1998; 2013). According to Viroli, Machiavelli played a pivotal role in the shift from politics to the concept of the reason of state, or from 'the art of politics' to 'the art of the state' (1992, pp. 126-77). The art of politics refers to the art of ruling a republic according to justice and reason, emphasising public personality and the possession of virtue; While the art of the state sees the state as private property rather than public, and focuses on the maintenance and expansion of the state, regardless of the means by which this is achieved.

As Viroli points out, Machiavelli never uses *politico* or its equivalent in *The Prince* (Viroli, 1990, p. 160). Therefore, *The Prince* deals with the art of the state, the central theme of which is to redeem and call upon the redeemer to establish a united Italy (Viroli, 2013). It is the *Discourses* that really discuss *politico*. Moreover, Machiavelli's use of *politico* is in line

with traditional civil philosophy, with its emphasis on the rule of law, civil equality, and liberty. In Machiavelli's view, a life in which virtue is customary is a *politico* life. In addition to civic virtue, another necessary basis for political wisdom in traditional political discourse lies in the maintenance of harmony. Machiavelli departs from tradition by arguing that political conflict is inevitable and can contribute to the freedom and power of the republic without escalating into civil war.

Viroli underscores Machiavelli's continuation of the republican tradition by distinguishing between the art of politics and the art of the state. He emphasises that when new princes create new orders, they must ultimately return the city to the citizens, as only republican politics can construct an ideal city based on republican principles of liberty, equality, and the rule of law (Viroli, 1990).[4]

2.2.4 Comparison and Conclusion

Skinner, Pocock, and Viroli are often regarded as prominent proponents of the republican interpretation of Machiavelli. They are united in their perspective that Machiavelli can be seen as an inheritor of the classical republican tradition. Their interpretations emphasise the alignment between Machiavelli's ideas and key aspects of the republican tradition, including the pursuit of the common good, the importance of political liberty, the rule of law, and the cultivation of civic virtue. Furthermore, these scholars acknowledge Machiavelli's departures from the classical republican tradition, such as his unique concept of *virtù* and his perspective on political conflict within the republic. Despite these differences, they all place Machiavelli within the broader republican tradition, recognizing his contributions and innovations as part of the ongoing development of republican political thought.

However, these scholars differ in their specific methodologies and contextual emphases. Skinner and Pocock both adopt linguistic contextualism, which involves exploring the relationship between the text and the historical circumstances in which it was written (Pocock, 1989). However, Skinner and Pocock are not concerned with the same context.

[4] For Viroli's recent response to Machiavelli's democratic interpretation, see Viroli (2022).

Specifically, the context Skinner constructs for Machiavelli is the Italian humanism of the Renaissance, whose social context is the rise of the Italian city republics and the experience of self-government and its intellectual context is the rhetorical tradition and the philosophical tradition of Scholasticism; while the context Pocock constructs is how the republic confronts its own temporal finitude, as attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secular stability. Pocock shows how Machiavelli attempts to solve this problem by demonstrating the confrontation of *virtù* with *fortuna*.

Different research methodologies have led to distinct interpretative viewpoints, particularly evident in the contrasting perspectives of Skinner and Pocock regarding the republican tradition associated with Machiavelli. Pocock's analysis traces the origins of Renaissance republicanism to the Aristotelian tradition, emphasising the active involvement of citizens as political actors in the life of the city-state. While Pocock recognizes certain differences in how Machiavelli interprets the military aspects of citizenship in contrast to Renaissance Aristotelian thought, such as participating in the selection of officials, voting on state policies, or directly serving in public office, he argues that Machiavelli upholds the fundamental principles of republicanism, particularly the maximal participation of citizens in political matters.

In contrast, Skinner presents a different viewpoint, suggesting that the Renaissance humanists and Machiavelli did not directly inherit the Aristotelian tradition. Instead, they were more profoundly influenced by the rhetorical tradition, the philosophical tradition of Scholasticism, and the republican ideals of ancient Rome. Notably, Machiavelli departed from Aristotle's teleology, viewing humans not as naturally political and sociable beings but as fallible, self-interested individuals constantly striving for more, with insatiable desires that tend toward conflict rather than harmony (Skinner, 1984; 1986). Given the absence of a single ultimate goal for citizenship in a republic, it logically follows that citizens' engagement in political affairs is not inherently an end in itself, but rather a means and a tool for enriching and strengthening the republic while safeguarding the rights of the individual.

The difference between Pocock and Skinner on the concept of liberty also comes to the

fore. Following Berlin's famous dichotomy between negative and positive liberty (Berlin, 2002), Pocock sees republican liberty as a positive liberty that emphasises political participation and civic virtue. Republican thinkers' analyses of political authority emphasise citizens' participation in the exercise of the right to rule and the virtues it requires, unlike liberalism, which focuses on the individual rights that citizens must have that cannot be infringed by rulers (Pocock, 1985, pp. 40-41). Most importantly, republicanism focuses on the survival of a political community of self-governing citizens rather than on the maximisation of individual citizens' freedom. Thus, Pocock argues that the spirit of republicanism is incompatible with liberalism. At the same time, Pocock sees Skinner as a defender of positive liberty (Pocock, 2004, p. 542; Palonen, 2014).

Skinner himself, however, rejects this claim. According to Skinner, Machiavellian freedom is the negative freedom of individuals to pursue their chosen ends without interference (Skinner, 1984).[5] However, this negative individual freedom can only be guaranteed in a republic, where the maximisation of individual freedom and the pursuit of the common good are not incompatible but rather complementary. For complete individual freedom can only be maintained if citizens do not place the pursuit of individual freedom above the preservation of the common good; if the exercise of individual freedom is not based on the common good, it becomes a state of corruption, as criticised by Machiavelli, and the price of corruption is always the loss of freedom and a descent into slavery. Skinner thus emphasises the role of law: law can change the corrupt state of human nature and compel citizens to act virtuously in order to ensure freedom and the common good (Skinner, 1986). Thus, with good laws in place, the citizens of the republic can promote political virtue and fulfil their civic duties, working together to maintain the common good and liberty of the republic. Skinner argues that republican freedom, represented by Machiavelli's concept of liberty, although also negative, is better able to deal with the fundamental question of how to maintain the liberty than liberalism. In other words, Skinner's republican liberty is meant to complement the liberal discourse of rights, in contrast to Pocock's view that republicanism

[5] Skinner argues that the dichotomy between positive and negative liberty proposed by Berlin does not apply to early modern political thought, such as that of Machiavelli. But like Berlin, Skinner holds a pluralist position and would not pursue positive liberty (Skinner, 2002b, p. 243; Shaw, 2003).

and liberalism are incompatible.

2.3 The Democratic Interpretations

In the last two decades there has been a so-called 'democratic turn' in Machiavelli studies (Robiadek, 2021, p. 686). This turn refers to the fact that the democratic dimension of Machiavelli's political thought has been emphasised and elaborated by some recent scholars who argue that Machiavelli held a strongly populist position, that the analysis of political conflicts constituted the focus of Machiavelli's thinking, and that it provided radical strategies for popular action to challenge the hegemony of the nobles. Some of scholars further argue that Machiavelli's insight into political conflict will provide a valuable intellectual resource for today's political issues such as the democratic deficit, the crisis of representation, and plutocracy. I have divided them into 'institutional', 'no-rule' and 'expansive' readings (c.f. Pedullà, 2018, pp. 3-4; Litvin, 2019). The institutional reading includes McCormick and Barthas. The no-rule reading includes Vatter and Winter. The expansive reading is mainly proposed by Pedullà.

2.3.1 The Institutional Reading

The Institutional approach places special emphasis on the structural aspects of Machiavelli's works, delving into the intricacies of institutional design. It establishes connections between these institutional designs and the class dynamics within the society. This perspective scrutinizes how Machiavelli employed a range of institutions within the republic to safeguard the plebs from the oppression of the nobles.

McCormick's interpretation of Machiavelli builds on his criticism of the Cambridge School's republican approach (McCormick, 2003, pp. 176-206; McCormick, 2018). McCormick argues that Machiavelli was a real outlier in the republican tradition outlined by the Cambridge School, as highlighted by his populist stance. The classical republicans, Machiavelli's contemporaries such as Guicciardini and later the American Founding Fathers such as Madison, had a deep suspicion of the temperament and political capacity of the

plebs, and this suspicion profoundly influenced the design of their institutions. Although they did not directly deny political rights of the plebs, they conceived a republic in which the nobles were always dominant, and the political space of the plebs was severely restricted. In contrast to this republican tradition, Machiavelli had a more positive view of the political role of the plebs and was more sceptical of the ambitions and desires of the nobles to rule. He therefore not only gave the plebs extensive political power, but also favoured creating strict accountability of the elite through various political designs.

McCormick argues that the Cambridge School blurs the distance between the populist Machiavellian and elitist republican tradition, and this confusion of the two is not only unhelpful to Machiavellian scholarship, but also undermines the political concerns that the Cambridge School reveals through its account of republicanism as a resource for contemporary political theory. In his review of Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment*, McCormick argues that the dominant model of the mixed regime in the republican tradition was provided by Machiavelli's aristocratic friend Guicciardini, not by Machiavelli (McCormick, 2003, pp. 619-26). In this model, the nobles, with their political experience and prudential virtues, dominated and direct political participation of the plebs as strictly limited. Thus, the book as a whole might more appropriately be called the 'Guicciardini moment'. If the elitist bias embedded in the republican tradition is simply restated and embraced uncritically, without any real expansion of popular power and enhanced accountability to elites, while addressing social oppression based on wealth inequality, the Cambridge School scholars' hope to remedy the current ills of liberalism and democratic representation through the articulation of a republican tradition will also fall short (McCormick, 2003; 2011; 2018) .

Moreover, McCormick points out that a fundamental aspect of Machiavelli's departure from Renaissance civic humanism was that, faced with the inevitable fortune of the republic's corruption over time, Machiavelli hoped republican reformers would re-establish order as the ancient Greek tyrants had done, whereas the Ciceronian-humanist wanted the best aristocrats to re-establish the republic in the position of the nobles. According to McCormick's Machiavelli, the Greek tyrants, including Hiero of Syracuse, Agathocles the Sicilian, the Spartans Cleomenes and Nabis, and Clearchus of Heracle, usually tried to win the

plebs' support after acquiring power through illegitimate means. They will crush the nobles and distributing its wealth to the plebs, arm the plebs to build their own armies instead of using mercenary armies, and manipulate diplomatic alliances to reduce external threats. By doing these things, the tyrants were able to establish good order and lay the groundwork for the future reestablishment of republics. For the republican reformers not fully on the side of the plebs, including the Gracchi, Caesar of Rome and the Medici of Florence, Machiavelli expressed his criticism in an indirect way. Besides, the tyrant as a republican reformer is always 'both enabled and constrained by his subject-citizens', so a civil principality could easily be transformed into a republic if the civil subjects are 'fully and extensively armed' and enjoy relatively equal socio-economic status with each other (McCormick, 2015b) .

Building on his critique of the Cambridge School, McCormick attempts to draw theoretical and institutional resources from Machiavelli's writings to construct a 'Machiavellian Democracy' that would revolutionise the institutional design of contemporary democracy and remedy the current problems of representative democracy (McCormick, 2011). According to McCormick, Machiavelli focuses on a number of institutional designs of the Roman Republic, the two most important of which were the tribunes and the council of the plebs. A council that accommodated both the nobles and the plebs always allowed the views of the nobles to prevail, and it was only in a council of the plebs that the plebs could accurately distil and fully express their own interests. Furthermore, the power of the tribunes to veto noble legislation, to impeach noble senators and to defend the personal safety of the plebs was an important defence against the desire and ambition of the nobles. Therefore, these two institutional designs are particularly valued by McCormick[6]. What's more, the institution of the Roman Republic was born out of the political conflict between the plebs and the nobles, and the conflict between the two was thus institutionalised in the daily workings of republican politics. McCormick summarises the main features of the Machiavellian democratic design as 'class-specific, popularly empowering, and elite-constraining', a system of distinction that enhances the class consciousness and self-

[6] McCormick's emphasis in the power of the plebs leads him to devise a system he called the People's Tribunate in his proposed amendment to the US Constitution (McCormick, 2011, pp. 170-88).

consciousness of ordinary citizens and gives them exclusive institutional channels of political participation, thereby excluding elite interference and corruption, while at the same time enabling ordinary citizens to participate in politics with a vigour and intensity that electoral politics itself cannot provide, and to monitor and hold accountable citizens of higher status (McCormick, 2011, p. 16).

According to Barthas, Machiavelli's advocacy for a civic militia, as analysed in relation to the financial and military system of the Florentine Republic, was not merely focused on enhancing military strength. Instead, it aimed at dismantling the nobles' dominance over both the military and financial aspects, aiming to protect the common people from the oppression and exploitation perpetrated by the nobles. Barthas suggests that Machiavelli's comprehensive examination, considering political, military, and public debt issues from a plebeian perspective, can be considered an early form of political economy critique in the Marxian sense (Barthas, 2017).

In summary, the institutional approach highlights Machiavelli's advocacy for the common people through the utilization of specific institutions like the plebeian tribunes and the citizen's army. It posits that these institutions could offer valuable insights into addressing contemporary challenges, such as the growing disparities in social equality and the issues confronting representative democracy today.

2.3.2 The No-rule Reading

In contrast to McCormick's central concern with institutions, the no-rule reading goes behind the institutions, focusing on their origins, generation, and juridical grounds on the one hand, and, on the other hand, exploring the constant tensions and ongoing interactions between the forms of domination that are necessarily embodied in institutions and what Machiavelli calls the popular desire not to be dominated.

Vatter draws on Arendt's concept of 'no-rule' to offer a distinctive interpretation of Machiavelli's notion of political freedom (Arendt, 1990; Vatter, 2000; Vatter, 2012). According to Vatter, Machiavelli's theory of freedom can be understood in terms of the opposition between 'form' and 'event'. The 'form' represents the desire to dominate, while the 'event'

represents the desire to be free or the negative desire not to be dominated (Vatter, 2000, pp. 302, 87). Vatter argues that Machiavelli's conception of freedom goes beyond the conventional notion of freedom from domination; rather, it entails a state of autonomy without external authority. In this state of freedom, there is no hierarchical relationship of domination, and the distinction between ruler and ruled is abolished. This form of freedom necessitates revolutions by the people, which disrupts the unity of the state (Vatter, 2000, pp. 273-76). Therefore, Machiavelli's political freedom is not static, but a continuous process of transformation. It is not realised through fixed institutional frameworks but through a succession of political events. In essence, Vatter argues that Machiavelli advocates for the attainment of freedom through the continuous action of the people, as opposed to any rigid state apparatus, legal structure, or political system.

Winter focuses on the issue of political violence in Machiavelli's work, arguing that understanding the symbolic circulation of violence is paramount to understanding political order (Winter, 2018). Winter contends that it is crucial not only to determine 'who controls the means of violence', but also to understand 'how violence circulates symbolically' (Winter, 2018, p. 140). Through an examination of Machiavelli's discourse on various forms of violence, Winter demonstrates how the symbolic meaning of violence serves the political ends of its practitioners. Furthermore, Winter contends that in the conflict between the nobles and the plebs, violence against nobles emerges as an effective mechanism of control. Economic inequality, Winter argues, is a key factor driving violent conflict between these two factions, with violence itself potentially offering a solution to this inequality.

Furthermore, Winter examines Machiavelli's treatment of the Ciompi, arguing that Machiavelli challenges conventional elite narratives by highlighting plebeian politics (Winter, 2012). By incorporating a speech by the anonymous workers' leader into his narrative, Machiavelli reshapes the traditional elite interpretation and advocates for the use of violence by the plebs to challenge elites. Winter contends that Machiavelli's support for such actions stems from the inability of the existing republican system to accommodate the lower classes, and thus advocates the use of violence as a means of correcting systemic flaws.

In general, the no-rule reading views political conflict as a situation where the

established legal order is suspended. It contends that Machiavelli's endorsement of civil constitutional rights and political freedoms during these exceptional circumstances reflects his populist position.

2.3.3 The Expansive Reading

While both the institutional and no-rule interpretations of Machiavelli's work are limited by the assumption that Machiavelli's domestic politics can be insulated from the issue of foreign policy, the expansive reading advanced by Pedullà argues for their inherent interconnectedness. He argues that the internal organisation and challenges faced by the republic are inseparable from its external relations. Through this lens, Pedullà contends that Machiavelli's political experience and works can be distilled into two primary efforts: First, in the realm of foreign expansion, Machiavelli sought to reform the Florentine army through the creation of a popular militia; Second, in terms of power distribution within the Republic, Machiavelli endeavoured to curtail the influence of the Florentine nobles while simultaneously empowering the plebs. It is Machiavelli's favourable view of internal conflict that serves as the connective tissue between these two endeavours. By doing so, Pedullà proposes an 'expansive' reading of Machiavelli's theory of internal conflict, highlighting the inseparable connection between the republic's external expansion and the internal growth of civilian power (Pedullà, 2018, p. 6).

According to Pedullà, Machiavelli's favourable evaluation of the internal conflict is rooted in the concept of republic expansion. Machiavelli perceives expansion as an essential mission for the republic, as failure to expand increases the likelihood of its demise. The republic's demand for external expansion inevitably leads to internal tumults, as expansion necessitates an army and, consequently, more power for the plebs, intensifying the conflict between the plebs and nobles. The key to maintaining political order, therefore, is to minimize the drawbacks of expansion by integrating non-violent conflict into normal public life. Machiavelli views the political structure of the Roman Republic as an ideal order where the plebeians and nobles kept each other in check. The plebs not only had adequate political power and means (e.g., secession) to curb the nobles' excessive desire to rule, but they also

had sufficient institutional channels (e.g., the accusation power of the plebeian tribunes) to express their desires and ambitions (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 53-64). In such an order, internal conflicts within the republic could always be resolved non-violently and could improve the institution. In contrast, in the absence of a similar order, conflict can escalate to violence, potentially leading to the republic's destruction. Thus, the positive effect of (non-violent) tumults or conflicts is that they serve as an 'antidote to greater evils', preventing violent conflict and maintaining a stable political order (Pedullà, 2018, p. 53).

Pedullà also analyses the substantive differences between Machiavelli and the humanists of his time. For the humanists, internal conflicts were considered too perilous for serious analysis and were instead morally condemned. They tended to underscore the distinction between friends and enemies, and to judge their opponents in the name of the common good, thereby exacerbating internal conflicts. In contrast, Machiavelli strives to carve out a space between enemies and friends for political disagreements that do not escalate into violence, thereby incorporating internal conflicts within the framework of political theory (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 10-26; 64-73). Moreover, Machiavelli places greater faith in fear as a political instrument to curb selfish passions and depraved tendencies than the humanists' belief in the role of education in fostering virtue. Therefore, Machiavelli seeks to instil obedience to the law in citizens (especially the nobles) through the presence of internal or external adversaries (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 84-116).

Pedullà also criticises both the republican readings of Machiavelli and McCormick's democratic reading. He argues that Machiavelli departs from traditional republicanism by placing the responsibility for safeguarding liberty on the plebs, believing in their inherent resistance to domination. In this regard, Machiavelli emerges as 'the crowd's first real champion at the level of theory' (Pedullà, 2018, p. 2). In contrast to McCormick's plebeian interpretation, however, Pedullà suggests that Machiavelli espouses a sceptical populism, noting that the desire of people shift with changing power dynamics. For example, when wealth or status changes, the plebs may exhibit the same greed as the nobles (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 134-44).

After delineating the interaction between internal conflict and external expansion in

Machiavelli's theory, Pedullà suggests that Machiavelli could be an imperialist who devoted his life to the pursuit of a republic's glory. The Roman Republic attained unparalleled glory through external expansion, which simultaneously enabled it to maintain its freedom and independence. Machiavelli's aspiration for Florence to mirror Rome is evident not only in his writings but also in his political actions. Therefore, Pedullà proposes that Machiavelli's theory of civil conflict should be understood within the context of expansion, leading him to characterise Machiavelli's republicanism as an 'expansive republicanism' (Pedullà, 2018, p. 145).

2.3.4 Conclusion

Overall, the democratic interpretations emphasise Machiavelli's stance against the elite and in favour of the plebs. They explore the various ways in which Machiavelli defends the plebs' quest for greater power within the political structure (institutions, conflict, expansion, etc.). These interpretations consider the conflict between the plebs and the nobles as a crucial dynamic in the life of the republic. Each interpretation provides valuable insights into Machiavelli's political theory, while also offering unique perspectives on key aspects of Machiavelli's thought.

The institutional reading, represented by McCormick, highlights Machiavelli's advocacy of specific institutional designs aimed at empowering the plebs and limiting aristocratic rule. In contrast, the no-rule reading, articulated by Vatter and Winter, delves deeper into the origins and dynamics of political conflict in Machiavelli's work. This interpretation underscores Machiavelli's awareness of the tension between forms of domination and the desire for freedom, and his exploration of political violence as a means of challenging established power structures. The expansive reading, proposed by Pedullà, emphasises the connection between domestic political structures and foreign policy, and the role of the institutionalisation of conflict in maintaining political order and preventing violent conflict.

These interpretations reveal the multifaceted nature of Machiavelli's thought and offer new perspectives and challenges to the traditional republican and elite-dominated interpretations of Machiavelli. Through these diverse interpretations, we gain a richer

understanding of the populism embedded in Machiavelli' thought and its enduring relevance in contemporary political discourse.

2.4 The Radical Interpretations

Intellectuals on the Left have elaborated Machiavelli's thought for radicalism from a Marxist perspective, while also attempting to draw philosophical and theoretical resources from Machiavelli for left-wing theories and movements that have suffered setbacks (Breckman, 2015, pp. 237-54). Gramsci was the first to read Machiavelli's ideas in terms of class struggle. Althusser inherited and further developed the class struggle reading of Machiavelli, emphasizing the dual perspective in his thought. Under the influence of Gramsci and Althusser, Lefort and Mouffe respectively drew intellectual resources from Machiavelli's theory of internal conflict and explored and innovated in democratic theory. From a plebian perspective, Negri and Vergara explores Machiavelli's contribution to our understanding of constitutional power.

2.4.1 The Class Struggle Reading

Both Gramsci and Althusser interpret Machiavelli's writings and ideas through the lens of political praxis within the framework of the theory of class struggle, a fundamental concept in classical Marxism. They underscore Machiavelli not solely as a thinker but primarily as a revolutionary (Speer, 2016, pp. 13-4).

Gramsci examines *The Prince* in the context of Machiavelli's intention to unify a fragmented Italy into a modern nation-state (Gramsci, 1957, pp. 127-78). To achieve this goal, Machiavelli argues that the prince must align with the people against the entrenched feudal power (the nobles). In Gramsci's view, Machiavelli's new prince symbolizes the essence of the modern nation-state, with the people embodying its true constituents. However, during that era, both the potential new princes and the people constrained by the hegemony of the ruling class, represented by Christian theology. *The Prince* served as Machiavelli's tool to debunk the outdated ideology among both the people and the princes, while at the same

time establishing a new ideological framework and hegemony for the revolutionary class. At the end of *The Prince*, Machiavelli 'makes himself the people' and 'merges himself with the people' who he had enlightened and armed (Gramsci, 1957, p. 128).

Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli strategically merges Marxist perspectives with his own notions on hegemony. However, However, there appears to be a potential misunderstanding in Gramsci's grasp of Machiavelli's comprehension of class struggle. Marx asserts that class struggle between rulers and subjects is only a temporary phenomenon in human history's evolution. Eventually, human society is envisioned to progress towards a classless, stateless communist structure where class conflict would cease (Marx, 1970). Conversely, Machiavelli contends that conflict between the nobles and the plebs is eternal due to inherent human desires: the nobles' inclination to oppress and the plebs' resistance to oppression. As long as these two desires exist, this conflict remains unending (Wu, 2016, p. 56).

Althusser further develops Gramsci's interpretation by emphasising Machiavelli's dual perspective in understanding the elites and the people.[7] According to Althusser, the dichotomy between the elites (princes and nobles) and the people is fundamental and cannot be overcome. Machiavelli employs a dual perspective to grasp this opposition, viewing the people from both the prince's standpoint and the prince from the people's standpoint. This interactive opposition renders the prince and the people interdependent in a constant struggle. According to Althusser's interpretation, both the Machiavellianism and republican interpretations of Machiavelli are one-sided (Lahtinen, 2015). *The Prince* transcends being merely an amoral guide dedicated to princes or people; instead, it embodies a revolutionary political manifesto with a dual perspective. Althusser argues that different interpretations of Machiavelli suggest an inherent dual perspective in his text (Althusser, 1999, pp. 5-32).

Althusser's aleatory materialist understanding of Machiavelli emphasises the inevitability and timelessness of internal conflict. He emphasizes that Machiavelli scrutinizes

[7] For an in-depth comparison between Gramsci's interpretation of Machiavelli and Althusser's, see Speer (2016); Marasco (2019).

the contingencies of the past and his era through the lens of 'effective truth' (Althusser, 1993, p. 220). In Machiavelli's political realm, each participant strives to master the effective truth; however, no party can maintain supremacy indefinitely. Every triumph is transient as other participants continuously challenge and subvert the existing order. Althusser asserts that politics fundamentally revolves around struggle and conflict, where a state of peace represents an alternative form of contention (Lahtinen, 2009, pp. 15-6). In his analysis of the *Discourses*, Althusser underscores that Machiavelli's envisioned new state necessitates reliance on law for long-term stability, a product of class struggles of the nobles and the plebs. Hence, class struggle was essential in endowing the state with endurance, expansion capabilities, and its evolution into a nation-state (Althusser, 1999, pp. 56-63).

2.4.2 The Agonistic Reading

Both Lefort and Mouffe have identified Machiavelli's emphasis on the eternal nature of internal conflict within society and endeavoured toelucidate its relevance to modern society and democracy.

Lefort, in particular, has underscored the correlation between Machiavelli's focus on perpetual societal conflict and its implications for contemporary society (Lefort, 2012; Erfani, 2008). He argues that the internal conflict depicted by Machiavelli does not revolve around economic class struggle as perceived by Marx, but rather centres on the dichotomy between the desire to oppress and the resistance to oppression. This perspective sheds light on the essence of modern society, characterised by inherent fragmentation and discord. To address the challenge of social disunity, modern societies necessitate power as a mediator of conflict. In a principality, this mediating power manifests through the prince, who embodies a form of dominion that establishes a representative relationship with society. Conversely, in a republic, this role is assumed by the law, providing channels such as a plebian tribunal for the plebs. However, Lefort contends that given society's perpetual divisions, the symbolic nature of power as a mediator renders it devoid of concrete substance. The tenuous link between power and its representation of society arises from the inability of any form of representation to fully encapsulate the intricate diversity within society. For example, within

modern democracies, political power is delegated to individuals or groups primarily through periodic elections, a process that according to Lefort underscores society's fundamental divisions. Lever's assertion that 'democracy is instituted and sustained by the dissolution of the markers of certainty' encapsulates this notion (Lefort, 1988, p. 19).

Furthermore, Lefort posits that Machiavelli's conception of acquiring and maintaining princely power underscores a democratic tendency in modern thought. He argues that anyone can ascend to princely power if they possess sufficient virtue and adhere to Machiavelli's prescribed principles of power. Lefort argues that Machiavelli's assertion that the new prince must impinge on the goddess of fortune with virtue 'delivers us from the myth of a history regulated by Providence' (Lefort, 2012, p. 125).

Mouffe, drawing inspiration from Machiavelli's insights on internal conflict, has developed a concept of agonistic democracy (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2005). According to Mouffe, societies have historically been marked by divisions, making politics inherently intertwined with conflict and confrontation. The role of politics, as she sees it, is to establish institutions that can manage these conflicts effectively, allowing dissent to coexist without descending into civil strife. This perspective stands in contrast to the liberal emphasis on consensus and the model of deliberative democracy. Mouffe underscores the enduring relevance of Machiavelli's observations on the conflicting desires of different societal factions and the perpetual struggle between them in shaping contemporary democratic politics (Mouffe, 2005, p. 7).

2.4.3 The Plebian Reading

Negri identifies the 'first absolute and inevitable definition' of constituent power in Machiavelli's philosophy (Negri, 1999, pp. 96-7). Vergara further elaborates on Machiavelli's contribution to our understanding of constituent power from the perspective of plebeians, emphasizing the need for plebeians to actively resist oligarchic rule through constitutional means.

Negri's argument revolves around the dynamic interplay between constituent power and constituted power in modernity (Negri, 1999). Constituent power embodies democracy

and the expression of the people's will, contrasting with constituted power. While constituent power initiates revolutionary processes, enabling transformative forces and the multitude's desires, constituted power tends to stifle revolutions and restore order. Negri highlights Machiavelli's recognition of the dilemma: while the principle and authority of constituent power are absolute, the inflexible and irrational nature of constituted power seeks to undermine this absoluteness. Central to Negri's inquiry is the quest for a revolution that remains impervious to suppression and for establishing a constituent power beyond control or defeat by constituted power, drawing inspiration from Machiavelli.

In Machiavelli's works, Negri discerns the opposition between constituent power and constituted power mirrored in the dichotomy of virtue and fortune, evident in both republics and principalities. The new prince epitomizes constituent power by countering constituted power, symbolized by fortune, with his own virtue (comprising force and prudence), exemplified by figures like Cesare Borgia. Additionally, Machiavelli acknowledges democracy as the optimal form of government where power originates predominantly from the people. Negri asserts that 'Only radical democracy, where absolute power finds an absolute subject, the multitude, to interpret it, can fully unfold virtue' (Negri, 1999, pp. 88-9). Aligning with Althusser on the interdependence of princes and people, Negri concludes that 'the prince is democracy' (Negri, 1999, pp. 80-1), emphasising that a prince derives authority from the people and must align with them in conflicts between the people and nobles.

Negri interprets Machiavelli's advocacy of a periodic return to the beginnings as a manifestation of constituent power. When the republic has become corrupt, Machiavelli argues that it can only be saved by a return to the beginnings, and he emphasise the role of dictator in Rome. Negri argues that the role played here by the constituent power is to reassert political autonomy and control of society by the state. In this context, Negri's perspective resonates with Vatter's no-rule interpretation. For Machiavelli, the constitution signifies 'the opening of the revolutionary process of the multitude' (Negri, 1999, pp. 80-1), underscoring a cyclical pattern where revolutions are pivotal for revitalizing political structures and empowering the people within democratic frameworks.[8]

[8] After Negri, Del Lucchese also explores the theory of constituent power in Machiavelli's thought (Del

Vergara's interpretation emphasises Machiavelli's advocacy for plebeians to counter oligarchic corruption through radical action (Vergara, 2020). She argues that Negri's reading of Machiavelli's constituent power contributes to the idea of plebeian constitutionalism, but lacks a constructive program, remaining at the level of pure critique (Vergara, 2020, pp. 118-19). By exploring the genealogy of systemic corruption and drawing on Machiavelli and other thinkers, Vergara suggests anti-oligarchic institutional innovations to empower the populace against oligarchical influence. This proposal will undergo a detailed critical analysis in Chapter 5.

2.4.4 Conclusion

Machiavelli's political philosophy has sparked a broad spectrum of reverberations within contemporary left-wing ideologies. Intellectuals on the Left have delved deeply into Machiavelli's theories through a Marxist lens. They posit that Machiavelli's examination of internal conflict prefigured certain elements of Marx's class struggle theory. As a result, they have utilized Machiavelli's analysis of internal conflict to critique fascism and the capitalist system, imbuing it with a distinctly Marxist essence.

However, Intellectuals on the Left do not merely assimilate Machiavelli into the Marxist framework. They are acutely cognizant of the disparities between Machiavelli's philosophy and Marxism, endeavouring to transcend or enhance Marxism with Machiavelli's insights. The radical democratic movement of the late twentieth century shifted its focus from advocating for the replacement of existing liberal democracy with an entirely new social structure to advocating for the expansion and deepening of modern democratic practices and ideologies through diverse means. For left-leaning theorists, Machiavelli's emphasis on internal conflict within the republic and his depiction of plebeian resistance against oppression serve as exemplars of an ongoing effort to rectify injustices within established

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Lucchese, 2017). He argues that Machiavelli's theory of constituent power offers a distinctive viewpoint on the interplay between law and conflict. This perspective underscores the inherent coexistence of the factual and juridical dimensions of constituent power, thereby addressing the theoretical challenge posed by the absence of a clear differentiation between the primary and secondary aspects.

institutions and reshape power dynamics through persistent rebellion and political engagement. They contend that Machiavelli's concepts offer valuable theoretical foundations and practical directives for combating oppression, fostering democracy, and infusing renewed energy into the pursuit of societal transformation.

2.5 Conclusion

In light of the diverse interpretations of Machiavelli, it is evident that his works continue to serve as a rich source of inspiration for contemporary political thought. According to Lefort, an insurmountable gap exists between interpretation and the object being interpreted, mirroring the divide between society and the power that seeks to represent it (Lefort, 2012, pp. 3-60). Interpretation relies on the object but falls short of fully capturing its essence, never achieving complete identity with it. The meaning of the object is thus continually shaped and refined through a process of elaboration and interpretation. This dynamic also applies to the various interpretations of Machiavelli. These diverse perspectives not only enhance our comprehension of Machiavelli but also reflect the ideological leanings of the interpreters themselves.

Various scholars have offered distinct interpretations of Machiavelli in response to different dissatisfactions. Skinner, discontent with the liberal concept of negative liberty, establishes a connection between Machiavelli and neo-Roman liberty, utilizing the coercive force of law to uphold the virtue and freedom of citizens within a republic. McCormick, critical of elitist inclinations within the Cambridge School, portrays Machiavelli as a philosopher more aligned with the common people than with the nobility. Scholars like Mouffe and Vatter, disillusioned by contemporary economic and political disparities as well as limited popular engagement in democratic processes, seek to draw intellectual insights from Machiavelli's theory of internal conflict.

The multitude of perspectives on Machiavelli underscores the enduring relevance of his ideas in tackling the intricate challenges of our era. Critiques of prevailing political paradigms—whether concerning liberal notions of freedom, elitist tendencies, or current inequalities—highlight the adaptability and versatility of Machiavelli's political philosophy.

This enduring vitality testifies to the creative potential inherent in his work, offering fresh perspectives and solutions to contemporary issues. In Chapter 5, I will revisit these three interpretive approaches to conduct a critical analysis of their interpretation and their contemporary significance. This examination will underscore the dynamic nature of Machiavelli's legacy, demonstrating how it continues to inspire and invigorate innovative discussions within the ever-evolving realms of political theory and practice.

Chapter 3 Institutional and Extra-institutional Conflicts in the *Discourses*

3.1 Introduction

In the last two decades, the theme of conflict (*conflitto*) or tumult (*tumulto*) in Machiavelli's political theory has received increasing attention and is now considered as 'one of the most hotly debated topics in Machiavelli studies' (Pedullà, 2018, p. 4). Scholars argue that the analysis of political conflicts is the primary focus of Machiavelli's thinking, and that Machiavelli provides radical strategies for popular action to challenge the oppression and hegemony of the nobility. Notable representative of this view include McCormick, Winter, and Pedullà (McCormick, 2011; Winter, 2018; Pedullà, 2018). While they collectively stress the significance of conflict, their interpretations of this theme exhibit important divergences. By providing an initial assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of their analyses of conflicts, I aim to establish the essential context for my own analysis, which will further enhance our comprehension of the role of conflict in Machiavelli's political thought. This forthcoming analysis will also engage more comprehensively with these contrasting interpretations as it unfolds.

Pedullà offers a comprehensive interpretation of Machiavelli's theory of conflicts in the *Discourses*, distinguishing between two modes of tumults: the ordinary mode and the extra-ordinary mode (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 53-64). The ordinary mode is primarily defined by its non-violent nature, typified by actions such as the plebs' secession and the employment of popular trials. In contrast, the extraordinary mode is marked by its violent characteristics, including violent riots and mass exiles. Pedullà argues that, according to Machiavelli, conflicts beneficial to republics are confined to those of the ordinary mode. These conflicts contribute to constitutional perfection through the enactment of laws and institutions that favour public freedom. They also serve as a outlet for dissension, channelling it into non-threatening forms, and curb the ambitions of the nobles through threats of popular action. Conversely, conflicts of the extraordinary mode are detrimental to republics. Pedullà emphasises that tumults predominantly serve to stabilize rather than overhaul the social

order, because princes are credited with the creation of new institutions, while the populace is more skilled in maintaining existing structures (*D* I.58). Significant transformative episodes, like the necessary reforms in third-century B.C. Sparta, Rome during the Gracchi, and Florence after Soderini's downfall, have exclusively originated from the decisive actions of radical elite reformers (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 73-83).

I contend that Pedullà's analysis places undue emphasis on the mode of conflict, whereas Machiavelli's primary concern lies in assessing whether the outcome of the conflict, particularly the establishment of new orders and laws, contribute to the common good (*bene comune*) of republics. Furthermore, Machiavelli does indeed emphasise the role of elites (whether nobles or princely figures) in using extraordinary means to reform corruption (*D* I.17-18). However, he also believes that organized common people have the potential to create new and decisive institutions (*D* I.2-6). In fact, all institutional creation and order renewal in the republic require mutual interdependence and checks and balances between the nobles and the plebs, and neither can exist without the other.

Both McCormick and Winter highlight Machiavelli's emphasis on the institutionalisation of conflict and the utilization of extra-ordinary means for innovation within republics. Winter, for instance, suggests that Machiavelli views the class-based institutions in republics as necessary but ultimately insufficient mechanisms for organizing and formalizing public violence. Consequently, Machiavelli envisions the application of extraordinary and unconventional sanctions to counter usurping elites (Winter, 2018, pp. 147-152). McCormick also underscores the importance of class-based institutions, including plebeian tribunes and popularly judged political trials, as fundamental mechanisms for active plebeian participation in public politics and for checking the power of the nobles (McCormick, 2011; 2018). McCormick also argues that the actions taken by Greek tyrants, such as crushing the nobility and redistributing their wealth to the common people and expanding the ranks of citizen soldiers, can serve as examples of the type of innovation required when a republic becomes corrupt (McCormick, 2015b). McCormick further contends that Winter's account may 'belittle scholarly accounts that accentuate the place of legal and judicial institutions in Machiavelli's conception of plebeian politics' (McCormick, 2020a, p. 2). Nevertheless,

despite sharing some agreement with McCormick's criticism, I argue that he does not sufficiently focus on how these institutions established for conflicts are maintained or reproduced and how they are prevented from being subverted or undermined through plebian or aristocratic agency. Additionally, both McCormick and Winter tend to exaggerate Machiavelli's partisanship, portraying him as solely aligned with the interests of the common people while overlooking his broader concern for the common good of republics.

As we shall see, a comprehensive account of internal conflict within the Roman Republic in the *Discourses* can be provided by analysing cases of conflicts through the lens of institutional and extra-institutional conflicts. Institutional conflicts are those in which the nobles and the plebs do not seek to bypass or negate the existing institutions, but rather use the institutions to achieve their goals, even where this may involve seeking to change the norms, authority, or scope of the institution. Extra-institutional conflicts, on the other hand, involve attempts to bypass or negate the existing institutions in pursuit of their objectives.

The institutions in the Roman republic refer to what Machiavelli called 'the order of the state', i.e., 'the authority of the people, of the Senate, of the tribunes, of the consuls; the mode of soliciting and creating the magistrates; and the mode of making the laws' (*D* I.18). According to Machiavelli, the rules within a state consist of 'orders'(*ordini*) and 'laws'(*leggi*) and orders include, but are not limited to, the way in which laws are made.[9] Most importantly, orders rarely change while laws often change. When the city becomes corrupt, or more precisely, when the citizens of that republic become corrupt, the orders and laws that were established at the beginning of the republic when the people were still good no longer apply and can even do harm to the republic. Machiavelli illustrates this with an example: every citizen could propose a law to the people and express their opinion for or against it. When the citizens are good, the order works well, everyone acts in accordance with the common good of the republic, and good laws are established. However, when the citizens become corrupt, the order becomes the worst as people can only make decisions that lead to their own destruction. Machiavelli points out that when a republic falls into corruption, although laws can be easily innovated, they are not powerful enough to free

[9] For the language of *ordini* in Machiavelli, see Whitfield (1955); Najemy (1982b).

people from corruption. Therefore, the creation of new orders through extraordinary means becomes necessary to preserve a republic's freedom from corruption (*D* I.18).

The analysis will demonstrate that, in Machiavelli's ideal republics, when the citizens are not yet corrupt, there is a dual imperative. On the one hand, there is a need to regulate the conflict between the plebs and the nobles and to mitigate corruption through stable institutions, ensuring that the outcome of these conflict consistent with the common good of the republic. On the other hand, the institutions face constant threats from the insolence and ambition of potential tyrants, the nobles, and the plebs. Thus, there is a simultaneous need to focus on the maintenance and reproduction of these institutions. When citizens become corrupt and the well-functioning institutions lose their effectiveness, extraordinary means become essential to renew the order of the republic. Machiavelli is acutely aware of the precariousness and risks associated with the use of extraordinary means in such circumstances.

Overall, in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli accentuates both the ordinary means of maintaining republics and the extra-ordinary means of reordering republics. Viewing this through the lens of institutional and extra-institutional conflicts allows us to comprehend the intricate interplay between these two means (Strauss, 1958, pp. 253-5). This nuanced perspective has significant implications for our understanding of 'new modes and orders' (*modi ed ordini nuovi*) that Machiavelli claims to have found (*D* I Preface).

In this chapter, I will begin by analysing the causes of internal conflicts, emphasising that these causes stem not only from the differing disposition of nobles and plebs but also from Machiavelli's conviction regarding human nature driven by insatiable acquisitiveness. Subsequently, I categorize the fourteen cases of conflict in the Roman Republic into two primary types: institutional and extra-institutional. These cases are further evaluated as either salutary or harmful to the common good of the republics, drawing from Machiavelli's assessment (refer to Tables 3.1 and 3.2 for details).

I will initiate the analysis by examining the sole extra-institutional salutary conflict, the one resulting in the establishment of the tribunes. This case illustrates how the plebs, through a non-violent and innovative approach, created an institution conducive to freedom.

According to Machiavelli, the conflict between the plebs and the nobles led to the creation of the tribunes and ultimately resulted in the formation of the perfect mixed government in the Roman Republic. In this perfect mixed government, the nobles and the plebs realised mutual checks and dynamic equilibriums of power, laying the institutional background for the ensuing conflicts. Following this, I will analyse the seven cases of institutional salutary conflicts, illustrating their alignment with the multifaceted concept of the common good within the republic. This is followed by an examination of two cases of institutional harmful conflict, highlighting their discordance with the common good. Finally, I will discuss four cases of extra-institutional harmful conflicts, elucidating their tendency to negate or bypass the established institutions and address conflicts in private means instead of public ones.

Table 3.1 Fourteen cases of internal conflicts in the Discourses

Number	Chapter	Case overview	Institutional or Extra-institutional	Salutary or harmful
1	I.2-6	The plebs forced the Senate to create the Plebian Tribunes by secession	Extra-institutional	Salutary
2	I.32	The Senate gained the support of the plebs with tax exemptions	Institutional	Salutary
3	I.51	The Senate gained the support of the plebs with a public wage	Institutional	Salutary
4	I.47-48	The conflict caused by the election of consuls	Institutional	Salutary
5	III.8, 28	Plebs and nobles united against the potential tyranny	Institutional	Salutary
6	III.11	Nobles manipulated tribunes to create internal divisions	Institutional	Salutary
7	I.13	The nobles stopped tumult and defended the republic by exploiting religious authority	Institutional	Salutary
8	I.7	The tribunes used accusation as an alternative to the violence that the plebs tried to use against the nobles	Institutional	Salutary
9	I.53	The plebs were misled by policies that only seemed beneficial	Institutional	Harmful
10	I.13	The nobles used religious power to force the plebs to change the results of the consular elections	Institutional	Harmful
11	I.5	The nobles spread calumny against the plebeian dictator	Extra-institutional	Harmful
12	I.39	The plebs imposed restrictions on the power of the consuls	Extra-institutional	Harmful
13	I.40	The conflict between the plebs and the Senate was used by tyrants to seize power	Extra-institutional	Harmful
14	I.37	The conflicts caused by Agrarian Law	Extra-institutional	Harmful

Table 3.2 Classification of internal conflicts in the Discourses

	Salutary	Harmful
Institutional	Case 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	Case 9, 10
Extra-institutional	Case 1	Case 11, 12, 13, 14

3.2 The Causes of Internal Conflict

The cause of internal conflict can firstly be attributed to the two different dispositions (or humour, in Machiavelli's terminology) that Machiavelli identifies in any political community. In the *Discourses*, the *Florentine Histories*, and *The Prince*, Machiavelli contends that the plebs have an innate antipathy towards being dominated, commanded, or oppressed. Conversely, the nobles have a desire to dominate, command, and oppress the plebs.[10] The inclination of the plebs is close to what Berlin describes as 'negative liberty' (Berlin, 2002, pp. 166-217). They are invariably passive, wishing to live in accordance with the laws and in security. As Machiavelli asserts, individuals always want to reap the benefit of a free way of life that allows one 'being able to enjoy one's things freely, without any suspicion, not fearing for the honour of wives and that of children, not to be afraid for oneself' (*D* I.16). The nobles, quite the opposite, seek power and desire to oppress the plebs. Thus, this inherent conflict of the two different dispositions inevitably leads to a conflict between the plebs and the nobles.

Machiavelli uses the term 'humour' (*umore*), which translates directly as 'body fluid', to delineate the human nature (*D* I.4; *P* IX; *FH* II.12). This term is rooted in the Hippocratic medical doctrine, which postulated that the human body consisted of four humors with their varying ratios engendering distinct constitutions and psyches. According to this doctrine, health is the product of a harmonious balance of the four humours, whereas disease results from a disequilibrium. This medical perspective was broadly endorsed in Italy during Machiavelli's era (Parel, 1992, pp. 101-112). Machiavelli's application of the term 'homour'

[10] 'Without doubt, if one considers the end of the nobles and of the ignobles, one will see great desire to dominate in the former, and in the latter only desire not to be dominated.' (*D* I.5) 'A small part of them desires to be free so as to command, but all the others, who are infinite, desire freedom so as to live secure.' (*D* I.16) 'For in every city these two diverse humours are found, which arises from desire neither to be commanded nor oppressed by the great, and the great desire to command and oppress the people.' (*P* IX) 'Only those humours were still excited that are naturally wont to exist in all cities between the powerful and the people; for since the people want to live according to the laws and the powerful want to command by them, it is not possible for them to understand together.' (*FH* II.12) 'The grave and natural enmities that exist between the men of the people and the nobles, caused by the wish of the latter to command and the former not to obey, are the cause of all evils that arise in cities.' (*FH* III.1)

indicates that the health of a political community is only ever temporary, with various imbalances and conflicts being the perennial state. A community cannot achieve perpetual harmony by simply eliminating a particular humour; rather, it can only achieve relative stability through the dynamic equilibrium of the humours. Therefore, political conflict should be regarded as a natural and unavoidable component of political life. As Pedullà points out, it is Machiavelli's recognition of the contrasting humours within the political community and his acknowledgment of the inescapable nature of political conflict that prompted his departure from the classical and humanistic traditions that sought harmony (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 48-49).

Despite the perpetual presence of these two opposing dispositions in all political communities, Machiavelli acknowledges that the conflicts they produce are, to some extent, not inevitable. In *D* I.6, Machiavelli offers a detailed comparison between two types of republics, which I have termed 'maintaining republic' and 'expansive republic'.[11] Venice and Sparta serve as examples of the former, described by Machiavelli as typical of 'those republics that have been free for a long while without such enmities and tumults' (*D* I.6). To sustain long-term stability and freedom, the Venetian Republic abstained from using plebs in wars and controlled its population growth, while Sparta focused on relative wealth equality and excluding outsiders. Machiavelli suggests that these strategies are indicative of smaller, less populous, and relatively insular republics, thereby making them better at maintaining enduring unity between the plebs and the nobles, as well as securing the stability of the republic.

However, Machiavelli underscores the dynamic nature of politics, stating, 'all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall; and to many things that reason does not bring you, necessity brings you' (*D* I.6; cf. *D* II.5, 30). He argues that the republics established with the sole aim of self-maintain face a critical dilemma: they are compelled by necessity to expand, which paradoxically acts as a poison leading to their eventual downfall due to their inherently weak foundations. Alternatively, if these republics

[11] 'If someone wished, therefore, to order a republic anew, he would have to examine whether he wished it to expand like Rome in dominion and in power or truly to remain within narrow limits.' (*D* I.6)

refrain from engaging in warfare, they become susceptible to lethargy and division, vulnerabilities that can lead to their collapse through either internal decay or external conflicts. As Machiavelli notes, Sparta, having conquered almost all of Greece, eventually succumbed to rebellions in some regions. Similarly, Venice, which had extended its dominion over much of Italy, lost everything in a single decisive battle. These examples highlight the fragile balance that republics must navigate between expansion and self-preservation.

Hence, Machiavelli asserts that a political system must recognize and prepare for the necessity of expansion. He advises, 'in ordering a republic there is need to think of the more honourable part and to order it so that if indeed necessity brings it to expand, it can conserve what it has seized' (*D* I.6). This need for expansion mandates that a republic maintain its own army, necessitating a broadening of citizenship, similar to Rome's strategy of incorporating foreigners. Such inclusivity not only increases the number of plebs but also ensures their significant participation and representation in the political system (*D* I.6, II.19).[12]Indeed, the integration of plebs into the political system leads to their enhanced proficiency in communication, dialogue, negotiation, and confrontation, especially in interactions with the nobles. This evolving dynamic, in turn, inevitably amplifies the inherent contradictions and conflicts between the plebs and the nobles, highlighting the complex interplay between expansion, citizenship, and internal stability within a republic. The process of expansion, by altering the composition and competencies of the plebeian class, thus plays a crucial role in shaping the political landscape and the nature of interactions within the republic.

Machiavelli's observation at the conclusion of Chapter 6, where he refers to the enmity between the plebs and the nobles as 'an inconvenience necessary to arrive at Roman greatness', is based on the underlying premise of the inevitability of state expansion. This perspective is crucial to understanding his analysis. Machiavelli views the expansion of a

[12] Machiavelli, in his works, consistently emphasised the importance of establishing a prince's or republic's own army, vehemently arguing against the reliance on mercenaries and foreign forces. He believed that such forces were not only ineffective but also detrimental (*P* XII-XIV, *D* I.21, II.20). During his time, the idea of a state maintaining its own army was not widely practiced in Italy. Most city-states, including Florence, predominantly depended on mercenaries and foreign armies for military engagements.

state as an inescapable reality, and he regards the establishment of a constitution that is adaptable to such expansion as a key factor in the superiority of the expansive republic over the maintaining republic. [13]In this context, the conflict between the plebs and the nobles is seen as a necessary discomfort, a sort of growing pain, on the path to achieving the kind of greatness exemplified by Rome. The Roman Republic, in Machiavelli's view, effectively harnessed this internal conflict as a driving force towards expansion and greatness, unlike the more static and insular approaches of Sparta and Venice. Therefore, the enmity between these two classes, while potentially disruptive, is ultimately framed as an essential element in the dynamism and success of a powerful and expansive republic.

Machiavelli, with a pragmatic outlook, acknowledges that 'nothing entirely clean and entirely without suspicion is ever found' (*D* I.6).[14] He contrasts the maintaining republic, which, despite their internal 'harmony', struggles with expansion, with the expansive republic, which, despite internal tumults, is better at expanding and achieving empire and glory (*D* II.9). Confronted with these divergent models and their respective outcomes, Machiavelli expresses a preference for the more perilous yet potentially more rewarding Roman approach. Furthermore, addressing the issue of internal conflict inherent in the Roman model, Machiavelli proposes that such conflict should be institutionalised. By doing so, he suggests that internal conflict, rather than being purely detrimental, can be structured in a way that contributes positively to the republic's development.

Machiavelli's exploration of necessity and expansion suggests that the essence of political conflict extends beyond merely the disposition of the plebs seeking freedom from domination and that of the nobles striving to dominate. Beyond his assessments of the plebs and nobles, Machiavelli also asserts several significant claims regarding human nature:

> It is necessary to whoever disposes a republic and orders laws in it to

[13] Machiavelli's view is contrary to the stance adopted by his friend Guicciardini, cf. Guicciardini (1994); Pedullà (2018, p. 177) .

[14] In Machiavelli's most famous comedy, *Mandragola*, this underlying view of balance between good and bad, as inherent to the nature of life and politics, is echoed through the protagonist, Callimaco. He states, 'it's true that fortune and nature keep their account balanced; the first never does you a good turn that on the other side something bad doesn't come up' (Machiavelli, 1989, p. 804).

presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always have to use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for it… men never work any good unless through necessity (or, men never do anything good except by necessity), but where choice abounds and one can make use of license, at once everything is full of confusion and disorder. (*D* I.3)

It does not appear to men that they possess securely what a man has unless he acquires something else new. (*D* I.5)

Nature has created men so that they are able to desire everything and are unable to attain everything. So, since the desire is always greater than the power of acquiring, the result is discontent with what one possesses and a lack of satisfaction with it. From this arise the variability of their fortune; for since some men desire to have more, and some fear to lose what has been acquired, they come to enmities and to war, from which arise the ruin of one province and the exaltation of another. (*D* I.37)

How easily men are corrupted and make themselves assume a contrary nature. (*D* I.42)

Either the people or the nobility always became proud when the other humbled itself. When the plebs stayed quiet within its bounds, the young nobles began to injure it; and the tribunes could find few remedies for it because they too were violated. Though it appeared to the nobility on the other side, that its youth had been too ferocious, it preferred that if the bounds had to be overstepped, its own should overstep and not the plebs. So the desire to defend freedom made each one try to prevail so much that he oppressed the other. The order of these accidents is that when men seek not to fear, they begin to make others fear; and the injury that they dispel from themselves they put upon another, as if it were necessary to offend or to be offended. (*D* I.46)

Human appetites are insatiable, for since from nature they have the ability and the wish to desire all things and from fortune the ability to achieve few of them, there continually results from this a discontent in human minds and a disgust

with the things they possess. (*D* II Preface)

In essence, Machiavelli's portrayal of human nature suggests that individuals are driven by an insatiable desire to acquire and possess yet remain perpetually dissatisfied with their acquisitions. This perspective raises a pertinent question: does such a view contradict his analysis of the dispositions of the plebs and the nobles? Specifically, does this apply universally to the plebs who are typically perceived as desiring only to avoid oppression, rather than to oppress others? In other words, given the means and opportunity, would the plebs exhibit the same tendencies to dominate and oppress as the nobles do?

Machiavelli's historical narratives do include instances where the plebs desired to oppress others. A notable example can be found in the Roman Republic, where the plebs, after securing the protection of the plebeian tribunes, 'began at once to engage in combat through ambition, and to wish to share honors and belongings with the nobles as the thing esteemed most by men' through the enactment of Agrarian Laws (*D* I.37; for more details, see 3.5.4).[15]

Furthermore, in Machiavelli's analysis comparing the multitude (*moltitudine*) and the prince, he acknowledges that the multitude tends to be wiser and more steadfast than a prince. However, he underscores that this assessment is based on the precondition that both the multitude and the prince are subjected to the rule of law:

> I conclude, thus, against the common opinion that says that peoples, when they are princes, are varying, mutable, and ungrateful, as I affirm that these sins are not otherwise in them than in particular princes. The variation in their proceeding arises not from a diverse nature—because it is in one mode in all, and if there is advantage of good, it is in the people—but from having more or less respect for the laws within which both live. Someone accusing peoples and princes together might be able to say the truth, but in excepting princes, he

[15] In *Florentine Histories* Machiavelli discusses more examples of ambition of plebs, the most emblematic of which is the famous Florentine Ciompi Uprising. In Machiavelli's fictitious speech for the workers' leaders, the workers were incited by blunt language to use violent means to seize power. The anonymous leader proclaimed that all men are equal, and that when the time comes the plebs could and should become the princes of the city, masters of those who were previously powerful, making them feel the fear they had felt before (*FH* III.13). For more details, see 4.6.

> would be deceived; for a people commands and is **well ordered** will be stable, prudent, and grateful no otherwise than a prince, or better than a prince, even one esteemed wise. On the other side, a prince unshackled from the laws will be more ungrateful, varying, and imprudent than a people. (*D* I.58, emphasis added)

Thus, the expression of human nature is contingent upon specific circumstances. Individuals tend to exhibit good behaviour when constrained by laws, but their inherent greed becomes apparent in the absence of such restrictions. The typical passivity and limited desires of the plebs can be attributed to their ongoing oppression by the nobles and their access to only limited resources. However, should the plebs acquire power and wealth, they are likely to manifest a strong inclination to oppress others, reflecting the transformative impact of changed circumstances on human behaviour and desires (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 73-75, 134-140).

In other words, for Machiavelli, the characteristics of the plebs and nobles cannot be abstracted into a single, unchanging essence but must be analysed within the context of specific cases and desires. McCormick, in his interpretation, acknowledges Machiavelli's general view of human nature but posits a more significant distinction between the nobles and plebs. McCormick posits that Machiavelli diverges from the perspectives of elitist thinkers such as Aristotle, Cicero, Guicciardini, and Madison, by firmly aligning himself with the viewpoint of the plebeians and affirming the moral legitimacy of their objectives (McCormick, 2011, pp. 4-6, 23-26). He argues this stance is rooted in the inherent decency (*onestà*) of the plebs, which engenders a fundamental disinclination towards aggression against others. McCormick further suggests that any oppressive tendencies displayed by the plebs are primarily reactive, emerging only in response to the oppression they suffer at the hands of the nobles. However, as the above analysis shows, this does not correspond to Machiavelli's texts. Machiavelli indeed asserts that 'the judgment of free peoples is **rarely** pernicious to liberty' (*D* I.4, emphasis added), yet this statement does not equate to an absolute affirmation that such judgments are **never** detrimental to liberty. As Pedullà contends, Machiavelli exhibits a form of 'sceptical populism', indicating a stance that is not unequivocally pro-populace (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 134-140). McCormick's potential

misinterpretation or oversight of Machiavelli's general views on human nature, coupled with an overemphasis on the moral legitimacy of the plebs, might hinder a comprehensive understanding of the concept of the common good in the republic. This perspective may also limit the appreciation of the role of expansion in Machiavelli's vision of expansive republics.

In essence, according to Machiavelli, the fundamental cause of political conflict is ingrained in human nature itself, characterized by an insatiable and unending quest for acquisitiveness. This deep-seated desire for more—be it power, wealth, or status—drives individuals and factions within a state to conflict, as each strives to fulfill their unquenchable ambitions. This condition necessitates the presence of coercive mechanisms, such as laws and institutional structures, to constrain human behavior and ensure respect for others' freedoms (Skinner, 2002b, pp. 173-84). As Pedullà argues, Machiavelli's diverges from classical republicanism and humanist perspectives on public education. In contrast to the focus on rational self-control and philosophical education, Machiavelli asserts that fear serves as the most potent teacher (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 84-116; See also Winter, 2018, pp. 157-8).

Concurrently, within a republic, conflict often manifests most acutely between the plebs and the nobles. The perpetual struggle between the plebs' desire to avoid oppression and the nobles' inclination to oppress is a defining and inescapable aspect of political life. Machiavelli's teachings emphasise the necessity of understanding and managing conflict effectively. In this regard, he points to the political practices of the Roman Republic as an exemplary model, illustrating how conflict, when harnessed and managed properly, can contribute to the freedom and strength of a republic.

3.3 The Only Extra-Institutional Salutary Conflict: The Plebs Forced the Senate to Create the Plebian Tribunes by Secession

There is only one conflict in the *Discourses* that is both extra-institutional and salutary. It is the case where the plebs forced the Senate to create the Plebian Tribunes by secession. This case serves as the most important evidence for Machiavelli's startling assertion that 'the disunion of the plebs and the Roman Senate made that republic free and powerful' (*D* I.4).

Chapters two to eight of the first book of the *Discourses* extensively explore this topic. Machiavelli emphasises that the conflict between the plebs and the nobles led to the establishment of the tribunes, subsequently giving rise to the formation of the perfect mixed regime in the Roman Republic.

> Since there were the consuls and the Senate in that republic, it came to be mixed only of two qualities out of the three written of above—that is, the principality and the aristocrats. It remained only to give a place to the popular government; hence, when the Roman nobility became **insolent** for the causes that will be told below, the people rose up against it; so as not to lose the whole, it was constrained to yield to the people its part, and on the other side the Senate and the consuls remained with so much authority that they could keep their rank in that republic. Thus arose **the creation of the tribunes of the plebs**, after which the state of that republic came to be more **stabilized**, since **all three kinds of government there had their part**. Fortune was so favourable to it that although it passed from the government of kings and of aristocrats to that of the people, by the same degrees and for the same causes that have been discoursed of above, nonetheless it never took away all authority from kingly qualities so as to give authority to the aristocrats, nor did it diminish the authority of the aristocrats altogether so as to give it to the people. But, remaining **mixed**, it made a **perfect** republic, to which perfection it came through **the disunion of the plebs and the Senate**.' (*D* I.2, emphasis added)

Machiavelli underscores that his view differs from that of many ancient writers, including his main reference, Livy. For this reason, it is necessary to present Livy's account first. According to Livy's account, when Tarquin died in 496 BC, the plebs began to experience a sense of oppression and the conflicts between the nobles and the plebs due to debt problems became increasingly intense. The plebs felt that while they fought bravely on the battlefield for the freedom of their homeland and the expansion of their territory, the nobles hid in the city to enslave and oppress them; the plebs had not been given as much freedom in times of peace as in times of war, and they were far more threatened by the enslavement of their

fellow Romans than by foreign enemies. As a result, a fierce struggle broke out between the plebs and the nobles, with the plebs often gathering in the streets and squares to fight for their interest, and violence was on the verge of breaking out. The nobles were, on the one hand trying to satisfy the demands of the plebs and, on the other hand, not willing to give up their vested interests.

The tumult continued for over a year, then the plebs could no longer tolerate the capriciousness of the nobles and the plebeian warriors, on the advice of Sicinius (who was later elected as a tribune), withdrew to the Sacred Mount. Both the nobles and the plebs were shocked by the situation: the plebs felt the loss of their friends in the army and feared violence from the Senate; the Senate were also afraid of the plebs who remained in the city and hesitated, not knowing whether the plebs wanted them to stay or preferred them to leave and worrying about what to do if there was an invasion by foreign enemies.

The Senate sent Menenius Agrippa as an emissary to the Sacred Mount to meet the plebs, who was eloquent and a member of the plebs. He told the plebs a parable, which compared the Roman Republic to the human body, the belly to the nobles and the other parts (hands, mouth, teeth, etc.) to the plebs. The other parts of the body, dissatisfied with their hard work while the belly only enjoys the good things they provide, stopped eating and tried to punish the belly with hunger. As a result, the whole body wasted away, and it was then that they realised that the belly is not idle, but actually receives food and provides the whole body with blood as a source of life and strength (Livy II.21-32). Through this story, Agrippa was trying to convey that the nobles were not just enjoying themselves and not giving, and that the common good of the republic required the joint efforts of all its citizens. This parable eased the resentment of the plebs, and eventually the Senate and the plebs agreed to create an office that only the plebs could hold, the tribunes. The tribunes were ‘sacrosanct’, and their duty was to give help the plebs in actions against the consuls (Livy II.33).

After a basic recapitulation of the six types of government proposed by Plato and Aristotle and the mixed government proposed by Polybius in *D* I.2, Machiavelli begins to discuss the Roman regime. Machiavelli ostensibly accepts Polybius’ judgement of the Roman

regime (although he does not mention Polybius by name), suggesting that the advantage of the Roman regime was that it was a mixed government, which was more durable and stable than a single government because the principality, the aristocrats, and the popular government in the same city could guard each other (Polybius VI.10-18). Pedullà points out that Machiavelli differed from Polybius in at least two important respects (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 43-44). First, whereas Polybius saw the institutional transition as the product of a crisis that was not specifically linked to internal conflict, Machiavelli emphasised that the change in the institution stemmed from the conflict between the nobles and the plebs. Second, whereas Polybius argues that the element of popular government of the Roman mixed government lay in the People's Assembly, Machiavelli argues that the element of popular government was the plebian tribunes. The tribunes, which had been criticised by ancient writers such as Cicero and Livy, were, in Machiavelli's view, an essential part of Roman mixed government, which he praised as never before.

Machiavelli's account thus emphasises the importance of the tribunes in the Roman Republic: Rome did not start out as a mixed system of government, and it was 'the disunion between the plebs and the Senate' that led to the creation of the tribunes (*D* I.2), which essentially made the Roman institution a perfect form of mixed government. When Rome was transformed from a kingdom to a republic after the expulsion of the Tarquins, the king was replaced by two consuls with a limited term of office. However, it entailed that there were only the element of principality and aristocracy in the Roman constitution and not the element of government. Under this constitution of the polity, the nobles inevitably became arrogant and oppressive towards the plebs, and the plebs were forced to rise up against them. In order not to lose all their power, the nobles were forced to give some of it to the plebs, thus creating the plebeian tribunes, and keeping the Senate and consuls as powers held by the nobles. Machiavelli praised the role of the tribunes in the development of Roman politics: the institutions of the Roman Republic were thus made more stable because the three types of government, principality, aristocracy and popular government, were all in their place.

In chapter I.3 Machiavelli discusses in more detail the reasons for the creation of the

tribunes in the light of his own judgement of general human nature. Machiavelli argues that the creator of republican law must assume that all men are evil and that 'men never work any good unless through necessity' (*D* I.3). This judgement of human nature is particularly supported by the reasons for the creation of the tribunes. The nobility did not begin to oppress the plebs after the expulsion of the Tarquins from Rome until their death, for the Tarquins still constituted a constraint on the nobility, who feared that oppression of the plebs would lead to their support of the Tarquins. According to Livy, the Tarquins were overthrown and expelled from Rome in 509 B.C.E., after which they continued to attempt restoration by planning conspiracies and seeking allies from other city states, but ultimately failed in Rome's defence. In 496 B.C.E. Tarquin died, then the tension between the nobles and the plebs intensified in the following years (Livy I.59-60; II.4-7, 9, 13, 15, 19-21). In other words, the nobility was left without the restraint of necessity after the death of Tarquin and thus became unbridled and arrogant, and it was necessary to conceive of a new institution that would have the same effect as that produced by the Tarquins, maintaining the nobility's fear of it and controlling their arrogance. Machiavelli argued that the eminence and reputation of the tribunes made them 'intermediaries between the plebs and the Senate' in Rome, acting as a check on the arrogance of the nobles (*D* I.3).

In Chapter I.4, Machiavelli explicitly articulates his striking point: 'the disunion of the plebs and the Roman Senate made that republic free and powerful'. He then elaborates on this argument in the subsequent chapters, namely I.4, I.5, I.7, I.8, focusing on the positive effects of conflict on freedom, and I.6, the relationship between internal conflict and expansion.

Machiavelli makes it clear that his view differs from that of ancient writers. He points out that many writers believe that Rome's recurrent tumult was its disadvantage, and that it would not have achieved such great hegemony if it had not been compensated for by 'good fortune and military virtue' (*D* I.4). Machiavelli acknowledges that 'fortune and the military were causes of the Roman Empire', but he points out that the fundamental cause of Roman Empire was its good army, because 'where the military is good, there must be good order; and too, it rarely occurs that good fortune will not be there' (*D* I.4). Fortune played only a

minor role in the development of Rome, and it was the virtue of the republic that mattered.[16] Machiavelli then does not discuss in detail the connection between Roman Empire and the army (a topic that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter VI and Book II, etc.), but instead begins to discuss 'the tumults between the nobles and the plebs' that has been denounced by many writers, and argues that this was the primary cause of Roman liberty, since '**all the laws** that are made in favour of freedom arise from their disunion ' (*D* I.4, emphasis added).

According to Machiavelli, the problem faced by previous writers was firstly that they ignored the different humours of the plebs and the nobles in republics, which made the tumults inevitable; and secondly that they thought more about 'the noises and the cries' that arose from these tumults than about the good effects they caused (*D* I.4). Machiavelli also recognises that tumults could bring about clamour, and was therefore 'extraordinary and almost wild', such as 'the people together crying out against the Senate, the Senate against the people, running tumultuously through the streets, closing shops, the whole plebs leaving Rome' (*D* I.4). But Machiavelli did not see this as a reason to deny or object to tumults. Firstly, they rarely engendered exile and violence or the division of the republic, but often established laws and institutions conducive to public liberty and were therefore not to be regretted. Secondly, Machiavelli argues that 'every city ought to have methods with which the people can express their ambition, and especially those cities that intend to make use of the people in important affairs' (*D* I.4). Rome was one such city-state that intended to 'make use of' (*valere*) the people in important affairs (not least because of the military importance of the plebs). When the Roman plebs wanted to obtain a law, they expressed their demands in ways that went beyond the legal system, and the nobility was often forced to make concessions to satisfy them in some way. Machiavelli argues that, on the whole, 'the desires

[16] Machiavelli has a thorough discussion of the relationship between virtue and fortune, and the role of virtue in politics. For example, 'if the first fortune did not fall to Rome, the second fell to it; for if its first orders were defective, nonetheless they did not deviate from the right way that could lead them to perfection' (*D* I.2); 'all those princes who proceeded as did the Romans and were of the same virtue as they would have the fortune that the Romans had in this aspect' (*D* II.1); 'fortune is arbiter of half of our actions, but also that she leaves the other half, or close to it, for us to govern' (*P* 25). See also Strauss (1958); Pitkin (1984); Mansfield (1996).

of free peoples are rarely pernicious to freedom because they arise either from being oppressed or from suspicion that they may be oppressed' (*D* I.4). If the opinions were false, there would be the assemblies as the remedy, where good citizens would correct the people by making public speeches (e.g., *D* III.8), because the plebs, though ignorant , were able to understand and easily make concessions when trusted people told them the truth (Pedullà, 2018, p. 65; McCormick, 2011, pp. 44-50). As Pedullà argues, Machiavelli is replacing the opposition of conflict and harmony with the opposition of ordinary and extraordinary modes of conflict, thus incorporating non-violent forms of conflict into normal public life (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 61-62). However, Machiavelli described these tumults as 'extraordinary and almost wild', so for him 'extraordinary' is not the same as harmful. He also used the term 'extraordinary' to describe the extraordinary means needed to address the problems of corruption and inequality (e.g., *D* I.17-18). Pedullà's dichotomy may therefore underestimate the importance of extraordinary means for the maintenance of republics.

Very few of the extra-institutional conflicts in the *Discourses* were salutary to republics, and only this instance that led to the creation of the tribunes was discussed in detail and highly appreciated by Machiavelli. As Machiavelli shows, Rome did not start out as a republican polity and underwent at least two crucial changes of order in its transformation from kingdom to republic. The first change of order was the expulsion of the Tarquins and the replacement of the king with consuls, but this did not turn out well, as the nobility had a monopoly on political power without leaving the plebs their rightful place. It also set the stage for the nobles to become arrogant and for conflict to intensify later on. Both the plebs and the nobles played an important role in the first change. Lucius Junius Brutus, who led the citizens to expel the Tarquins and was later elected as a consul, was one of the plebs, but somehow his status as one of the plebs was overlooked (Livy I.58-60). [17]In the second change of order, the plebs forced the Senate to compromise by withdrawing and refusing to fight,

[17] The reasons are complicate. The fact that Brutus, one of the first consuls, was one of the plebs seems to have been overlooked, as writers generally believed that consuls were the spokesmen of the nobility and that consuls could only be noblemen (until 367 B.C.E. when the consuls was opened to both the plebs and the nobles). In fact the list of consuls of the early 5th century B.C.E. contains many names belonging to the plebs, but in the second half of the century the plebs completely disappeared (Beard, 2015).

thus creating the tribunes, and allowing Rome to establish a perfectly mixed government. Moreover, despite Machiavelli's belief that 'a multitude without a head is useless' (*D* I.44), in discussing this conflict Machiavelli does not emphasise the role of any individual, nor does he mention the pivotal role of the plebs Sicinius and Agrippa, as recorded by Livy, but rather emphasises the political virtues and the quest for the common good that the plebs as a whole have demonstrated in this conflict. In contrast to other instances of conflict, the plebs did not use violent means or make excessive claims to political power, but rather created new institutions in line with the common good through peaceful means.

Thus, while on the whole 'princes are superior to peoples in ordering laws, forming civil lives, and ordering new statutes and orders, peoples are so much superior in maintaining things ordered' (*D* I.58), this instance shows that it was also possible for the plebs to create good order and institution. As Fontana notes, Machiavelli did not see the people as 'a mere passive vulgus defined by its objective and empirical reality', but rather as 'a force that can move from the pre-existing reality and create a new reality, a people become the subject of its activity within this reality' (Fontana, 1993, p. 127). The creation of the new institution by the Roman plebs as a whole in the conflict is powerful evidence to the creativity of the people.[18]

Machiavelli's view of the perfection of the Roman Republic following the establishment of the tribunes is rooted in the development of a stable institutional framework and power

[18] Fontana's argument is a further development of Gramsci's view. Gramsci interpreted Machiavelli in terms of the basic principles of Marxism as the enlightened man who summoned the princes and led the people to work together to transform Italy from a divided state into a unified and modern nation-state (Gramsci, 1957). *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, his other writings, his ideas, and his life, are a living political practice to achieve this end. For Gramsci, Machiavelli's two most important works are thus intrinsically united in this aim: the prince is the embodiment of the modern nation-state, while the people are the true subject of the modern nation-state. On the one hand, the modern nation-state is a principality since its authority must be incarnated in one individual, the prince; on the other hand, it must be a republic since the prince is the representative of the people. Gramsci argues that at the end of *The Prince* 'Machiavelli makes himself the people, merges himself with the people' (Gramsci, 1957, p. 128). Similarly, Machiavelli can be seen as a representative of the plebs when discussing their creation of the tribunes in the *Discourses*. Through his retelling of Roman history, Machiavelli armed the people with new ideas and theories, transforming them from a silent and passive class into an active and conscious one, an intellectual, moral, and political subject.

structure. This framework facilitates checks and a dynamic equilibrium of power between the nobles and the plebs. As explored further below, when operating within this institutional framework, both the nobles and the plebs, if utilizing the institution to address their conflicts, tended to produce outcomes beneficial to the common good. Conversely, attempts to bypass or negate the institution often led to results unfavourable to the common good.

3.4 The Institutional Salutary Conflicts

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli discusses six cases of institutional salutary conflict within the Roman Republic. In these cases, both the nobles and the plebs engage in conflict not by circumventing existing institutions, but rather by utilizing them to safeguard and promote their own interests. Machiavelli views these conflicts as beneficial for the republic, because the outcomes of these conflicts align with, and actively support, the common good of the republic. Machiavelli's analysis highlights how conflicts, when conducted within the bounds of established institutions, can serve a constructive purpose. Rather than destabilizing the republic, these conflicts, managed through institutional channels, contribute to the orderly competition between plebs and nobles and to the advancement of the common good of the republic.

Machiavelli's concept of the 'common good' is a subject of considerable debate among scholars studying his works (Hanasz, 2010, p. 57). This concept is multifaceted and open to various interpretations. In the preface of the first book of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli expresses his intent to reveal insights that will 'bring the common benefit to everyone' (*D* I Preface). The republican interpretation positions Machiavelli as a successor and proponent of classical republicanism, with the common good of the republic being a core tenet of his political philosophy (Pocock, 1975; Skinner, 1990a; Viroli, 1998). However, scholars like Hanasz highlight the conceptual ambiguity in Machiavelli's usage of the common good, noting the challenges in applying this notion within the complexities of real-world politics (Hanasz, 2010). Del Lucchese argue that Machiavelli, as a radical realist, does not believe in the existence of a common good as the conflict among various social groups within the city is inevitable (Del Lucchese, 2012, pp. 242-4).

However, as Pedullà argues, the apparent contradiction between factional interests and the common good can be resolved. Drawing on the analogy of Hippocratic medicine, Pedullà proposes that just as the health of an organism results from the natural struggle of different elements within the body, the common good—or the health of the body politic—might similarly arise from the interplay of diverse groups within the city. Furthermore, Pedullà argues that the common good fundamentally entails the survival of the community, and the non-violent conflict between the plebs and the nobles can, in various ways, contribute to Rome's military strength (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 174-6).

Through an analysis of specific instances of conflict and Machiavelli's treatment of the concept of the common good, we gain insights into the multifaceted nature of this idea, thereby enriching and elaborating upon Pedullà's interpretation. Machiavelli posits that although both nobles and plebs pursue their self-interests, the outcomes of their conflicts may align with the common good of the republic. It is in these circumstances that conflicts are regarded as beneficial. This approach underscores the potential for self-interested actions to inadvertently contribute to the collective welfare, provided they are resolved in a way that serves the broader interests of the republic.

3.4.1 The Tribunes Used Accusation as an Alternative to the Violence that the Plebs Tried to Use Against the Nobles

Machiavelli argues that republics require institutions providing lawful and harmless outlets for the disposition of citizens to maintain internal stability. A crucial manifestation of this in the Roman Republic was the accusation of the plebeian tribunes (*D* I.7). Machiavelli underscores that Rome entrusted the guardianship of freedom to the plebs and tribunes, with the power of accusation being the most effective and essential in guarding freedom. This accusation allows the tribunes 'to accuse citizens before the people, or some magistrate or council, when they sin in anything against the free state' (*D* I.7). The power of accusation serves two functions: first, it operates through fear to restrain citizens from anti-state actions and suppresses such behaviours; second, it provides a legal and harmless outlet 'by which to vent, in some mode against some citizen, those humours that grow up in cities' (*D* I.7). As

has already been pointed out, internal conflicts are frequent in republics, especially the expansive ones, because of the inherent acquisitiveness of individuals. Without such a legal outlet, individuals may resort to 'extraordinary' means, especially violence, resulting in more severe and perilous consequences.

Machiavelli cites the example of Coriolanus to support his argument. In this case, some nobles were discontent with the plebs because they thought that the plebs had too much power after the creation of tribunes. During a food shortage in Rome, Coriolanus, an enemy of 'the popular faction', suggested that the Senate should punish the plebs by withholding food and deprive them of their power. This angered the plebs, and they sought to kill him outright after he left the Senate. Fortunately, the tribunes intervened, summoning Coriolanus to court, allowing him to defend himself and face the law (*D* I.7). Mansfield notes a significant modification in Machiavelli's account compared to Livy's: Machiavelli highlights Coriolanus's hostile attitude towards the plebs (Livy II.35; Mansfield, 1979, pp. 53-5). As Pedullà argues, Machiavelli's portrayal of Coriolanus as an enemy of the plebs and his emphasis the tribunes' role underscores his departure from ancient writers like Livy on the issue of the tribunes (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 42-7). By highlighting the positive role of the tribunes, Machiavelli positions them as a fundamental institution in achieving a mixed form of government in the Roman Republic.

While the ambition of the nobles deserves condemnation in this instance, Machiavelli more strongly censures the way in which the plebs resisted nobles' oppression—through private and sectarian violence . He particularly underscores the distinction between public and private violence (Winter, 2018, pp. 145-6). When citizens face oppression through public violence (legal and institutional), even unjust punishment rarely leads to chaos, as public forces and orders have limits that prevent the transgression into actions that could destroy the republic. In contrast, oppression through private and sectarian violence, including foreign forces, can instil fear, prompting individuals to seek self-defence or private protection. This, in turn, gives rise to factions that may ultimately lead to the destruction of the liberal state. As implied by the term 'the popular faction' (*fazione popolare*) , internal conflicts in the republic have the potential to become factional and private, serving as a direct cause of the

eventual downfall of the Roman Republic (*D* I.37; *FH* VII.1).[19]

In this instance, Machiavelli underscores the necessity of relying on institutions to manage and discipline conflict. Through an analysis of the distinction between public and private violence, he reveals how internal conflicts can be effectively addressed through institutional mechanisms. Institutions can offer legitimate and harmless outlets for citizens' acquisitive tendencies. The eradication of private violence through institutions and its replacement with more publicized violence in response to conflicts and clashes between citizens can contribute to maximizing the common good of the republic.

3.4.2 The Nobles Stopped Tumult and Defended the Republic by Exploiting Religious Authority

The religion of Rome has a significant position in the Roman Republic and is considered by Machiavelli as a crucial factor influencing both the success and failure of Rome. In Machiavelli's words, 'as the observance of the divine cult is the cause of the greatness of republics, so disdain for it is the cause of their ruin' (*D* I.11).[20] The religion introduced by Numa is particularly highlighted by Machiavelli, as it resulted in 'good orders', which, in turn, led to 'good fortune' and successful enterprises (*D* I.11). Specifically, the religion allowed the otherwise ferocious Roman people to become moderate and submissive. Furthermore, Machiavelli argues that Numa's contribution was more significant than Romulus', because 'where there is religion, arms can easily be introduced, and where there are arms and not

[19] Immediately following the presentation of the positive example of the Roman Republic, Machiavelli contrasts it with the negative example of Florence. In Florence, the absence of the institution of accusation resulted in the invasion of foreign armies, ultimately culminating in the downfall of the Florentine Republic in 1512. Further discussion is provided in section 4.2.

[20] Although here Machiavelli so emphasises the important role of religion (*D* I.11-15), there is essentially little mention of religion in the rest of the *Discourses*. Machiavelli sees two specific reasons for the fall of the Roman Republic: one is the conflict provoked by the Agrarian law (*D* I.37) and the other is the prolongation of the commands (*D* III.24), and religion is not involved either. Whether a connection can be drawn between the demise of religion and these two causes is open to further exploration.

religion, the latter can be introduced only with difficulty' (*D* I.11). [21]

Concerning religion, Machiavelli was primarily interested in its political efficacy (Beiner, 1993; Fontana, 1999). In contrast to Christianity, which dominated during Machiavelli's lifetime, Roman paganism was more secular and better capable of fostering a martial and united republic. Specifically, Roman religion induced fear of the gods among the people, making them hesitant to break their oaths, even at the expense of violating the law. Machiavelli cites two examples illustrating the educational impact of religion: Scipio, wielding a sword, forced the people to swear allegiance to their country; Titus Manlius threatened a tribune with an oath to drop the charge against his father or else he would put him to death, and the tribune was forced to take the oath and drop the charge (*D* I.11). As Pedullà notes, Machiavelli emphasises the fear-inducing role of religion in the political community, preventing citizens from becoming weak and indolence (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 102-116).

In the chapters on religion, Machiavelli selected three instances to illustrate how the Roman ruling class used their religious power to 'reorder the city', two of which occurred in the broader context of the conflict between the plebs and the nobles (*D* I.13). The first instance is harmful and will be discussed below (See 3.4.2). In the second instance, the nobles manipulated oracles and oaths to thwart laws proposed by the tribunes and defend the republic from invasion. As Machiavelli writes, the tribune' attempts to issue laws to limit the power of the consuls caused turmoil in Rome, and the nobles employed religion to counteract this in two ways. First, they used the Sybilline books to warn of the city's danger due to internal discord. Although the tribunes exposed this manipulation, the plebs, driven by fear of the gods, continued to believe in the oracle, reducing their obedience to the tribunes. Then, during a critical moment when the city was under attack, the tribunes believed that the attack was false and still persisted in promoting the law. At this point, Publius Ruberius, a citizen 'grave and of authority', addressed the plebs with a combination of affection and threats, highlighting the peril to the republic and the inappropriateness of their demand. Then Publius compelled the plebs to swear an oath of obedience to the consul.

[21] Machiavelli believes that a good army is the basis of good order: 'where the military is good, there must be good order; and too, it rarely occurs that good fortune will not be there' (*D* I.4).

Under the leadership of the consul, they successfully repelled the invaders. The consul also attempted to lead the plebs out of the city to fight. Despite the objections from the tribunes, the plebs, bound by their oath, disobeyed the tribunes and followed the consul's orders. Eventually, an agreement was reached between the tribunes and consuls: the former would not seek to limit the consul's power for a year, while the latter would not take the plebs out of the city to fight for a year (Livy III.9-10, 15-21; *D* I.13).

According to Machiavelli, this case serves as a notable example of how the nobles 'made religion serve to reorder the city and to carry out their enterprises and to stop tumults' (*D* I.13). The tribune's proposal of limiting the powers of the consuls was perceived by the nobles as a complete removal of the nobles from the republic, leading to vigorous opposition from the nobles (See also *D* I.39). In other words, the tribunes' proposal had the potential to shift the balance of power significantly in favour of the plebs, disrupting the established stable mixed regime of the Roman Republic. Concerned about the stability of the mixed regime, Machiavelli implicitly criticizes the misjudgements and incorrect decisions of the plebs while supporting the nobles' countermeasure, which involved exploiting religious authority. As McCormick shows, the plebs are prone to agitation and often require calming by highly respected citizens and prudent consuls (McCormick, 2011, p. 72).

Moreover, Machiavelli contends that the common good of the republic is, first and foremost, its security and independence. As highlighted in the opening chapter of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli underscores that a free community should be, above all, free from the domination of other political communities (*D* I.1). Therefore, Machiavelli supports the actions of Ruberius, as they contributed to uniting all the citizens and safeguarding the republic from invasion. McCormick suggests that the nobles using religion and unnecessary war to divert the plebs' demands for domestic reform (McCormick, 2011, pp. 73, 85, 90). However, Machiavelli argues that it was not an unnecessary war, as the survival of the republic is the primary aspect of the common good. Additionally, the proposed reforms by the tribunes posed a threat to the checks and balances of power between the nobles and the plebs, leading Machiavelli to reject them. The nobles' use of religion to influence the plebs was therefore in line with the common good. Therefore, in this instance, Machiavelli

endorses the use of religion by the Roman nobles 'to reorder the city and to carry out their enterprises and to stop tumults' (*D* I.13).

3.4.3 The Senate Gained the Support of the Plebs with Tax Exemptions

Chapter 32 discusses the case of the Senate gaining the support of the plebs by granting tax exemptions during times of crisis. The perilous situation arose when Porsenna attacked Rome to reinstate the Tarquins. Faced with the urgent need to unite the republic and prevent the besieged and starving plebs from surrendering, the Senate opted to exempt the plebs from the salt tax and other imposition. The rationale behind this decision was the assertion that the poor had already contributed significantly to the public welfare by raising their children (Livy, II.9; *D* I.32).

In this case, although the Senate's policy may not have been exceptionally prudent, Machiavelli was inclined to endorse it because it aligned with the common good.[22] When Rome faced external threats, its paramount interests were security, peace, and independence. The strategy of granting tax exemptions served to unite the plebs and the Senate in the face of foreign adversaries, contributing to the defence of the independence and freedom of the Roman republic.

Hanasz argues that the Senate's appeal to the common good was merely a rhetorical cover for its own self-interests (Hanasz, 2010, p. 83). However, Machiavelli prioritizes the outcomes of political actions over their motivations. This perspective is evident in Machiavelli's commentary on Romulus. Romulus, in the nascent days of Rome, was responsible for the deaths of Remus and Titus Tatius. Despite the moral ambiguity of

[22] While the Senate had achieved positive results with this approach, Machiavelli deemed such success improbable to recur due to the necessity of two specific conditions. First, the state was in its nascent stages, with its institutional framework yet to be firmly established, leading the plebs to expect laws to be crafted in their favour. Second, the plebs' recent memories of suffering under monarchical rule were still vivid. Machiavelli generally contends that a republic or prince should avoid conferring favours upon citizens solely during crises. He argues that such a strategy could accelerate their downfall rather than cultivate gratitude among plebs. This is because the plebs tend to attribute these favours to the presence of an external threat, fostering a belief that these concessions will cease once the crisis abates (*D* I.32).

Romulus' actions, Machiavelli argues that they can be 'excused' when considering the outcomes, as the establishment of a republic necessitates solitary action (Havercroft, 2023).

Machiavelli does not require absolute selflessness from citizens, acknowledging the inherent conflict between individual and collective welfare. According to him, an ideal citizen should be capable of harmonizing personal interests with the common good. In situations where personal and collective interests clash, he recognizes that individuals might naturally favour their own interests. However, he argues that external institutional constraints can compel individuals to make decisions aligned with the common good.

3.4.4 The Conflict Caused by the Election of Consuls

Chapters 47-48 discuss the conflict between the nobles and the plebs regarding the election of tribunes with consular power. The plebs sought to limit consuls' power or have plebs as consuls, leading to a compromise by appointing four tribunes with consular power, open to both plebs and nobles. Surprisingly, despite the option for plebs to hold all positions, all the elected tribunes with consular power turned out to be nobles. Machiavelli quotes Livy to emphasise the different spirit of the plebs during and after conflict: 'there is one spirit in contention over freedom and honour, another after conflict has been put aside and when their judgment is incorrupt' (Livy IV.6). He also praised the plebs for their 'modesty, equity, and elevation of spirit' (*D* I.47).

Machiavelli goes further to explore the motivation behind the plebs' behaviour, attributing it to their tendency to be 'very much deceived in general things, not so much in particulars'. In this case, the general thing refers to the plebs' perception of themselves as deserving consuls due to their majority status and their role in keeping Rome free and strong. However, when faced with specific judgments about candidates, the plebs recognized the shortcomings of plebeian candidates. Consequently, they concluded that none possessed sufficient virtue for the position, leading them to choose nobles with perceived virtue (*D* I.47).

However, Machiavelli immediately claims in the next chapter that the nobles did not remain inactive during the election process but used political strategies to influence the

outcome (*D* I.48). In order to prevent the plebs from becoming the tribunes with consular power, the nobles employed two deceptive tactics. First, they put the most prominent men in the election campaign, aiming to lead the plebs to choose nobles when comparing all candidates. Second, they bribed some vile plebs to run alongside better candidates of plebeian origin, intending to evoke shame in the plebs and dissuade them from selecting candidates of plebeian origin (Livy IV.56-57). Machiavelli sees this as consistent with his earlier argument that 'the people does not deceive itself in particulars, even if it deceives itself in generalities' (*D* I.47). In other words, the plebs, although blinded by the issue of the candidates, always chose the right person for particular offices in the process of specific elections.

Machiavelli does not explicitly define particular and general things, so we have to rely on the three examples he gives to determine their scope. Apart from the Roman example, he discusses similar instances in Capua and Florence. During the internal tumult in Capua, the plebs attempted to remove all the senators, but when it came time to choose replacements from among the plebs, they were unable to do so because none of the plebs were deemed worthy of serving as senators. In Florence, after the expulsion of the Medici family in 1494, the republic fell into a sort of anarchy. Some of the plebs blamed powerful individuals, but upon gaining power and ability to observe and think more closely about the issues involved, they realized the root cause differed (more in 4.2). Therefore, particular things are those about which people have full access to details, such as the 'distribution of offices and honours', while general things are those about which people do not have full access to information and can only observe from a distance (*D* I.48). As Machiavelli puts it, 'peoples are deceived generally in judging things and their accidents about which, after they know them particularly, they lack such deception' (*D* I.47).

In Chapter 48, the plebs demonstrated sound judgment in particular things, i.e., they elected officials based on the virtues worthy of their positions when fully informed about candidates' reputation and ability. However, in areas where they lacked sufficient information, i.e. the issues where the nobles manipulated the candidates, the plebs failed to make accurate judgments. They were actually deceived by the tricks of the nobles, leading

them, out of shame, to not choose equally good and worthy candidates of plebeian origin as officials. It is noteworthy that the nobles often employed deceit to prevent the plebs from having sufficient information for proper judgement. For example, nobles used religious authority to manipulate election results, a tactic that escaped the notice of the plebs (See 3.3.2 and 3.4.2).

Machiavelli argues that in particular things the plebs, with their prudent political judgement, rarely make mistakes. In contrast, it is the nobles and princes - 'a few men who have to make such distributions' - who more frequently err (*D* I.47; See also I.58; III.34). McCormick argues that Machiavelli supports the political judgement of the plebs in this instance and sees this as an important support for Machiavellian democracy (McCormick, 2011, pp. 70-76). However, this perspective overlooks Machiavelli's limitation of the argument about the political judgment of the plebs to particular things.

Indeed, Machiavelli's argument emphasises not only the political participation of the plebs in the republic, but also the appropriate way for them to engage in politics — by focusing on particular things. On the one hand, the republic should facilitate the plebs' maximum participation in judging particular affairs through institutional means, as they have demonstrated excellent judgment in particular affairs. This was evident in Rome with the plebs having the right to elect crucial officials, including consuls. On the other hand, general affairs primarily relied on the virtue of the noble elites, and the nobles should guide or manipulate the plebs to make decisions aligned with the common good when necessary. This suggests that both nobles and plebs are indispensable in a well-functioning republican order, and only cooperation between the two, although often involving competition or conflict, can maximise the correctness of decision-making in both general and particular matters. Further discussion on this topic will be presented in the conclusion.

In this instance, although the nobles deceived the plebs regarding the candidates, the election outcome still aligned with the common good of the republic as the most suitable candidates were elected. Machiavelli regards the flexibility and diversity of leaders as a crucial advantage of the republic over a principality. He emphasises that a republic 'can accommodate itself better than one prince can to the diversity of times through the diversity

of the citizens that are in it' (*D* III.9). Therefore, having appropriate leaders is considered a vital dimension of the common good in republics.

3.4.5 The Senate Gained the Support of the Plebs with a Public Wage

Chapter 51 discusses the instance of the Senate's efforts to gain the support of the plebs through the provision of the public wage. Before that, citizens, both nobles and plebs, served in the military without receiving public wage, limiting their ability to fight for extended periods or in distant territories. Faced with this limitation, the Senate, driven by necessity, made the decision to pay citizens for their participation in war. Despite concerns raised by the tribunes about the increased tax burden accompanying this policy, the plebs perceived it as an unexpected benefit from the Senate and embraced it with great joy (Livy, IV 59-60; *D* I.51).

Machiavelli contends that the Senate displayed adept political manoeuvring in this instance. While compelled by necessity to implement the policy of providing public wages, the Senate skilfully presented it as a voluntary decision, thereby gaining a positive reputation.[23] As previously noted, this situation falls within the realm of general affairs, where the plebs did not discern Senate's motives and were manipulated by the nobles (McCormick, 2011, pp. 51, 81).

Nonetheless, it is important that the Senate's policy not only served its own interests but also aligned with the common good of the republic, necessitating expansion for its preservation. The provision of public wages to all citizens enabled the Roman Republic's army to engage in prolonged and distant military campaigns, including besieging towns. This significantly bolstered the state's military capacity, facilitating better expansion and contributing to the overall well-being of the republic (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 145-180).

3.4.6 Plebs and Nobles United Against the Potential Tyranny

The opposition between liberal order and tyranny (*tirannide*) is one of the central

[23] Livy mentions the gratitude of the plebs, but not that the Senate was forced to do so (Livy, IV.60). See also Mansfield (1979, p. 151).

themes reiterated throughout the *Discourses* (e.g., D I.2, 10, 18, 40; III.3, 7, 28). As Machiavelli put it, 'as much as the founders of a republic and of a kingdom (*regno*) are praiseworthy, so much those of a tyranny are worthy of reproach'(*D* I.10). The juxtaposition of republics and kingdoms implies that a certain degree of freedom is achievable under both republican and monarchical institutions. Notably, Machiavelli suggests that a kingdom established by a sole prince has the potential for transformation into a republic, as seen in Rome's historical example.[24] The antithesis of a liberal republic and kingdom is a tyranny in which there is almost no inner freedom at all. In a tyranny, absolute freedom is vested solely in the tyrant, and all aspects of governance are subject to their arbitrary will (Rahe, 2017; Ranum, 2020, pp. 71-8; Majumder, 2022). Based on a pessimistic understanding of human nature, Machiavelli contends that, despite the widespread belief that the establishment of a republic or kingdom can achieve 'perpetual honour', almost everyone is 'deceived by a false good and a false glory' and turns towards the path of tyranny (*D* I.10).

Tyranny poses a significant threat to the free order of the republic. Ambitious citizens often seek support from either the plebs or nobles through private channels to undermine the republican order and establish despotic rule. The response of the plebs and nobles plays a crucial role in determining the future of republics. If the plebs and nobles prioritize the public interest of republics over partisan concerns, as demonstrated in the first two examples discussed in this section, they could collaboratively oppose potential tyrants and uphold the liberal institutions of republics. However, if the plebs and nobles prioritize their factional interests at the expense of the common good, as will be explored further in Section 3.5.3, tyrants could successfully seize power.

In the first instance, Spurius attempted to secure the favour of the plebs to gain extraordinary authority in Rome. Fortunately, the Senate detected his ambitious designs, raising suspicions that led to the rejection of his proposal by the plebs. When Spurius suggested distributing the public property of the republic to the plebs, they saw it as an

[24] Machiavelli observes that many laws enacted by the kings of Rome align with 'a free way of life' (*D* I.2). This alignment is attributed to a significant factor—the establishment of the Roman Republic did not entail a radical transformation of the old system. Instead, it involved the substitution of the life-long king with two consuls who held fixed terms of office (*D* I.9).

attempt to manipulate their freedom, and the proposal was met with refusal (Livy II.41; *D* III.8). In this case, the Senate exposed the true motives behind Spurius' favours, a revelation that resonated with the plebs. The uncorrupted Roman citizens collaborated to thwart the threat to Rome's liberty. Machiavelli emphasises that the plebs would have yielded if a reputable elite had publicly disclosed the truth through speeches in popular assemblies or other occasions (*D* I.4, 53, 54).

In the second instance, Manlius Capitolinus, driven by jealousy towards the honours bestowed upon received by Camillus, created tumults against the Senate and the laws of Rome.[25] However, he failed to recognize that the Roman way of life and its citizens were not inclined to accept tyranny. In an unusual turn of events, neither the nobles, the tribunes, nor the plebs supported him. Despite the typical strong defines of each other's interests by the nobles, even Manlius' relatives did not stand by him. While the tribunes typically favoured what seemed beneficial to the people and detrimental to the nobles, this time they did not support Manlius. Although the plebs had previously supported Manlius in their pursuit of personal gain and opposition to the nobles, when the tribunes presented Manlius' case to the judgment of the people, they condemned him to death without hesitation (Livy VI 14-20; *D* III.8).

Machiavelli considered this example crucial because it vividly illustrates the virtue of all parts within the Roman Republic:

> Therefore I do not believe that there is an example in this history more apt to show **the goodness of all the orders** of that republic than this, seeing that no one in that city moved to defend a citizen full of every virtue, who publicly and privately had performed very many praiseworthy works. For **love of the fatherland was able to do more in all of them than any other respect**, and they considered present dangers that depended on him much more than past merits, so much that with his death they freed themselves. (*D* III.8, emphasis added)

[25] Machiavelli considers the example of Manlius to be more important because we can see from Manlius' example 'how much virtue of spirit and body, how many good works done in favour of the fatherland, an ugly greed for rule later cancels' (*D* III.8). Here Machiavelli again emphasises the nature of man as a subject of desire.

McCormick argues that the plebs demonstrated prudence in this case (McCormick, 2011, p. 128), but Machiavelli's emphasis extends beyond the plebs alone. He underscores the goodness of all orders in the republic, including both the plebs and the nobles. Indeed, good order ensures that all citizens prioritize the love of their country and the pursuit of the common good above other considerations. This commitment is crucial for the Republic and its citizens to effectively defend their freedom.

In the third instance, when the public institutions failed to provide enough food, Spurius Maelius, a wealthy man, distributed food to the plebs, gaining their gratitude. Anticipating the serious threat this behaviour posed to public order and liberty in the republic, the Senate decisively appointed a dictator to put him to death (Livy, IV 13-14;*D* III.28).

Machiavelli aims to emphasise through this case that the key factor determining whether a republic moves toward tyranny is the way in which citizens acquire reputation. The ways of acquiring reputation can be divided into two categories: public and private. The public way involves citizens providing useful advice and exhibiting outstanding behaviour in the public interest, and the reputation gained through such means is not harmful to the republic. On the other hand, the private way involves forming a faction of duty and loyalty by offering private favours to others and gaining their support. Such factions can potentially lead to the corrosion of public order and the disregard for the law by those supported (*D* III.28, See also *FH* III.5, VII.1). Therefore, the republic should support and encourage the acquisition of reputation through public means, while reducing or prohibiting the acquisition of reputation through private means (Pedullà, 2018, p. 62; Winter, 2018, p. 157). Institutions play a pivotal role in addressing this issue. Machiavelli contends that the Roman Republic's institutions of triumphs, accusations, and dictators were effective in this regard and are worthy of emulation.

In the first two cases, Machiavelli highlights that the absence of corruption among the Roman people prevented ambitious citizens from evolving into true tyrants. However, he suggests that if Manlius had lived during the era of Marius and Sulla, he might have achieved similar results, given the infiltration of corruption into the Roman populace and the predominant pursuit of reputation through private means by then (Pedullà, 2018, p. 95). In

the hearts of incorrupt citizens, 'love of the fatherland was able to do more in all of them than any other respect'. In other words, citizens, both nobles and plebs, prioritized the pursuit of the common good over individual interests. This commitment was crucial to keeping the Roman Republic free and independent. In the third instance, although the republic hadn't entirely succumbed to corruption, the plebs had been partially influenced by the ambitious citizen and were 'blinded by a species of false good' (*D* III.28). The Senate, consistently prioritizing the common good, recognized the danger of tyranny in time and eliminated the potential threat by creating a dictator.

On the issue of wealth, Machiavelli advocates for 'keeping the public rich and their citizens poor' (*tenere ricco il publico, e gli loro cittadini, poveri*), as he believes that inequality in property ownership can easily lead to ambitious individuals using personal wealth to gain disproportionate political power (See also *D* I.37; II.19; III.16, 25). In the third instance, the rich used his wealth to buy off the materially fewer wealthy plebs. Under these circumstances, if he attempted to establish a tyranny, he could easily succeed, thus threatening the liberties of the republic. As Rose argues, Machiavelli is not arguing that citizens need to endure material hardship; rather, citizens should not prioritize their personal wealth over the common good, nor should they allow material pleasures to divert their attention from public affairs (Rose, 2016). In the third example, the plebs must prioritize 'love of fatherland' above other considerations and resist the erosion of liberty by wealth, as they did in the first instance. Simultaneously, the republic needs proper institutions in place to ensure that citizens hold the right attitudes towards wealth.

In these instances, when the ambitious potential tyrants sought to exploit the discord between the plebs and nobles to establish tyranny, both parties consistently prioritized the common good of the republic over factional interests. This allowed them to collaborate against tyranny instead of falling victim to the schemes of potential tyrants. Machiavelli implies that when institutions effectively manage the conflict between nobles and plebs, they not only regulate internal disputes but also foster a recognition of shared interests in upholding the free way of life of the republic. This recognition enables cooperation against internal and external threats to the stability of republics.

3.4.7 Nobles Manipulated Tribunes to Create Internal Divisions

Machiavelli highlights a crucial principle in the *Discourses*: 'In everything some evil is concealed that makes new accidents emerge, it is necessary to provide for this with new orders' (*D* III.11). This principle recurs throughout the *Discourses* (*D* I.3, 6, 18, 34, 37, 49; III.1, 37, 49). In Book III, Chapter 11, Machiavelli applies this principle to discuss the excessive power of the plebeian tribunes. When the power of the tribunes became 'insolent and formidable', posing a threat to the nobility and Rome, the nobles found a remedy. They identified a tribune 'who was timid or who could be bribed or who loved the common good' and influenced him to oppose decisions that the other tribunes intended to make, always against the will of the Senate (*D* III.11; Livy VI.37-42). Machiavelli comments that this remedy greatly tempered the excessive authority of the tribunes and, in many cases, protected Rome's liberty.

In this instance, the usual structure of political power in Rome appears to have been reversed. In most instances it is the nobles who initiate oppression of the plebs. Machiavelli emphasises that the ambition of the nobles was the primary cause of the Roman Republic's downfall (*D* I.37). However, in this case, the tribunes initiated the introduction of new laws, posing a threat not only to the nobles' interests but also to Rome's common good. Mansfield argues that the conflict between the plebs and the nobles evolves into a power struggle between the nobles and the tribunes for control of the plebs. Both parties disregard the republic's common good and focused solely on partisan interests (Mansfield, 1979, p. 75). However, the conflict between the nobles and the tribunes, despite their partisan interests, served as a counterbalance to each other's power. Under certain institutions, the conflict's resolution ultimately aligned with the common good. The key to maintaining good order lies in the appropriate institutional design of checks and balances of power, which channel partisan interests towards the common good.

McCormick frequently cites this example, primarily to illustrate the tribunes' positive role in checking the nobles' ambition (McCormick, 2011, pp. 32, 34, 93, 97, 138) and the nobles' use of more aggressive means to achieve their ends (2011, p. 25). McCormick

acknowledges the tribunes' arrogance and potential harm to the republic, but he expresses surprise at Machiavelli's inclusion of 'love of the common good' as a requisite quality for tribunes (McCormick, 2011, pp. 95-6). McCormick's surprise implies that he may have overlooked Machiavelli's pursuit of the common good. In a more recent study, McCormick further examines this case, maintaining that plebeian tribunes only occasionally exhibited insolent behaviour. He argues that Machiavelli's citation of the insolent tribunes underscores the Roman plebs' general lack of insolence (McCormick, 2021, p. 494).

In fact, the tribunes are also members of the plebs. The insolence displayed by the tribunes after they have assumed power shows that plebs do not always seek merely not to be ruled but also to oppress others when they have sufficient resources. As Machiavelli puts it, 'when men seek not to fear, they begin to make others fear; and the injury that they dispel from themselves they put upon another, as if it were necessary to offend or to be offended' (*D* I.46). Therefore, Machiavelli is not arguing that the behaviour of the plebs is always perfectly just and completely harmless, as McCormick argues. Plebs can also become insolence when they assume power, and thus unfavourable to the common good, as in this case with the tribunes.

In this instance, the excessive powers of the tribunes threatened the relatively solid balance of power. The nobles strategically utilized the institution of the tribunes to redress this imbalance, reinstating equilibrium and safeguarding the liberty of the republic. Machiavelli commends the Roman Republic's institution for achieving perfection with the establishment of the tribunes, incorporating all three types of rules (the king, the aristocrat, and the people) effectively (*D* I.2-4). This implies that a resilient balance-of-power structure is essential for the common good of the Republic.

3.4.8 Conclusion

The preceding analysis illustrates the various facets of the common good of the republic. Externally, the republic must uphold independence and autonomy, with Machiavelli emphasising the necessity of expansion or possessing the strength to defend against external threats. Internally, the common good encompasses preserving the checks and balances

between the power of the nobles and the plebs, ensuring the stability of the political system, and electing individuals of exceptional virtue to office. These elements contribute to the common good and serve as means to advance the overarching goal of the community—freedom.

If the citizens consistently prioritize the common good, as illustrated in the first two cases in 3.3.6, the freedom of the republic can be preserved. However, Machiavelli acknowledges the susceptibility of individuals to corruption. In most instances, both the nobles and the plebs make decisions based on their personal interests, sometimes even at the expense of the common good. When either the nobles or the plebs act against the common good, it is necessary for the other side to use institutions to force a change in behaviour or to find a remedy, thereby aligning the outcome with the common good. Machiavelli does not aim to educate citizens to be perfectly rational and perpetually patriotic, nor does he expect all citizens to exhibit political virtues of absolute selflessness. Instead, he seeks to restrain individuals' ambitions through external institutions. Thus, Machiavelli underscores the need to rely on appropriate institutions to establish and maintain a balance of power between the nobles and the plebs, thereby compelling them to make decisions that align with the common good.

For Machiavelli, effective institutions should enlighten citizens, including both nobles and plebs, about the crucial role of the common good in ensuring the stability and continuity of the republic. . Additionally, citizens should recognize that the common good aligns with their best individual interests. The benefits of a free way of life for both plebs and nobles can be fully realized only in an independent, secure, and free republic. These institutions not only maximize the convergence of individual interests, party interests, and the common interests of the republic but also provide an outlet for the temperaments of the nobles and the plebs. They confine conflicts within the bounds of the institutions and ensure that the outcomes of these conflicts align with the common good

3.5 The Institutional Harmful Conflicts

Not all institutional conflicts are beneficial, and Machiavelli also discusses two cases of

harmful institutional conflicts. As we shall see, in both the following cases, the plebs or the nobles made decisions that were not in the common good, and there were not sufficient institutional means to correct them. Fortunately, however, such conflicts were not common and did not have serious consequences. When the citizens of the city-state were not corrupt, for the most part, the order was able to limit the ambitions of the plebs and the nobles and kept conflicts within the institutional framework and maintained the dynamic stability of the republic. By showing these examples, Machiavelli implies that the institutions do not ensure the complete harmlessness of the conflict.

3.5.1 The Plebs Were Misled by Policies That Only Seemed Beneficial

Despite Machiavelli's praise that the plebs 'being very much deceived in general things, not so much in particulars' (*D* I.47-48), and the multitude is 'wiser and more constant' than a prince (*D* I.58), he also points out that 'many times the people desires its own ruin, deceived by a false appearance of good; and that great hopes and mighty promises easily move', which is supported by three instances (*D* I.53).

The first instance is the debate between the plebs and the Senate over whether to move to Veii. After the capture of Veii, the idea arose among the Roman people that half of the Romans should move to Veii. However, the Senate and the wisest Romans saw this proposal as harmful to Rome and opposed it. The dispute between the plebs and the Senate over this proposal was so serious that armed conflict and bloodshed almost broke out, but fortunately the Senate used some old and esteemed citizens as a shield to check the plebs and prevent violent conflict (Livy V.24-25). The second and third instances are the disputes between the plebs and the Senate in the appointment of military governors. Fabius Maximus, who fought against Hannibal by stalling tactics, was considered cowardly by the plebs and was thus deprived of the power to command the army. Besides, the Roman people appointed Varro as the consul simply because he boasted that he would defeat Hannibal. In the end Varro's army was routed, which almost led to the destruction of Rome (Livy XXII.25-49). In the third instance, Marcus Centenius Penula volunteered that he could immediately defeat Hannibal and asked to be given the authority to raise a volunteer army. The Senate

had intended to refuse this rash request, but granted it anyway, knowing that such an act would be welcomed by the people, and that if the people knew that the request had been refused by the Senate, tumults and resentment against the nobles would surely have arisen. In the end, Penula and his army were, unsurprisingly, easily defeated (Livy XXV.19; *D* I.53).

In these instances, the people show themselves to be short-sighted, paranoid, and gullible, able to see only the appearance of things and not the advantages and disadvantages concealed underneath it.[26]Plebs are often 'deceived by a false appearance of good', and without the guidance of those whom they trust, infinite dangers and harms are brought into republics (*D* I.53). In the first instance, the plebs were persuaded by old and esteemed citizens to abandon policies that were detrimental to Rome's common interest; While in the latter two instances, in the absence of such persons who could gain the trust of the plebs, the plebs (or the Senate was forced by the plebs) made policies that were detrimental to the common good and caused damage to the republic. Machiavelli sarcastically comments: 'there is no easier way to make a republic where the people have authority come to ruin than to put it into mighty enterprises' (*D* I.53). In line with Machiavelli's statement that the plebs 'being very much deceived in general things, not so much in particulars' (3.3.4), things such as general population transfers and the appointment of military governors are among those general things, on which plebs do not have sufficient information to make a judgement. This issue will be analysed comprehensively in the conclusion.

3.5.2 The Nobles Used Religious Power to Force the Plebs to Change the Results of the Consular Elections

It is also possible for the Roman nobility to use religious power without regard to the common good and in favour of sectarian interest. In 399 BCE six new tribunes with consular power were elected in Rome, and only one of them was a noble, most of them were plebs, which caused discontent among the nobles. Therefore, the nobles interpreted the plagues, famines and prodigies happened at the same year as the wrath of the gods and claimed that

[26] In *The Prince* Machiavelli has a similar judgement of the nature of the plebs: 'because the crowd is always attracted by appearances and the results of things, and the world is full of them.' (*P* 19)

the remedy could only be to return the old way of election. Then in the next year, the new tribunes with consular power, elected by the plebs full of fear, were all noblemen (Livy, V 13-14; *D* I.13).

Although this case also illustrates how the nobles used religious power 'to reorder the city and to carry out their enterprises' (*D* I.13), I argue that Machiavelli would have criticised the nobles. As noted before (3.3.4), the plebs rarely made mistakes in the 'distribution of public offices and honours', the result of the first year's election should have been reasonable, whereas the result of the second year's election was produced under the threat of the nobles and was therefore probably not in the common good of the republic.

It is also worth noting that the nobles had a monopoly on the interpretation of religion, and therefore only the nobles could use religious power to achieve their ends. Whether or not the nobles believed in the gods, they believed that omens could be interpreted and manipulated according to their own will. The plebs as a whole were pious, even foolish in some cases (the plebs believed in the oracles even after the tribunes had exposed the nobles' tricks) and cowardly (the plebs believed in the oracles completely and did not dare to break their vows, more likely for fear of divine punishment). Machiavelli is here more like a member of the nobles: not so much a believer in the gods himself but believing that he could use religion to carry out his enterprise. As Machiavelli says, the prince must show piety (*P* XVIII) and he must support and enhance all those things which arise in favour of religion, even if he considers them false (*D* I.12), and he must prudently pretend to observe religion when he has to go against it (*D* I.14). This case also shows that the monopoly of religious interpretation by the nobility could also be harmful for the republic: once the nobility began to use religious power for partisan interests, there might not be sufficient institutional means to check it.

3.6 The Extra-Institutional Harmful Conflicts

Machiavelli argues that the tyranny of the republic basically stems from 'too great a desire of the people to be free and too great a desire of the nobles to command' (*D* I.40), and this is also the cause of harmful extra-institutional conflicts. When the nobles and the plebs could

not agree on certain issues, either side might try to bypass or negate the existing institutions in order to pursue their own factional interests, thus intensifying the conflict and undermining the common good of the republic; or they might support someone, which could easily lead to partisanship and tyranny, and ultimately to the destruction of the republic.

3.6.1 The Nobles Spread Calumny Against the Plebeian Dictator

Calumny and rumour were political tools used by the nobles in Rome to influence public opinion. Machiavelli discusses the case of the nobles targeting the plebeian dictator by spreading calumny in *D* I.5. Two plebeians, Marcus Menenius and Marcus Fulvius, were appointed dictator and master of the horse respectively. They were then authorized by the plebs to investigate persons who have managed to hold office by 'ambition and extraordinary modes'. However, the nobles believed that such authority was granted to the dictator against them, so they spread the rumour that it was the plebs who had acquired office by extraordinary modes, not the nobles, because the plebs did not believe that they could come to those ranks by their blood and virtue. Forced by the powerful accusation, Menenius laid down the dictatorship and submitted himself to the judgment by the plebs, who finally consider him innocent (Livy, IX.26; *D* I.5).[27]

Machiavelli cites this example to answer, 'which has greater cause for tumult, he who wishes to acquire or he who wishes to maintain' (*D* I.5). He argues that the latter (nobles) is more harmful than the former (plebs) and that in fact most tumults are caused by those who wish to maintain, for which he gives three reasons. Firstly, those who already possess much will not be satisfied unless they acquire something else new, because the fear of losing generates in them the same wishes that are in those who desire to acquire. Machiavelli argues that everyone, whether they possess or do not possess, is never satisfied and always wants to acquire more. This reason alone is not sufficient to show that the nobles should be responsible for most tumults and more important are the next two reasons. The second reason Machiavelli gives is that since the nobles possess much, they have greater power and

[27] For the subtle difference between Machiavelli's portrayal of this conflict and Livy's, see Mansfield (1979, p. 47).

a greater tendency to cause tumults. In other words, the plebs are less likely to cause tumults simply because they lack power, and if the plebs have power, they would have been more likely to cause tumults as same as the nobles. Machiavelli does not deny that the plebs would have sought more power when they had some, and Roman history also supports this (E.g., I.37). The last reason is that the nobles' 'incorrect and ambitious behaviour' promotes greed in the poor and the plebs will seek money, fame, and power through improper means (*D* I.5). In other words, the behaviour of the nobles has a guiding effect in the republic, and the unrestricted ambition of the nobles would lead the whole republic to corruption (McCormick, 2011, p. 10).

The instance Machiavelli cites in this chapter supports the first and second reasons he gives, that the nobles will not be satisfied with the power they already have and will use their wealth and power to dominate or oppress others. However, although the nobles, because of the power and wealth they already possess and their detrimental influence in the republic, should be responsible for most of the tumults, it does not necessarily mean that tumults are harmful to the republic, as Machiavelli's repeated reframing of the problem implies (Mansfield, 1979, p. 49). In fact, Machiavelli sees the conflict between the nobles and the plebs as 'the first cause of keeping Rome free' (*D* I.4). What should really be condemned is the way in which the nobles oppressed others – calumny. Machiavelli contrasts accusation and calumny: accusation requires definitive evidence, whereas calumny does not; accusation is made to magistrates, peoples or councils while calumny happens in squares and public corridors (*D* I.7-8). Calumny is extremely harmful to republics because it 'arose that on every side hatred surged; whence they went to division; from division to sects; from sects to ruin', as happened in Florence (*D* I.8). Machiavelli points out that 'Calumny is used more where accusation is used less and where cities are less ordered to receive them' (*D* I.8), which also shows that when a republic already has the institution of accusation, it still cannot completely prevent calumny. Further, when some ambitious citizens use calumny to cause tumults in a republic that have the institution of accusation, it implies that there is already some degree of corruption in the republic, for which citizens need to be highly vigilant.

Another question discussed in the same chapter, related to the previous question is,

'where the guard of freedom may be settled more securely, in the people or in the great' (*D* I.5). Pedullà points out that the two questions Machiavelli raises in this chapter are highly innovative, because Guicciardini, as Machiavelli's friend and interlocutor, expressed his incomprehension: why should the people alone be the guard of freedom when the Roman Republic has a mixed government (Guicciardini, 1965, p. 70; Pedullà, 2018, p. 118)? To this question, Machiavelli examined both the reasons and ends of it. As far as the end is concerned, it is better to settle the guard of freedom in the nobles, as Sparta and Venice did, because their freedom lasted longer. On the other hand, as far as reasons are concerned, Machiavelli clearly suggests that republics should imitate Rome and place the guard of freedom in the plebs, because the guard of a thing should be given to those 'who have less appetite for usurping it' - the plebs, who only wish not to be dominated (*D* I.5). But then he goes on to show the other side of the argument, namely that the nobles will be satisfied if the guard is in their hands; moreover, 'the restless spirits' of the plebs would be restrained from the outset, otherwise it would lead to the destruction of republics (*D* I.5, 37). After presenting both sides of the argument, Machiavelli admits that the issue is indeed very difficult, but he still presents his argument: a republic must imitate Rome if it wants to build an empire and imitate Venice and Sparta if it wants to maintain itself; the reason for this will be discussed in Book I, Chapter 6. McCormick analyses the first half of the chapter from the perspective of the aristocratic readers, arguing that it is merely 'an inconclusive dialogue' that does not persuade the aristocratic reader to hand over the guards of freedom to the people, and that it is only when the empire tempts the aristocratic reader as a greater good (McCormick, 2011, pp. 46-52). However, he completely ignores the analysis of the reason why the nobles should be blamed for causing most tumults in the second half of this chapter, probably because this part is criticism rather than persuasion for the nobility. This demonstrates the limitations of analysing the *Discourses* from the perspective of the aristocratic readers. Pedullà keenly note Machiavelli's innovative use of the traditional term 'guard of liberty', which he uses as a conceptual tool that enables him to 'break the classical bonds between social mixture, institutional combination of powers, and civic harmony' (Pedullà, 2018, p. 122). Machiavelli thus shows that even with a mixed government, a

republic cannot completely avoid conflict and maintain a static equilibrium (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 117-126) . More in line with 'the effectual truth' rather than 'the imagined truth' (*P* 15)., a republic can limit conflict through institutions and achieve mutual checks and dynamic stability between nobles and plebs.

3.6.2 The Plebs Imposed Restrictions on the Power of Consuls

Out of their humour not to be ruled, the plebs always tried to resist the oppression of the nobles by limiting the power of the official positions held by them. Rome was always in a constant state of war and the plebs could never rest. Although this actually arose from the ambition of Rome's neighbours, the plebs believed that it arose from the ambition of the nobles. When the plebs stayed in the city, nobles could not punish the plebs because the plebs were protected by tribunes. Therefore, the plebs could only punish the plebs by leading the plebs as an army outside the city under the leadership of consuls. The plebs therefore believed that either the office of consuls should be abolished, or their powers should be limited. The tribune Terentillus made an effort in the second direction by proposing that the consuls' power be limited by five men. This greatly angered the nobles, who felt that it would cancel any rank for the nobles. At the insistence of the plebs and the tribunes, the title of consul was abolished, and they created 'tribunes with consular power' rather than consuls. However, after a long time, the plebs eventually realised the error of their ways and the consuls were recreated (*D* I.39; Livy III.9, IV.6). [28]

In this instance Machiavelli criticises the errors of judgement of the plebs. The error of the plebs was, first of all, to misjudge the cause of the war - it was the ambition of the neighbouring states rather than the ambition of the nobles. McCormick makes the same mistake as the plebeians, believing that the aristocracy is oppressing the plebs through war (McCormick, 2011, p. 59). Although the nobles used to oppress the plebs by means of war, for example by assembling armies out of the city to delay the Agrarian law (*D* I.37), in this

[28] In the same chapter Machiavelli also discusses something similar that happened in Florence: the Florentine people wrongly attributed the war and the high expenditure to Ten of War, a magistracy of ten citizens, and thus abolished the office, but later re-established it (*D* I.39).

instance Machiavelli makes it clear that it was 'the ambition of neighbours who wished to crush them[Rome]' that caused the endless war (*D* I.39). Moreover, the plebs proposed the wrong solution, one that would have left 'no place for the nobles' (*D* I.39) and would have undermined the republic's mixed government. In Machiavelli's view, republics needs the nobles and the plebs to have their own place, and the abolition of either the tribunes or the consuls would have undermined the institutions of republics, and thus would not have served the common good of republics.

3.6.3 The Conflict Between the Plebs and the Senate Was Used by Tyrants to Seize Power

Machiavelli argued that the cause of the most tyranny of republics was 'too great a desire of the people to be free and too great a desire of the nobles to command' (*D* I.40) When the nobles and the plebs could not agree on a law in favour of freedom, either of them might turn to support an ambitious citizen and contribute to the tyranny. This argument is based most heavily on the conflict surrounding the Decemvirate, an instance in which both nobles and plebs made severe mistakes that were not conducive to liberty.

In 452 B.C. the Roman Republic sent citizens to Athens to learn the laws made by Solon and appointed the Decemvirate for a year to examine and confirm laws. In order to create such laws without any hesitation, the Decemvirate was given absolute power and all other offices in Rome were abolished, including the tribunes and consuls, and the appeal to the people. Moreover, Appius Claudius, who was the most ambitious member of the Decemvirate, changed his image from his previous cruel persecution of the plebs and succeeded in gaining the support of the plebs, thus concentrating all power and becoming, almost literally, the prince of Rome. After the term of the Decemvirate had expired, Appius argued that some time was needed to complete all the legislation and asked for a new election of the Decemvirate. The people agreed, because during the reign of the Decemvirate they did not need to be dominated by the consuls occupied by the nobility and were themselves judges in lawsuits. Appius managed to get re-elected in a less than ignominious way, soon showing his natural arrogance and leading the whole the

Decemvirate to become arrogant. The Decemvirate soon began to curry favour with the Senate and suppress the plebs, who realised their mistake and appealed to the nobility for help, but the nobles gloated. After the second term of the Decemvirate, it still held power by violence and groomed the young nobles to become its own followers, including corrupting them with wealth. At this time foreign enemies invaded, and the Decemvirate was forced to summon the Senate to arrange war. The Senate, despite its opposition to the arrogance of the Decemvirate, did not want to return to the previous situation where the plebeian tribunes had power, but wanted the Decemvirate to voluntarily relinquish its power and the tribunes not to be created. The Senate therefore supported the Decemvirate in war, with some of its members and nobles leading the army. Appius took charge of the city, but once again he showed his arrogance by trying to take by force a woman named Virginia, whose father killed her in order to free her; from this ensued a riot in Rome and a disturbance in the army, which was evacuated with the plebs to the Holy Mountain, where they remained for a long time until the Decemvirate gave up their posts. The tribunes and consuls were reappointed, and Rome was restored to its former liberal institutions (Livy, III.31-54; *D* I.40).

In this case, Machiavelli argues that both the Senate and the plebs made the most serious mistake in creating the Decemvirate, which is failing to establish a supervisory institution to restrain it. This resulted from the excessive desire of the people for liberty and the excessive desire of the nobility for dominion, in other words, the excessive desire of the Senate to abolish the tribunes and the excessive desire of the plebs to abolish the consuls (McCormick, 2011, pp. 85-86). This excessive desire caused them to lose their prudence and to become unaware of the instability and danger of the Decemvirate. At the same time, both the Senate and the plebs ceased to pursue the common good but only pursued the interests of their own factions. When Appius and the Decemvirate gave the power of trial to the plebs and showed themselves to be pro-plebeian, the plebs chose to support the Decemvirate. When the Decemvirate ingratiated the Senate and oppressed the plebs, the Senate also chose to support the Decemvirate and oppress the plebs. Thus, the conflict between the plebs' desire for freedom and the nobles' desire for command can produce both laws in favour of freedom (*D* I.4) and tyranny. The key is how to regulate and limit the desires of the

desires through institutions.

3.6.4 The Conflicts Caused by Agrarian Law

The conflict over the Agrarian law in the late Roman Republic is typical of the harmful conflicts criticised by Machiavelli, and it was this conflict that ultimately led to the fall of the Roman Republic. Machiavelli's discussion of this conflict can be analysed in three parts: firstly, the causes of the conflict over the Agrarian law; secondly, how the conflict over the Agrarian law specifically led to the demise of the Roman Republic; and finally, how the harm caused by the conflict should be reduced and the demise of the Republic avoided.

Machiavelli's discussion of the causes of the conflict over the Agrarian law involves both the humours of the nobles and the plebs and Machiavelli's pessimistic judgement of universal human nature. In the first place, the direct cause of the conflict is that the tribunes, the Gracchi, formulated and enforced the Agrarian law on behalf of the plebs, limiting the amount of land owned by every citizen and stipulating that land acquired by expansion could only be distributed to the plebs, which was sure to cause discontent among the nobles and thus conflict. In addition, the nobles in the Roman Republic had been oppressing the plebs and enjoying political, economic and religious privileges, which also contributed to the conflict. Ultimately, this conflict was rooted in 'the human nature' proposed by Machiavelli: everyone is the subject of insatiable desire. At the beginning of chapter 37, Machiavelli again elaborates on his pessimistic assertion about human nature: 'For whenever engaging in combat through necessity is taken from men they engage in combat through ambition, which is so powerful in human breasts that it never abandons them at whatever rank they rise to.' (*D* I.37) Machiavelli then makes it clear that the plebs - like the nobles - are also human beings who are subjects of desire and will never be satisfied. Not content with merely creating tribunes to defend themselves from the nobles, the plebs began to struggle out of ambition to 'share honours and belongings' with the nobility, and it was this that gave rise to the conflicts surrounding the Agrarian laws and eventually led to the fall of the Roman Republic (*D* I.37).

Most of the fourteen cases of conflict analysed in this chapter were caused by the

nobles' desire to dominate others, and the plebs were often forced to resist only by the oppression of the nobles. In this case, however, the Agrarian law, as the direct reason of the conflict, were initiated and advanced by the plebs and the tribunes. Faced with the political and economic advantages that the nobility possessed, the plebs and tribunes sought to pursue their own interests, especially material ones, through the Agrarian law. This suggests that the plebs would have had ambitions and desires similar to those of the nobility if they had been given sufficient resources and conditions. As Machiavelli said, 'men never work any good unless through necessity, but where choice abounds and one can make use of license, at once everything is full of confusion and disorder' (*D* I.3).

The second part concerns how the conflict over the Agrarian law ultimately led to the demise of the Roman Republic. According to Machiavelli's summary, the Agrarian law had two principal heads: one was to limit the amount of land owned by citizens, and the other was to provide for the distribution of land acquired from enemies among the plebs. Therefore, the Agrarian law would have caused two kinds of offenses to the nobles: firstly, it would have deprived most of them of the excess land they already owned; secondly, it would have deprived them of the way to get rich. It is not surprising that every time the Agrarian law was introduced there was strong opposition from the nobles. Machiavelli divides the introduction of the Agrarian law into two broad phases: the law before the Gracchi and after. Before the Gracchi, probably because the nobles were not strong enough to resist the will of the plebs directly, 'with patience and industry the nobles temporized with it, either by leading an army out, or by having the tribune who proposed it opposed by another tribune, or by sometimes yielding to a part of it, or indeed by sending a colony to the place that had to be distributed' (*D* I.37). The conflict caused by the Agrarian law subsided as the Romans began to fight on the farthest parts of Italy or outside Italy, where the enemy's lands were too distant for the plebs to possess; and the Romans punished their enemies by public colonizing more than distributing the land to citizens. Thus, the early conflict arising from the Agrarian law, though also relatively intense, did not have a devastating effect on the republic. However, these tactics by the nobles actually increased the economic and social inequalities between nobles and plebs, and also allowed the army chiefs to gain more private power,

thus laying the groundwork for the subsequent intensification of the conflict (McCormick, 2011, p. 87; Maher, 2016, p. 1012).

Then, the situation was quite different when the Agrarian law was enacted by the Gracchi:

> For it found the power of its adversaries redoubled, and because of this it inflamed so much hatred between the plebs and the Senate that they came to arms and to bloodshed, beyond every civil mode and custom. So, since the public magistrates could not remedy it, and none of the **factions** could put hope in them, they had recourse to **private** remedies, and each one of the **parties** was thinking of how to make itself a head to defend it. (*D* I.37 emphasis added)

When the Gracchi tried to enact the Agrarian law for the benefit of the plebs, the nobles reacted with direct violence, killing the Gracchi (Plutarch, 1965, pp. 130-232). Violence could only be countered by violence, so the plebs and the nobles each chose their leaders and fought. The conflict within the institutional framework turned into a naked civil war, which then further intensified the concentration of power and led to Caesar becoming 'the first tyrant in Rome' (*D* I.37), and the freedom of the Roman Republic ceased to exist. Machiavelli thus re-emphasised the distinction between public and private violence (Winter, 2018, pp. 141-166).

In contrast to Machiavelli's earlier praise for the conflict between the plebs and the Senate (the disunion is the cause of Rome's freedom, as it produced laws in favour of freedom), it seems that the instance of the Agrarian law is inconsistent with his previous argument. Machiavelli was aware of this potential contradiction, and his defence was that the ambitions of the nobles were too strong and that the Roman Republic would have fallen sooner if the plebs had not checked the ambitions of the nobles 'both with this law and with its other appetites' (*D* I.37). Besides, the Agrarian law was concerned more with material wealth than with mere office or honour, and thus the noble became even more intransigent in protecting their vested interests and forcing the plebs to resort to illegal means. McCormick notes this keenly, arguing that previous interpreters have underestimated or ignored the material and economic dimensions of Machiavelli's account of the motives and

behaviour of the nobles, which in fact valued wealth more than prestige and honour (McCormick, 2011, pp. 4-5, 87-90). Thus, the conflict over the Agrarian law was ostensibly caused by the plebs, but in essence, it was still the nobility who were responsible for the destruction of the republic (McCormick, 2011, pp. 88-89; Winter, 2018, pp. 149-151; Pedullà, 2018, p. 76) .

The final question is whether and how the Roman Republic could have avoided the intensification of conflict and civil war brought about by the Agrarian law. As mentioned earlier, Machiavelli did not consider the Agrarian law unjustified because of the end they had brought about; on the contrary, he considered the 'intention' of the Gracchi to be praiseworthy, even though their 'prudence' was insufficient (*D* I.37), as the laws they enacted went back a long way and were contrary to the ancient customs of the city-state. Machiavelli's exoteric advice was that the Gracchi should temporize with it, then 'either the evil comes later or it eliminates itself on its own with time, before it reaches its end' (*D* I.33, 37). Few scholars have really taken this advice seriously, arguing that the problems of factionalism, private violence, and privatisation of the army that existed in the republic at this time were too numerous to be solved by temporizing (Cf. *D* III.24). [29]At root, to avoid the problem of rising wealth inequality brought about by expansion, Machiavelli argued that well-governed republics have to 'keep the public rich and their citizens poor' at the same time (*D* I.37; II.6, 19; III.16, 25). With all citizens in a state of equal poverty, no citizen can acquire fame and power in a private way (*D* III.28), thus eradicating the possibility of tyranny (Rose, 2016; Maher, 2016).

If the republic cannot 'keep the public rich and their citizens poor', the citizens of the republic are vulnerable to severe inequality and corruption, requiring princely figures to use extra-ordinary means to re-order the state (*D* I.17-18, 55; III.1). McCormick and Winter link the Gracchi to the Spartan kings Agis and Cleomenes (*D* I.9), arguing that the Gracchi could have succeeded if they could concentrate power and used violence to reorganise the republic in imitation of Cleomenes (McCormick, 2015a; Winter, 2018, pp. 147-152; Pedullà, 2018, pp. 78-93). As Winter points out, given the intransigence of elites in defending their

[29] For a medical rationale for temporizing, see Pedullà (2018, p. 78).

property, violence is not a sign of degenerate conflict and is sometimes the only effective means. Machiavelli therefore did not interpret the violence of the Roman Republic as a continuum but drew a distinction between certain forms of beneficial violence (associated with the early Roman Republic) and what he saw as the corrupt violence of the late republic. In short, freedom and violence were not always antithetical, and violence could also produce freedom (Winter, 2018, pp. 151-152). Although Machiavelli saw the use of violence to re-order the republics as extremely difficult and it actually did not happen in Rome, it was not entirely impossible (*D* I.18; III.1).

3.6.5 Conclusion

In these four cases of conflict, the nobles and the plebs either denied the existing institutions or tried to bypass them, seeking to resolve the conflict in a private rather than a public way, and they caused great harm to the Roman Republic. As Winter argues, republics 'turn private into public force and invest it with a certain legitimacy' by institutionalising it, but the lack of strong executive powers to check the nobles made republics extremely 'vulnerable to corruption by oligarchic factions' (Winter, 2018, p. 166). Winter correctly identifies the threat to the freedom of republics posed by the use of private violence by the nobles, but he ignores the possibility that the plebs can also be arrogant and thus threaten the freedom of republics. Machiavelli argues that after the creation of the tribunes, the order of the Roman Republic had reached a state of perfection (*D* I.2) and that a mutual check and dynamic balance between the power of the nobles and the plebs could be achieved within the existing institutional framework. When citizens are not caught up in corruption, there is only a need to renew the law and not to renew the order; only when citizens are fully corrupt, it is necessary to reorder the republic by extraordinary means (*D* I.18; III.1, 49). Therefore, any negation of the established institution and the use of private means outside the institution when the citizens are not yet corrupt is dangerous and requires vigilance and precaution.

3.7 Conclusion

Through his interpretation of Roman history, Machiavelli presents the Roman Republic as an exemplary model. According to Machiavelli, the conflict between the plebs and the nobles is the primary cause of the republic's freedom and power. The conflict not only leads to the creation of new institutions favourable to freedom but also grants the republic the capability to expand externally. A pivotal outcome of this conflict is the institution of the tribunes, which establishes a stable structure of power checks and dynamic equilibriums—what Machiavelli calls good order. As the most instances of conflict show, the good order effectively regulates conflicts in the Roman Republic, directing factional interests towards the common good. It not only maximizes alignment between individual or partisan interests and the republic's common good but also provides a regulated outlet for citizens' emotions, confining conflicts within institutional bounds.

Meanwhile, the institutions of the republic can be negated or bypassed by nobles, plebs, and ambitious individuals, resulting in outcomes contrary to the common good. Therefore, there is a crucial emphasis on the preservation and perpetuation of institutions, as Machiavelli emphasises in the final chapter of the *Discourses*: 'a republic has need of new acts of foresight every day if it wishes to remain free' (*D* III.49). Machiavelli warns that when conflicts are resolved through private rather than public means, they are prone to inflict significant harm on the republic. Therefore, vigilance and a proactive utilization of institutions are essential for maintaining checks and dynamic equilibrium between the powers of nobles and plebs.

Throughout the conflict, the nobles and the plebs not only check, constrain, and struggle with each other but also depend on each other. Machiavelli inspires us to adopt a dual perspective when contemplating politics, comprehending the nature of the plebs from the viewpoint of the nobles, and understanding the nature of the nobles from the perspective of the plebs.[30]

From the perspective of nobles, Machiavelli points out that the humour of the plebs is generally passive, with a basic desire not to be oppressed. Plebs are prone to make mistakes

30

and act blindly and impulsively, which may be detriment of the common good, not only because they lack sufficient understanding and judgement and are easily deceived by appearances (*D* I.47-48, 53), but also because they will become useless due to a lack of leaders (*D* I.44, 57). Machiavelli believes that 'the multitude is wiser and more constant than a prince', but he makes a very important qualification that 'for a people that commands and is well ordered will be just as stable, prudent, and grateful as a prince, or will be more so than a prince, even one esteemed wise' (*D* I.58). The nobles sought the support of the plebs through the distribution of wealth, corrected mistakes of the plebs through public speeches, made decisions that both were in their own interest and in line with the common good, and led the Roman plebs in expansion and pursuit of glory while maintaining political stability in the city. In the face of excessive demands by the plebs, the nobility would use political tactics to mediate and meet some of demands in the service of the common good of the republic. As Balot and Trochimchuk show, 'the Roman elite played a fundamental role in shaping the people's opinions, judgments, and decisions, through ideology, civil religion, displays of violence, and the engineering of particular electoral results' (Balot and Trochimchuk, 2012, p. 563). Moreover, when a republic is in conditions of severe corruption and inequality, only the elite can return the republic to its beginnings and restore its spiritual vitality and political freedom, because the people are for the most part passive beings with neither the desire nor the capacity to act (*D* III.1).[31]

From the perspective of plebs, Machiavelli points out that nobles' desire to oppress others often displayed itself and caused tumults in the city-state, so that the nobles' humour is always one of the greatest threats to the freedom of republics, for which external coercive institutions and laws were needed to check them. The nobility oppressed the plebs not only through institutional means, but also through non-institutional means, e.g., violence and calumny. In response, the plebs resisted through the republic's reliance on plebian army and

[31] 'In Rome those who particularly produced these good effects were Horatius Coclus, Scaevola, Fabricius, the two Decii, Regulus Attilius, and some others who with their rare and virtuous examples produced in Rome almost the same effect that laws and orders produced. If the executions written above, together with these particular examples, had continued at least every ten years in that city, it follows of necessity that it would never have been corrupt'. (*D* III.1)

institutional means such as the tribunes, sometimes by radical means. As Machiavelli praised, the Roman plebs 'never served humbly nor dominated proudly while the republic lasted uncorrupted; indeed, with its orders and magistrates, it held its rank honourably', and when 'it was necessary to move against someone powerful', the plebs behaved strongly (*D* I.58). When the state needed a renewal of order, the plebs were also able to create new institutions in keeping with the common good.

Moreover, as previously discussed, nobles and plebs play distinct roles in the political decision-making of the republic. In the assessment of particular matters (i.e., matters for which sufficient information is available), the plebs exhibit better judgment than the nobles. Therefore, the republic should implement institutions that maximise the participation of the plebs in particular matters. This was exemplified in Rome through the plebs' right to elect significant officials, including consuls. On the other hand, general affairs (i.e., matters for which sufficient information is not available) primarily rely on the virtue of the noble elites, and the nobles are encouraged to guide or manipulate the plebs to make decisions aligned with the common good when necessary. This underscores the indispensability of both nobles and plebs in a well-functioning republican order. Only through cooperation, even if it involves competition or conflict, can the correctness of decision-making be maximised in both general and particular matters.

In this way, a reasonable political practice should neither despise and exclude the plebs from the standpoint of the nobles, nor reject or even destroy the nobles from the standpoint of the plebs. Instead, it should allow both groups to conflict and struggle with each other, recognizing their mutual need, and channel this conflict into institutions that create a political community capable of accommodating both sides to the greatest extent possible. As Pedullà argues, Machiavelli departs from the earlier emphasis on the distinction between enemy and friend, avoiding judgments of opponents in the name of the common good and thus preventing the intensification of internal conflict. Instead, Machiavelli aims to create a space between enemies and friends for political disunion (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 64-73). Ideally, the republic maintains a check on power and a dynamic balance between the plebs and the nobles through institutions, where both groups contribute equally to the common good of

the republic.[32]

Machiavelli argues that following the creation of the tribunes, the Roman Republic attained a mutual check and dynamic balance between the power of the nobles and the plebs. In the absence of corruption among citizens, the need arises only to renew the law, not the order, i.e., the mixed regime. It is only when citizens are fully corrupt that the reordering of the republic through extraordinary means becomes necessary. Consequently, any negation of established institutions and the utilization of private means outside the institution, when citizens are not yet corrupt, are deemed dangerous and demand vigilance and precaution.[33] Therefore, any negation of established institutions and the use of private means outside the institution, when the citizens are not yet corrupt, are deemed dangerous and demand vigilance and precaution.

The preservation of a republic's freedom is contingent on its citizens consistently prioritizing the common good over other considerations. In instances where the nobles and the plebs deviate from this principle, institutions always compel corrective actions that align with the common good. However, as revealed in the analysis of institutional harmful conflicts (3.5), institutions alone do not guarantee conflict harmlessness. Citizens' attitudes toward the common good and their way of political participation are also influenced by custom. Thus, there is a necessity to cultivate or renovate citizens' customs. The synergy of good institutions and customs is indispensable for preserving the republic's liberty, a theme further explored in the analysis of internal conflicts in Florence in the next chapter.

[32] As Pocock argues, Machiavelli's equality refers to 'a state of affairs in which all look to the public good alike' (Pocock, 1975, p. 209).

[33] The real threat to the republic is the corruption of its citizens, which is brought about in large part by expansion. Although the expansion of the republic brought with it very serious problems of widening wealth inequality, corruption, and privatisation of the army, the republic is unlikely to abandon expansion, for it was required by necessity (*D* I.6) and expansion is also essential for maintaining the virtue of the citizens of the republic (Pocock, 1975, pp. 217-218). Even though Rome was ruined because of expansion and corruption, Machiavelli did not believe that there was no remedy. Either keeping the public rich and the private poor or using violent means to reorder in cases of corruption, would have allowed the republic to last longer. This topic will be further discussed in 6.5.

Chapter 4 Conflicts in Florence: The Interaction of Institutions and Customs

4.1 Introduction

When discussing conflicts in Rome and their institutionalisation in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli generally praises them because, at least when institutionally structured, they lead to civic freedom and support the power of the Roman Republic, yet in the same text he almost universally criticizes conflicts in Florence because they lead to internal divisions (e.g., *D* I.7-8). Why does conflict produce different results In Rome and Florence? Although there is a fragmented discussion of this question in the *Discourses* (*D* I.2, 7-8, 49; III.27), Machiavelli discusses it more fully in the *Florentine Histories*, yet the discussions in these two books do not obviously appear to be consistent with each other. Moreover, Machiavelli's assessment of the plebs also seems to differ in the two books: in contrast to the *Discourses*, the *Florentine Histories* repeatedly condemns the plebs' resistance. Some scholars have argued that the *Florentine Histories* shows Machiavelli to be more conservative and on the side of the nobles in his later years (e.g., Hulliung, 1984; Silvano, 1990; Viroli, 1990; Butters, 2010; Jurdjevic, 2014). It has also been argued to the contrary that, as the *Florentine Histories* was commissioned by the Medici, its conservative appearance is understandable, but that the basic ideas and positions throughout the book remain consistent with the *Discourses* (e.g., Bock, 1990; McCormick, 2018; Clarke, 2018). In this chapter, I will argue that through the analysis of key texts and the representative cases of conflict in the *Florentine Histories*, that the arguments of the two texts are consistent and we can better understand Machiavelli's theory of conflict and his judgement of the position of the nobles and the plebs in politics by attending to the framing of both texts in Machiavelli's overall account of human nature and of its highly contextual-sensitive manifestation of this nature in class-specific dispositions.

In the preface of *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli emphasises that one of the key themes of his history of Florence is the internal conflict of the city-state. Machiavelli notes that 'if in any other republic there was ever a remarkable division (*divisioni*), the division of Florence was the most remarkable' (*FH* Preface). The civil discord in Florence was endless:

'the divisions arose first between the nobility, then between nobles and people (*popolo*), and finally between people and the plebs (*plebe*)'; these conflicts resulted in many deaths, much exile, and ruined numerous families (*FH* Preface). Machiavelli's methodological decision to organise the structure of the *Florentine Histories* on the basis of the internal divisions and political conflicts in Florence at different stages of its evolution is designed to allow him to illustrate and explain the ways in which class-specific dispositions manifest themselves and to highlight the importance of well-ordered political institutions in the effective governance of political life. This is continuous with Machiavelli's methodological approach in the *Discourses*; the major contrast is that in the *Florentine Histories* he will be demonstrating the importance of well-ordered political institutions main through a focus on the effects of their absence.

From Machiavelli's perspective, political conflict in Florence constitutes an issue that no one concerned with truthful and effectual historical writing or political reflection in this context can or should avoid precisely because it is a case-study of the absence of well-ordered political institutions. It is then unsurprising that when, in the preface of the *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli accuses his predecessors Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini of having written histories of Florence that are completely silent on the issue of civil discord (*civili discordie*) and inherent enmities (*intrinseche inimicizie*), he not only criticises them for ignoring this topic but also attributes this neglect to their connection with the Florentine oligarchy in the begining of the fifteen century and the conservative political ideas shared by them. [34] In their failure to approach the issue of internal conflict, Machiavelli argues that they failed to attend to the central human motivations of ambition and desire that should be the most important concern of historical writing.

The *Florentine Histories* also provides us with Machiavelli's self-understanding of the social and intellectual context of his own political activity and political writing. It is widely known that Machiavelli was a devoted patriot who once said 'I love my native city more than my own soul' (1988, p. 249). Machiavelli had a lifelong desire to make his homeland a strong

[34] For a comparison of Machiavelli and his humanist predecessors on the history of Florence, see Skinner (1978, pp. 156-157); Viroli (1990, pp. 147-148); Clarke (2018, pp. 27-58). In this chapter I only focus on the topic of internal conflict.

and free republic through his own effort, first by being a diplomat and secretary of the Florentine Republic, later by writing books deploying his knowledge and dedicating them to the prince and potential princes (Ridolfi, 1963; Viroli, 2000). However, for various reasons, his efforts did not pay off in the way he had hoped: Florence 'has never had a government for which it could genuinely be called a republic' (*D* I.49). As Clarke argues, Machiavelli's republicanism is best understood as 'a critical response to the successes and failures of his own city's republican project' (Clarke, 2018, p. 5). The *Florentine Histories* can thus help us better understand the political and social context of Machiavelli's political thought in his other works.

This chapter begins with an examination of the portrayal of Florence in the *Discourses*, showing how Machiavelli criticises Florence and advocates for learning from Rome in order to gain freedom and power. Then, to set the stage for further analysis, I will provide a concise historical overview of the Florentine Republic from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. I will then categorise and summarise the nineteen cases of internal conflict discussed in the *Florentine Histories*. Machiavelli's portrayal of Florence can be divided into three distinct stages based on variations in internal conflict. For the first two stages I will select a representative case for detailed analysis, while for the third stage I will analyse the rise and reign of the Medici family.

4.2 Florence in the *Discourses*

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli often cites ancient history (including the histories of Athens, Sparta, and Rome) and contemporary events (including Florence and other cities in Italy, as well as France, Germany, and other countries) to support his arguments. Moreover, Machiavelli usually praises the Roman Republic for doing well in one respect while criticising contemporary republics and princes (especially the Florentine Republic) for failing to imitate Rome in this respect (e.g., *D* I.7, II.23, III.48). Although – or because - Florence is his homeland, Machiavelli shows no mercy to it and makes it the primary critical target of the *Discourses*. In this regard, it is necessary to begin our reflections on Machiavelli's engagement with Florence's history by presenting the image of Florence in the *Discourses*.

The *Discourses* consists of 141 chapters, of which 43 refer to events relating to Florence, 17 in Book One and 13 each in Book Two and Book Three. The exploration of Florence covers three key aspects: the establishment and renewal of the state, the shortcomings in internal order, and the vulnerabilities in military and diplomatic matters.[35]

4.2.1 Establishment and Renewal

Regarding the establishment of Florence, Machiavelli asserts that the city was founded by outsiders and individuals dependent on external forces, rather than autonomously (*D* I.1). It became accustomed to a lack of freedom, submitting to Roman rule from its inception and habitually living under the dominion of others (*D* I.49). As we shall see, this was a major hindrance to the establishment of good order in Florence.

In terms of renewal, the changes of systems of the Florentine Republic have been filled with peril. It was reordered by the accident in Arezzo in 1502[36] and then plunged into turmoil

[35] In addition, the historical leaders of the Florentine Republic, including the Medici, Savonarola, and Soderini, are also analysed and evaluated by Machiavelli. Machiavelli discusses the Medici's rise to tyranny, highlighting both their effective statecraft and the initial acquiescence of the Florentines (*D* I.33, 52; III.7). The strategy of periodic return to the beginnings adopted by the Medici for the longevity of the republic is contrasted with Machiavelli's criticism of their deceptive promises when they regained power in 1512 (*D* III.1, 12). In Machiavelli's assessment of Savonarola's leadership, he notes the presence of religious virtues and prophetic abilities (*D* I.11, 56). However, Savonarola's ultimate downfall is attributed to a failure to adhere to the laws he had set for himself and to a lack of authority to suppress opposition (*D* I.45; III.30). For Soderini, Machiavelli criticises his perceived weakness and kindness, arguing that his failure to adapt his leadership style to changing times ultimately led to his downfall and that of the republic (*D* I.52; III.3, 9, 30). Machiavelli also examines the behaviour of the Florentine plebeians. Like the plebeians in Rome, the Florentine plebeians showed a tendency to lack adequate political judgement in general matters, exhibiting impulsiveness and susceptibility to deception (*D* I.39, 53) and a willingness to be influenced by the elites (*D* I.54). At the same time, the plebeians showed an ability to avoid mistakes in specific matters (*D* I.47).

[36] The Arezzo Incident, occurring in 1502, marked a challenge to Florence's rule over Arezzo, which had been under Florentine governance since 1384. Local resistance from nobles, discontent with lost liberties and oppressive taxation, fuelled opposition. Expulsion of the Medici family in 1494 further strained Florentine control. In 1502, Arezzo sought freedom, recruiting Vitellozzo Vitelli and gaining support from Caesar Borgia. Florence, militarily weak, turned to the French army for assistance, leading to the restoration of its rule over Arezzo. This incident prompted Florentine reforms, including the creation of the lifetime Standard-bearer of Justice, first held by Piero Soderini (Black, 2000; Najemy, 2021).

by the Prato Incident in 1512[37] (*D* I.2). Machiavelli emphasises that this is a common challenge in renewing the order of the republic, as changes to the order tend to meet with considerable resistance. Agreement to renew the order can only be reached under conditions of necessity. However, necessity brings with it danger. Therefore, the renewal of order in the republic is always accompanied by danger.

4.2.2 The Shortcomings in Internal Order

Machiavelli states that the principal challenge facing the Florentine Republic was the lack of a good order to regulate internal conflicts, which led to serious armed confrontations. This deficiency manifested itself in three ways. First, Florence lacked the institutions to effectively address conflicts. Machiavelli specifically states that when Florence began to self-govern, the order that was created could not become good, as it remained entangled with the old and flawed order (*D* I.49). This is evident in the evolution of the institution of accusation in Florence. Second, Machiavelli argues that the citizens of the Florentine Republic lacked a public spirit, prioritizing factional interests over the common good of the republic (*D* I.49). Finally, the internal divisions in Florence's dependent cities exacerbated the discord within Florence itself (*D* III.27). As a result, Machiavelli argues that despite Florence's two centuries of self-government and its claim to be a republic, it never had a government that could truly be described as such (*D* I.49).

First, Machiavelli criticises the Florentine Republic for the lack of good institutions to regulate conflicts, using the institution of accusation as an example. As I argued in the previous chapter, Machiavelli holds that in a well-ordered polity, the institution of accusation provides a legitimate outlet for collective emotions, such as popular anger, and thus helps to maintain the stability of republics, as exemplified in Rome. The absence of such an outlet regulated by laws to vent the anger that the collectivity conceives against one citizen could

[37] In 1512, Spanish troops aimed to overthrow Florence's republican government and restore the Medici rule. Machiavelli's civic militia, defending Prato, suffered defeat, leading to a brutal sack of the city by Spanish forces. The tragic event caused an uproar in Florence, resulting in the exile of Soderini and the successful restoration of the Medici family. This episode also led to Machiavelli losing his position in the Florentine Republic (Ridolfi, 1963, pp. 128-32).

easily lead to factional conflict, on Machiavelli's view, resulting in potentially serious threats to the stability, or even continued existence, of the republic, as exemplified in Florence (*D* I.7). Machiavelli points out that Florence's inadequate institution of accusation caused significant harm to the republic. Initially, the power to make accusations was entrusted to a foreigner known as the Captain of the People, and later to an eight-member committee known as the Eight of the Guard (*D* I.7, 49; See also *FH* II.5, IV 29, V4). Machiavelli argues that these ways of instituting the power were highly vulnerable to manipulation by a few influential figures and hence could be subordinated to the service of factional interests. Consequently, the Florentine institution of accusation failed to contribute to the stability of the republic. Machiavelli asserts, for example, the absence of a reasonable institution of accusation prevented citizens from venting their anger against Piero Soderini through public institutions, leading them to seek the assistance of Spanish troops in overthrowing Soderini's government (*D* I.7).

The absence of a trustworthy institutionalisation of the power of accusation had the further disadvantage of allowing calumny to flourish. According to Machiavelli, citizens assigned to significant roles in Florence were consistently maligned. Giovanni Guicciardini serves as an example: he was defamed by his political adversaries for poor combat performance and never succeeded in vindicating his reputation. This incited considerable outrage among his allies, who constituted the majority of the nobles and harboured intentions of orchestrating a coup in Florence. This situation played a role in the downfall of the republic (*D* I.8; See also *FH* IV.25).

To address this problem, Machiavelli proposed the establishment of a tribunal in Florence that would be composed of many individuals and hence be less vulnerable to manipulation and enable these judges to build a reputation for impartiality that would effectively prevent the destabilizing effects of its subordination to factional interest (*D* I.7).

Second, the lack of public-spirited citizens rendered the Florentine Republic incapable of regulating the conflict in a reasonable manner. Machiavelli criticizes that despite the enactment of numerous reforms by a select group of citizens, who were granted broad authority through public and free votes, these reforms failed to establish orders for the

common good of the republic. Instead, they were designed solely to benefit particular factions, leading to increased disorder (*D* I.49). This will be further elucidated in the subsequent analysis of the conflict case of Florence.

Finally, Machiavelli argues that internal divisions within one's subject cities could intensify internal divisions within the ruling city itself, as illustrated in the case of Pistoia (*D* III.27). He identified three strategies to reunite a divided city: kill the leaders who incited the tumult; expel the leaders; or compel them to make peace together under obligations not to harm one another. Machiavelli deems the third approach the most precarious and ineffective due to its inherent uncertainty and high risk of renewed conflict. Pistoia exemplifies this precarious outcome, as Florence's repeated reliance on the third method only exacerbated internal turmoil. Florence was subsequently compelled to adopt the second method, achieving a more durable peace. While advocating for the decisiveness of the first method, Machiavelli acknowledges the limitations of the Florentine Republic's capacity for such swift action, noting its lack of 'something of the great and the generous' (*D* III.27). This inability to decisively quell unrest in its dependencies would exacerbate Florence's own internal divisions. Factions within these subject cities, seeking influence, engaged in bribery and the acquisition of loyalties within Florence itself.

4.2.3 Military and Diplomatic Weakness

In terms of diplomacy and military affairs, Machiavelli identifies the primary issue of the Florentine Republic as its absence of a self-sustaining army. The republic could only wage war through financial means, which, according to Machiavelli, does not constitute the true sinews of war, and through mercenaries, whom he deems as the least reliable military force (*D* II.10, 30). The Florentines, due to their lack of a personal army and insufficient virtue in their leaders, demonstrated weakness and indecisiveness in their foreign policy. This led to costly errors in their dealings with the Duke of Valentino (*D* I.38), their assaults on Pisa and Arezzo (*D* I.38; II.23; III.48), their alliance with the King of France (*D* I.59; II.11, 15; III.43), and their peace negotiations in the face of the Spanish army (*D* II.27). Relying on financial resources and mercenaries for warfare resulted in Florence becoming weaker after the

annexation of Tuscany (*D* II.12, 19; III.12), contrary to the expectation of gaining more power. Moreover, the Florentine Republic exhibited a disregard for men of virtue during peaceful times. When faced with a dangerous war, no one rivalled a man of military virtue for the role of general. However, in situations where the war posed no danger and there was ample honour and position to be won, he encountered so many competitors that he was overlooked (*D* III.16). Machiavelli also explores several specific military strategies, including the orders of the army (*D* II.16), the detrimental effects of fortresses (*D* II.24), the quantity of army chiefs (*D* III.15), and the absolute decision-making authority that should be granted to army generals (*D* II.33). The Florentines performed poorly in all these areas, and their failures were more blameworthy as they could have emulated the Roman precedent (*D* II.19).

4.2.4 Conclusion

In Machiavelli's *Discourses*, Florence occupies a threefold role: as a source of evidence, an object of criticism, and, most importantly, a dedicated object of Machiavelli's own passion. First, the history of Florence is a crucial source of evidence Machiavelli used to support his arguments. Second, Florence is an object of criticism and Machiavelli laments its misfortune and condemns its cowardice. Thirdly and most importantly, Florence, as Machiavelli's homeland, is the true dedicatee of the *Discourses*. He poured everything he knew - gleaned from political practice and historical reflection - into this text, hoping his Florentine noble friends would learn the 'effectual truth' of politics and apply it to revive Florentine freedom and power (*P* 15; *D* Dedication, I Preface). Yet, as Najemy shows, the scattered treatments of Florence in the *Discourses* do not amount to anything like 'a conceptualized overview of Florentine history' (Najemy, 1982b, p. 556). For a more in-depth understanding of Machiavelli's treatment of this task, one must turn to the *Florentine Histories*.

4.3 Political Institution and Social Dynamics in the Florentine Republic

In this section, I will offer a concise overview of the political institutions and social

dynamics within the Florentine Republic. I will also delineate the role of the elites, people, and plebs, as the internal conflicts primarily occurred among these groups. As the conflicts discussed in the *Florentine Histories* took place between 1215 and 1492, the context is confined to this time frame.[38] Additionally, I will emphasise the presentation of the official positions featured in Machiavelli's historical discourse.

4.3.1 Political Institutions

In the early thirteenth century, administrative power in Florence was vested in a committee of twelve consuls. These consuls, elected on an annual basis, predominantly hailed from elite families. Additionally, two councils, namely the General Council of 300 and the Special Council of 90, provided advisory support to the committee (Najemy, 2006, p. 64).

With the growth of the economy and specialization, various groups of merchants and artisan sought to establish guilds, becoming influential entities. Guilds, formed in the early thirteenth century, served as self-governing associations, offering merchants and artisans independent political institutions, free from aristocratic dominance (Winter, 2012, p. 739). These guilds progressively solidified their role in political representation, gaining control over Florentine politics and influencing policies in commerce, finance, and currency. The establishment of the priorate of the guilds in 1282 marked their ascendancy (Najemy, 2006, p. 74). The Ordinances of Justice of 1293 formally defined the political status of the twenty-one guilds, emphasising their role as intermediaries between individuals and the state, transforming the republic into 'a kind of confederation of guilds' (Winter, 2012, p. 740). Additionally, the organizational principles of the Florentine government aligned with those of the guilds (Najemy, 2006, p. 42).

During this period, the central institution in the Florentine political system was the 'the priorate' (*Signoria*), tasked with the day-to-day governance of the republic, formulation of laws, regulations, and foreign policy (Brucker, 1983, pp. 133-4; Najemy, 2006, pp. 74-87; Dean and Waley, 2023, pp. 38-43). The Priorate comprised nine members, initially three and

[38] For a comprehensive exploration of the political and institutional history of the Florentine Republic, see Brucker (1962); (1983); Najemy (2006).

later six, known as ‘priors’. These members were selected through a complex lottery system for a two-month term. Regular eligibility checks were conducted for the Priorate candidates, with only a small elite group of guild members qualifying. In practice, the seats of the Priorate were distributed among the major and minor guilds in a certain proportion, which was always subject to change. The head of the priorate, known as ‘the Standard-bearer of Justice’ (*Gonfaloniere di Giustizia*), held command over the army and possessed certain judicial power. In addition, the priorate could approach two advisory bodies, the Twelve *buonuomini* and the Sixteen *gonfalonieri*, for policy advice. These bodies served terms of three and four months, respectively (Brucker, 1983, p. 134).

The nominal legislative entities in Florence comprised the Council of the People and the Council of the Commune, which encompassed approximately five thousand members and had a tenure of six months. These bodies, however, did not possess the authority to propose legislation. Their powers were confined to either approving or disapproving laws put forth by the Priorate, thereby curtailing their influence (Brucker, 1983, p. 135).

The judicial system of Florence was composed of ‘the courts of the Podestà, the captain, and the executor’, each with distinct yet occasionally overlapping jurisdictions and responsibilities (Brucker, 1983, pp. 147-8). The judges appointed to these courts were foreigners, not citizens of Florence, serving for a term of six months. Similar to other Italian cities of that era, the Florentines believed that this arrangement would prevent factional interference and ensure the judiciary’s independence and impartiality. However, in practice, the judiciary often faced interference from the elite, particularly from entities like the priorate.

Apart from the standard institutions, a unique entity, the balìa, was frequently established in Florence (Brucker, 1983, p. 134; Najemy, 2006, p. 128; Dean and Waley, 2023, p. 43). This entity possessed the authority to legislate and make autonomous decisions, superseding the regular institutions. The tenure of Florentine officials typically spanned only a few months, resulting in a high turnover rate and a lack of political stability. To enable the republic to respond swiftly during emergencies, the balìa was instituted. It served not only as a mechanism for restoring order following political crises but also as an effective instrument

for those in power to exclude dissenters and implement political reforms.

4.3.2 The Power Struggle Between Elites, People, and Plebians

The power struggle between the elite (*i grandi*) and the people (*il popolo*), and occasionally the plebians, was one of the most important, if not the most important, themes of Florentine politics since the early thirteen century (Brucker, 1983, p. 129; Najemy, 2006, p. 5; Winter, 2012, p. 739; Dean and Waley, 2023, p. 125).

The elite were composed of some of Florence's wealthiest and most influential families, including international bankers, merchants, and landowners.[39] Despite their shared political influence, there was significant internal competition and factionalism within this group. The commoners, who made up the majority of the guild members, were local merchants, artisans, and professional groups of more modest economic standing. Within the plebeian class, there were also divisions and struggles between the upper and the lower. Moreover, the plebians, or workers who did not qualify for guild membership, also participated in Florentine political life at certain stages (Brucker, 1972).

In the thirteenth century, the primary conflict was predominantly between two factions: the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. Broadly speaking, the Ghibellines were supporters of the noble rulers of Florence, while the Guelphs were more populist in nature (Dean and Waley, 2023, pp. 149-59). From the mid-thirteenth century onwards, with the expanding influence of the guilds, conflict primarily arose among the elite members of the guilds, the non-elite members, and those who were not affiliated with any guild.

The fluctuating and ambiguous status of the non-elite members within the major guilds was a significant factor contributing to the frequent conflicts in Florence (Najemy, 2006, pp. 35-44). The major guilds broadly represented the early aristocracy, bankers, financiers, large merchants, and industrialists of the time. In contrast, the minor guilds were composed of skilled artisans and small shopkeepers. However, each guild was not homogeneous and there

[39] Najemy points out that the elites in Florence, often called '*grandi*' (literally means 'great ones')by the Florentines, were not typical nobility or aristocracy as they were highly mobile (Najemy, 2006, pp. 5-34). It's important to note that Machiavelli's usage of the term may differ.

were identity differences and power struggles within them. The political power of the people encompassed both members of the minor guilds and non-elite members of the major guilds. During periods of economic prosperity, non-elite members of the major guilds typically accepted political leadership from the elites and shared power with them in the governing bodies. However, in times of economic, military, and financial crises, these non-elite members would break away from the elites and seek alliances with the minor guilds. This shift would lead to the establishment of a new, more inclusive government that implemented a series of controversial reforms aimed at penalizing the elite and reducing their power.

In addition, the plebians, workers who were not eligible for guild membership, consistently advocated for the establishment of their own guilds and participation in guild alliances, further intensifying the political turmoil in Florence (Brucker, 1983, p. 183; Najemy, 2006, p. 37). The textile industry serves as a prime example. Given the industry's prominence in Florence, it employed the largest number of unskilled and poor artisans like weavers, known as Ciompi (Najemy, 2006, p. 165). In 1378, out of the approximately 14,000 people involved in wool production, only about 200 were eligible for guild membership. The rest were ineligible for membership and were prohibited from establishing their own guilds. The plebians, due to their lack of political status in the republic, were subject to economic exploitation. As a result, they were seen as the closest equivalent to an industrial proletariat in late medieval Florence, with their employment often being precarious and exploited by merchants (Winter, 2012, p. 741). The significant disparity in political and economic status between plebians and the guildsmen fuelled tensions between these groups and signalled impending major political changes (Winter, 2012, p. 741; Najemy, 2006, pp. 157-60).

4.4 Classification of the Nineteen Cases of Conflict

There are 19 cases of internal conflict in Florence in the *Florentine Histories*, as illustrated in table 4.1. Based on the context and characteristics of these cases, they can be categorized into three periods, as presented in table 4.2. Subsequently, I will elucidate the general characteristics of conflict events in each period and select representative cases from

each epoch for in-depth analysis.

Table 4.1 Nineteen cases of internal conflict in Florence in the Florentine Histories

Number	Chapters	Time	Overview
1	II.3-6	1215-1260	The first division between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. The two factions got involved in a brutal armed conflict as a result of a broken engagement. Then they reached peace and worked together to establish a new order in Florence.
2	II.6-10	1256-1279	The second division between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. At first, The Ghibellines seized the power with the help of Naples. Then the citizens overthrew the Ghibellines and the Guelfs seized the power and established a new order.
3	II.10-11	1280-1282	The third division between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. Florence was reordered again.
4	II.12-15	1282-1300	The earliest division between the nobles and the people. The new order was established by mutual agreement and compromise.
5	II.16-20	1300-1304	The division between the Whites and Blacks.
6	II.21-23	1304-1308	The division and tumult caused by the ambition of Corso, one of the nobles.
7	II.24-25	1312-1320	The city was divided into two factions, the Friends of the King and the Enemies of the King.
8	II.26-28	1323-1328	The division between the nobles and the people over the military strategy against Castruccio and the treatment of exiles. Florence was reordered again.
9	II.32	1340	The division between some noble families caused tumult throughout the city.
10	II.33-37	1341-1343	The loss of Luca led to division, which then caused tyranny of the duke of Athens.
11	II.39-42	1343-1353	The new order was unable to prevent the armed conflict between the nobles and the people, which eventually led to the destruction of the nobles and the exclusive rule of the people.
12	III.2-11	1353-1378	The enmity between the family of the Albizzi and that of the Ricci led to the return of division between the Ghibellines and the Guelfs.
13	III.12-29	1378-1381	A series of conflict between the greater guildsmen (the popular nobles), the lesser guildsmen, and the lesser plebs, including the Ciompi Uprising.
14	IV.8-11, 14-15, 19,	1426-1434	The division between the Albizzi and the Medici over power, the new tax law, and the war with Luca. Finally, the Medici took control of Florence.

	26-33		
15	V.4	1434	The men of the Medici faction sentenced their opponents to exile and death for their own benefit.
16	VI.6-7	1444	The conflict between some powerful citizens, with the Medici behind the scenes
17	VII.2-4	1454-1458	The conflict between some powerful citizens and the Medici over the tax law and modes of electing officials
18	VII.10-17, 21, 23-24	1464-1466	The conflict between some powerful citizens and the Medici.
19	VIII.1-9	1478	The conflict between the Pazzi and the Medici. The murderous plot of the Pazzi family was only partially successful and instead strengthened the Medici's authority and prestige.

Table 4.2 Classification of nineteen cases of internal conflict in Florence

Classification	Chapters	Time	Case	Cases for focused analysis
The first period	II.1-15	1215-1300	No. 1-4	No.4 The earliest division between the nobles and the people.
The second period	II.16-III.29	1300-1422	No. 5-13	No.13 A series of conflict between the greater guildsmen, the lesser guildsmen, and the plebs, including the Ciompi Uprising.
The third period	IV-VIII	1422-1492	No. 14-19	The rise and rule of the Medici

4.5 The First Period: Why the Institutions Failed

In the first period, Florence experienced significant growth in both wealth and power, notwithstanding the continuous conflicts in the city. Internal disputes persisted due to family feuds (e.g., *FH* II.3), interference from outside forces (e.g., *FH* II.4), struggles for dominance (e.g., *FH* II.8-9), and insolence of the nobility (e.g., *FH* II.11-12). These conflicts often involved violence, leading to casualties and exile. In the majority of instances, following the resolution of the conflict, the surviving inhabitants managed to coalesce and institute new orders to promote the common good of the city. For instance, following the initial conflict between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, citizens united to institute a new order that would facilitate their

living in freedom and ensure their protection. Machiavelli praises the virtues of this newly established order for rendering Florence free and strong: 'On these military and civil orders the Florentines founded their **freedom**. Nor could one conceive how much **authority** and **force** Florence had acquired in a short time: it became not only head of Tuscany but was counted among the first cities of Italy, and it would have risen to any greatness **if frequent and new divisions had not afflicted it**' (*FH* II.6, emphasis added). Similar praise followed the establishment of a new order after the second conflict between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines (*FH* II.10). The cessation of the earliest conflict between the nobles and the people led to a state, as observed by Machiavelli, where 'never was our city in a greater and more prosperous state than in these times, when it was replete with men, riches, and reputation; there were thirty thousand citizens **skilled in arms**, and those in the surrounding countryside came to seventy thousand' (*FH* II.15, emphasis added).

Machiavelli, however, observes that these recently established orders are rarely resistant to the re-emergence of violent conflict. Usually, the peace following the establishment of a new order could only last no more than 20 years, after which new violent conflicts arose. Contrary to the institutions of the Roman Republic, which adeptly channelled and regulated conflict, the Florentine institutions fell short of functioning in a comparable manner. What led to the failure of Florence's political institutions in serving as a conflict regulator? This question will be explored by conducting a detailed analysis of Case No. 4 (*FH* II.11-15).

This conflict can be segmented into three phases: the establishment of the Standard-bearer of Justice and its subsequent failure, the implementation of the Ordinances of Justice and its ensuing failure, and the conciliation between the nobles and the people. According to Machiavelli, the root of this conflict was the discord in dispositions between the nobles and the people: 'the people want to live according to the laws and the powerful want to command by them' (*FH* II.12). What distinguishes this discourse apart from other similar ones (e.g., *D* I.5, *P* 9, *FH* III.1) is the emphasis on the inability of nobles and people to understand each other (*FH* II.12).

In the first phase of the conflict, the people endeavoured to restrain the nobles by

instituting the position of Standard-bearer of Justice, albeit unsuccessfully. Machiavelli narrates that citizens were subjected to daily harm due to the nobles' oppression, and that neither the law nor the officials could adequately manage the situation, as the nobles shielded themselves through their familial and friendly ties. In order to limit the insolence of the nobles, the Standard-bearer of Justice was created by the princes of the guilds. The Standard-bearer of Justice could only be held by members of the people, and it has the power to enforce justice with armed men. In Machiavelli's account, the 'grave enmities that remained awake among the nobles' made it easy for the guilds to make this order (*FH* II.12). The nobles were initially frightened by this order, as the first Gonfalonier of Justice destroyed the houses of one of the noble families because one of that family killed a man of the people. The nobles soon counteracted this, with the noble members of Signoria obstructing the Gonfalonier of Justice from carrying out his duty, as well as preventing people from testifying against the nobles. Therefore, the new institution failed again as 'the judges were slow and their sentences lacked executions' and the nobles reverted to their insolence (*FH* II.12).

The Gonfalonier of Justice seems to bear a resemblance to the Plebian Tribune in the Roman Republic in the *Discourses*: both could only be held by people. However, the Gonfalonier of Justice did not play a positive role in the Florentine Republic similar to that of the tribunes in the Roman Republic, for two main reasons. Firstly, the term of Gonfalonier of Justice was only two months, which is too short to be effective (McCormick, 2020b, pp. 70-72). The term of Signoria was short because the Florentines feared that the republican administration would be monopolised by certain families or parties. In reality, however, this scheme did not prevent the creation of factions, but rather left the republic with a weak administration that was not capable of controlling conflicts between citizens.

Second, factional politics, or in Machiavelli's words, divisions with 'sects and partisans', made it difficult for public institutions to work (*FH* VII.1). Machiavelli points out that key to whether divisions are harmful or salutary is the existence of factions, and that those harmful divisions are accompanied by 'sects and partisans', while those helpful divisions are maintained without sects and partisans (*FH* VII.1). There are two modes through which citizens can acquire reputation: public ways and private modes. If citizens acquire reputation

by private modes, including giving favours to this or that citizen, protecting them from officials, financing them with money, getting them unmerited honours, and using public entertainment and donations to enlist the hearts and minds of the people, sects and partisans will arise and the conflict will be harmful to republics (*FH* VII.1, cf. *D* III.28). As Machiavelli points out, the divisions in Florence were always accompanied by sects and partisans and therefore always harmful, which caused the instability of politics. In this stage of the conflict, the nobles initially supported each other through 'family and friends' (i.e., by private means), making the public institutions ineffective. But then the enmities within the nobles were exploited by the guilds, who took advantage of the opportunity to check the nobles by creating the Gonfalonier of Justice. This hints at the problem of factional politics: without external enemies, noble factions could easily become divided within themselves, and provide the opportunity for the people to institute a counter-power. However, when the power of the people threatened the interests of the nobles as a whole, the nobles united again to prevent the Gonfalonier of Justice from upholding justice and continued to oppress the people through the use of private means.

In the second phase, the people again attempted to use institutional means to strengthen the checks on the nobles. Giano della Bella, 'a man of very noble lineage but a lover of the freedom of the city', joined with the chiefs of the guilds to strengthen the authority of the Gonfalonier of Justice by passing the Ordinances of Justice (*FH* II.13). The Ordinances decreed that the banners of justice should reside with the Signoria and increased the number of its guard to four thousand. In respect of accusations, the Ordinances decreed that public reports were sufficient for judgement, and that people were no longer required to testify. Furthermore, the decree deprived all the nobles of 'the power to sit with the Signori' (*FH* II.13). The Ordinances gave the people considerable power, but also made Giano della Bella a focus of hatred of the nobles and jealousy of the richer classes of the people. In practice, however, the decree did not seem to have had the desired effect, as shown by the fact that a nobleman accused of killing a man of people in a brawl was acquitted by the Captain of the People. The people were so upset that they gathered in arms and demanded that Giano enforced the Ordinances. Giano, while standing up for the people and wanting

the murdering noblemen to be punished, insisted on an institutional approach and suggested that people go to the Signoria and ask them to take certain measures. This led the enraged people, who felt they had been both offended by the Captain of the People and abandoned by Giano, to resort to violence, seizing and sacking the Captain's palace. Such a reasonless act displeased all the citizens, but Giano's enemies blamed it on Giano and sued him, which caused the people to defend him in arms. Finally, Giano chose a voluntary exile and left his homeland because he 'did not want either to put these popular favours to the test or to commit his life to the magistrates, for he feared the malice of the latter and the instability of the former' (*FH* II.13).

During this phase of the conflict, institutional reforms remained ineffective, which forced the people to resort to extra-institutional means, but also with negative results. In Machiavelli's account, Giano played the role of a reformer and strengthened the authority of the people yet, as McCormick argues, Giano did not act in the manner of Machiavelli's ideal founder and reformer: 'they fail to spiritedly invigorate new laws with necessary and salutary violence' (McCormick, 2020b, p. 75). Machiavelli stresses the need for a new law to be invigorated by elite citizens, 'that where the matter is not corrupt, tumults and other scandals do not hurt; where it is corrupt, well-ordered laws do not help unless indeed they have been put in motion by one individual who with an extreme force ensures their observance so that the matter becomes good' (*D* I.17).[40] Giano made good orders, but failed to use his own virtue as well as 'extreme force' to ensure that they were applied in corrupt Florence. This suggested that the lack of 'astute political leadership' in Florence was an important reason for the failure to resolve its internal conflicts in an institutional manner (McCormick, 2020b, p. 75).

In the third phase, the impending conflict between the nobles and the people was temporarily suspended through the persuasion of neutrals. The nobles once again united, realising that their defeat stemmed from their internal divisions, and asked the Signoria to relax some of the harshnesses of the laws against them. The people, on the other hand,

[40] Also, Machiavelli declares that good orders 'have need of being brought to life by the virtue of a citizen who rushes spiritedly to execute them against the power of those who transgress them' (*D* III.17).

suspected that the Signoria would give in to the nobles and were preparing for armed struggles. At this point, 'some men of the people as well as of the nobles, along with certain men of religion of good repute', placed themselves in the middle to appease them (*FH* II.14). The neutrals warned that an armed struggle would be detrimental to both sides. Besides, the people were advised not to expel all the nobles, but to share power in the city. Eventually, an agreement was reached that the nobles could only be prosecuted if there was sufficient evidence. In addition, people reordered the government by 'restricting it in number', as the Signoria had been favourable to the nobles (*FH* II.15). However, the resolution of this conflict actually set the stage for the more violent ones that followed, with both parties remaining full of suspicion and fortifying themselves with arms. On the one hand, Machiavelli is proud to say that 'never was our city in a greater and more prosperous state than in these times, when it was replete with men, riches, and reputation'(*FH* II.15). On the other hand, Machiavelli lamented that the damage not done to Florence by outside forces was done by those from within, which hinted at the more violent conflict that followed.

The reforms of the institution of accusation in this conflict can be contrasted with the institution of accusation in the Roman Republic. As noted earlier, the tribunes' power of accusation provided a legitimate and harmless outlet for the humours of citizens (3.4.1), whereas the accusation in Florence was terribly designed (3.6.1). The biggest problem was Florence's extensive use of foreign judicial officials, such as the Podesta and the Captain of People. These judges, invited from other cities, were expected to provide objective and impartial judgements in civil, criminal, and political disputes, but in Machiavelli's account, they became the political tools of the powerful factions that dominated the city. As Jurdjevic argues, all existing institutions were conceived at their origin in the interests of factional parties rather than in the collective and public interest. In response, Machiavelli suggests that popular assemblies, rather than foreign judges, should serve as the institutions that render judgements in political trials (McCormick, 2020b, pp. 67-80).

In conclusion, the high frequency of internal conflicts in Florence can be attributed to both the flawed institutions design and certain customary aspects. First, the design of institutions such as the Standard-bearer of Justice and the institution of accusation was

flawed and lacked the authority to effectively regulate conflict. Second, Florence's entrenched tradition of factional politics and armed struggle tended to reduce public order to a mere facade. Citizens also tended to gain prestige more through private means than through public ones. Machiavelli emphasises that both custom and law are indispensable for the maintenance of good order: 'as good customs have need of laws to maintain themselves, so laws have need of good customs so as to be observed' (*D* I.18). In contrast, Florence lacked both good customs and efficient institutions, perpetuating the cycle of internal conflicts.

4.6 The Second Period: The Ciompi Uprising and the Common Good

In the second period, after reaching its peak (*FH* II.15), Florence seemed to have come to a certain standstill or even began backsliding, largely due to the increasingly serious damage of internal conflict. For this period, Machiavelli devoted a great deal of space to internal conflict in Florence and scarcely discussed its growth and prosperity. According to Machiavelli, Florence 'was agitated not only by one humour but by many, there being enmities in it between the people and the great, the Ghibellines and the Guelfs, the Whites and the Blacks', and these humours led to a situation such that all the city was 'in arms and full of fighting' (*FH* II.21). Machiavelli laments that the discord of Florence made it 'truly a great and wretched city'(*FH* II.25). In addition, during this period, a wider class of people became involved in politics. As the power of people gradually overwhelmed the nobles, Florence became more 'humble and abject' (*FH* III.1). Especially in the series of conflicts from 1378 to 1381, once the plebs had their own guilds and priors.

The Ciompi Uprising of 1378 is the most far-reaching political upheaval in Florentine history, as well as one of the events that have received the most attention in the study of the Florentine Histories. It is important to note that the Ciompi Uprising was not an isolated incident but took place in the wider context of conflicts with different classes of Florence. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the Ciompi Uprising together with other conflicts that occurred from 1378 to 1381. In this section I will first present a historical account of the

conflicts from 1378 to 1381. Then I will analyse in what ways Machiavelli's account differs from historical account, including which parts he emphasises and ignores, and more importantly, how these reveal Machiavelli's views on conflict, people, and elites.

4.6.1 A Historical Account of the Ciompi Uprising

The Ciompi Uprising had three stages (Brucker, 1968; Najemy, 2006, pp. 161-176; Winter, 2012, pp. 742-743). In June 1378, the guild elites, dissatisfied with the Guelphs, incited the people and plebs to rise up against the Guelphs and succeeded in establishing a new government. In July, workers and artisans began to take control of the revolution, creating three new guilds that joined the guild federation. In August, the unskilled textile workers, or the Ciompi, established their own authority, but were quickly suppressed by the other guilds. After the dissolution of the Ciompi, the remaining 23 guilds established the last and most radical guild government in Florence, which ruled from September 1378 to January 1382 until it was overthrown by the elites.

In 1377, the Guelphs intensified their attacks on the government, leaving Florence rife with partisan and class rivalries. The opposition of the Guelphs tried to fight back, and Salvestro de' Medici, who was the Standard-bearer of Justice from May to June 1378, proposed the re-promulgation of the Ordinances of Justice 'on behalf of the *popolani*, the merchants and artisans of Florence, and also the poor and impotent … who desire to live in peace from their labour and possessions' (Brucker, 1962, p. 364). When the measure was opposed by the government, Salvestro announced his resignation. Cooperating with Salvestro's behaviour, the wealthy merchants mobilised the plebian artisans and workers, who participated in a day of protest and burned the houses of many leaders of the Guelphs. With the help of plebs, the guilds succeeded in defeating the Guelphs and founded a balìa, led by Salvestro and including one consul from each of the twenty-one guilds (Najemy, 2006, pp. 161-162).

But the agitated wool workers soon proposed their own demands, bringing the uprising to a second stage and extending the extent of the uprising. Beginning in mid-July, while threatening violence and burning down the houses of some twenty elites, workers expressed

their demands by submitting petitions to the priors. The wool workers' demands covered political, economic and judicial aspects: the creation of their own guilds, the abolition of the wool guild's obnoxious foreign judges, the extension of debt maturities, and increased taxes on the rich (Brucker, 1983, p. 84; Najemy, 2006, p. 163). Rejected for demanding three priors in the priorate, the minor guilds formed an alliance with the wool workers. On 22nd July, 7,000 workers and guild members from almost all the guilds occupied the Palazzo del Podestà, overthrew the old government and established a revolutionary regime led by Michele di Landò, a wool carder.

The new system instituted by Michele di Lando and the Guilds was characterised by the principle of inclusiveness and equality between the guilds(Najemy, 2006, p. 165). On the one hand, the revolutionary government created three new guilds for about 13,000 workers. The third guild represented 9,000 'unskilled textile workers, including sorters, shearers, and beaters, and poor artisans like weavers - those whom contemporaries called the Ciompi' (Najemy, 2006, p. 166). It is estimated that almost all men of working age became members of the guilds, demonstrating the great inclusiveness of the system. On the other hand, although the three new guilds had two-thirds of all guildsmen, the political power of Florence was equally distributed between the major guilds, the minor guilds and the new guilds, each group having an equal share of the priorate and colleges. As Winter notes, despite the boldness of their actions, the political and social demands of the Ciompi were modest (Winter, 2012, p. 742). In general, their petition remained within the framework of the guild system. They did not seek to change or overthrow the regime, nor did they attempt to establish a more radical egalitarian order.

At the end of August, the Ciompi Uprising entered its third stage as the Ciompi made more radical demands. The unskilled textile workers broke ranks with the rest of the guilds and elected a Committee of Eight, claiming city-wide authority. When the lottery for the priorate was held, a large group of Ciompi insisted that every name be read aloud and rejected several of them. The workers' intervention in the sortition process and their exclusive demands for power undermined the uneasy alliance between the old and new guilds.

The conflict was eventually resolved by force. On 30th August two Ciompi went to the palace to demand that their Committee of Eight should have a veto over all communal legislation, and di Lando had them arrested. The next day, di Lando drove the militia of the three new guilds out of the square by force and allowed the old guilds to occupy it. The Ciompi greeted the attack with the cry 'long live the popolo and the guilds' (Najemy, 2006, p. 168). Eventually, the Ciompi were routed, 6 killed and 20 wounded, and many were chased into hiding and exile.

On 1st September citizens gathered in the square and approved the dissolution of the Ciompi guilds. The federation of Guilds was reorganised into two divisions, consisting of seven major guilds and sixteen minor guilds, with all government offices divided equally between the two groups until 1382.

4.6.2 Machiavelli's account

Machiavelli's description of the first stage of the conflict (*FH* III.8-11) follows the pattern of most conflicts in Florence: conflicts between the two sides intensify, armed conflict breaks out, one side is defeated, and the victorious side establishes a new government, laws, and institutions, but soon new conflicts break out again.

Machiavelli focuses his analysis on the second stage of the conflict caused by the Ciompi (*FH* III.12-16). According to Machiavelli, the tumult was the subsequent conflict of the division between the Ghibellines and the Guelfs, and it 'hurt the republic a good deal more than the first' (*FH* III.12). This tumult was caused by the lowest plebs of Florence, who has two motives. The first, and also the direct motive was 'fear'. The plebs, who have done most of arson and robbery in the previous conflict, feared that they would be punished for their crime and would be abandoned by those who had incited their crime, 'as always happens to them' (*FH* III.12). Machiavelli thus shows that the plebs didn't act as a self-conscious class or political association but were exploited as an instrument by the elites. For example, in the previous conflict between the Ghibellines and the Guelfs, some ensign bearers 'from the guilds and from those of lesser quality', moved by those who wanted to retaliate against the Guelfs, ransacked and burned the house of a leader of the Guelfs (*FH* III.11). The plebs' lack

of political autonomy stems from the lack of an institutional organisation of its own, as will be discussed below.

The second, and also the fundamental motive was 'hatred'. The plebs had harboured hatred for 'the rich citizens and the princes of the guilds' since the establish of the guilds. As Machiavelli notes, Florence was in fact ruled by twenty-one guilds, including seven greater guilds and fourteen lesser guilds, but 'the lesser people and the lowest plebs' did not have their own guild corporations and had to be subordinated under various guilds (*FH* III.12, Cf, II.8, 11-12, III.10). Therefore, if they were oppressed by their masters, they could only seek help from the magistracy of the guild that governed them, 'from which **it did not appear to them** that they got the justice **they judged** was suitable' (*FH* III.12, emphasis added). Most of the plebs and the lesser people were subordinated under the Wool Guild and the ensuing riot became known as the Ciompi Uprising. However, As Machiavelli notes, the plebs of Wool Guild were not the only ones who were dissatisfied with the existing political institution, there were also plebs from other guilds who joined the uprising (*FH* III.13). The inability of the plebs as an dependent group to participate in the guild politics and express their demands through institutional approach finally led to their resorting to violence (Jurdjevic, 2014, pp. 111-112; Winter, 2018, pp. 183-188). Another point worth noting is that Machiavelli uses the phrase 'it did not appear to them that …' (*FH* III.12) twice when he writes about the injustices felt by the plebs, which may set the stage for the justice demanded and reforms proposed by the plebs later on.

After discussing the fear and hatred that the plebs possessed before the riot, Machiavelli inserted a speech by an unnamed wool worker (*FH* III.13). At the beginning of this speech, the worker pointed out that, after taking up arms and doing much evil, in order to secure themselves, they had to heed the teachings of 'necessity' and resort to more intense violence. But beyond this goal, the anonymous worker expressed a more independent and autonomous demand to 'be able to live with more freedom and more satisfaction than we have in the past'. The middle part of the speech is a fierce taunt and criticism of the current rulers, denying that birth or wealth can constitute a basis for domination: 'do not let their antiquity of blood, with which they will reproach us, dismay you;

for all men, having had the same beginning, are equally ancient and have been made by nature in one mode. Strip all of us naked, you will see that we are alike; dress us in their clothes and them in ours, and without a doubt we shall appear noble and they ignoble, for only poverty and riches make us unequal'. After forcefully asserting that people are in an equal position, the speech further exposes the darkness and hypocrisy that accompanies the acquisition and maintenance of power: 'if you will take note of the mode of proceeding of men, you will see that all those who come to great riches and great power have obtained them either by fraud or by force; and afterwards, to hide the ugliness of acquisition, they make it decent by applying the false title of earnings to things they have usurped by deceit or by violence'. Any reader familiar with *The Prince* will immediately notice that this passage reverses, in a highly realistic and ironic way, the advice Machiavelli once gave to princes. At the end of the speech, the worker again urges his audience to resort to violence, because the moment is fleeting and once missed it is difficult to regain.

Encouraged by this speech, the plebs planned a violent riot and tried to attract more companions, but they didn't act immediately. Then their plot was discovered by the Signori and one of them was arrested. Driven by necessity, the plebs armed themselves and assembled in the squares, demanding the release of the prisoners 'with terrible cries' (*FH* III.14). They also taken the standard of justice from its executor and burned many houses and hunted down those 'who were hated for public or private reasons'. The tumult was fuelled by the private hatred of citizens, as Machiavelli writes: 'many citizens, to avenge their private injuries, led them to the houses of their enemies; for it was enough that a single voice shout out in the midst of the multitude, 'to so- and-so's house,' or that he who held the standard in his hands turn toward it'. Beyond violence, the plebs also used deceit, following the teachings of the speech, as Machiavelli writes: 'they might accompany the many evils they did with some praiseworthy work, they made Salvestro de' Medici and many other citizens knights' (*FH* III.14).

Under the pressure of the armed plebs, public forces such as the guilds were rendered ineffective. Out of fear, some citizens stayed inside their homes, others followed the 'mob'

(*la turba*)[41] 'so that by being among them they could better defend their houses and those of their friends' (*FH* III.14). Finally, without much effort, the multitude (more than just the plebs) occupied the palace of the Podestà and then presented their demands to the government:

> That the Wool Guild could no longer have a foreign judge; that three new guild corporations be formed, one for the carders and dyers, another for the barbers, doublet makers, tailors, and such mechanical arts, the third for the lesser people; and that from these three new guilds there would always be two Signori and from the fourteen lesser guilds three; that the Signoria should provide houses where these new guilds could meet; that no one placed under these guilds could be compelled, for two years, to pay a debt for a sum less than fifty ducats; that the Monte suspend payment of interest and only repay capital; that those imprisoned and condemned be absolved; and that honours be restored to all the admonished. They demanded many other things besides these for the benefit of their particular supporters, and on the opposite side they wanted many of their enemies to be imprisoned and admonished (*FH* III.15).

The most important of these demands were the creation of guilds belonging to the plebs and the possibility for the plebs to participate in the Signoria and to share power with others. According to Machiavelli's previous account, the people were divided into three sorts: powerful, middle, and low; and 'it was ordered that the powerful should have two Signori, the middle people three, and the low three' (*FH* II.42). If the demands of the plebs were fulfilled, the Signoria would have two from the powerful (or the greater guilds), three from the lesser guilds, and two from the plebs. These demands seemed reasonable, since the plebs neither tried to overthrow the guilds politics nor demanded exclusive domination, following the anonymous worker's speech (Cf, *FH* III.1 Machiavelli's criticism of the people in Florentine). However, Machiavelli describes these demands as 'dishonourable and grievous for the republic' (*FH* III.15).

[41] The term '*la turba*' appears only three times in Florentine history, all in III.14-16 when discussing the Ciompi Uprising. Machiavelli always uses 'la moltitudine' (the multitude) to refer to a group of people. Sometimes the two words appear in the same sentence to refer to almost the exact same object (Cf, *FH* III.14). Whether Machiavelli used '*la turba*' in a pejorative sense needs further examination.

The government were forced to agree to the plebs' demands and it was agreed that the council of the commune would meet the next day to establish the new orders. At this point, the guilds and the plebs seemed satisfied, and they promised that once the law came into force, any violence would cease. On the following day, however, the 'impatient and fickle' multitude met in the square, with 'such loud and terrifying cries that they frightened the whole council and the Signori', and again threatened the officials to kill their children and burn their houses if they did not leave the palace (*FH* III.15). Under pressure from the armed masses, there was a split within the Signoria and all the members eventually fled.

Michele di Lando, a 'sagacious and prudent' wool carder, became the Gonfalonier and lord of Florence with the support of the multitude (*FH* III.16). His actions were largely in accordance with Machiavelli's advice to the new princes. On the one hand, to settle the tumult, he had gallows erected in the piazza and prohibited theft, arson and other offences. On the other hand, to satisfy the plebs' desire for revenge, he sent the men who was hated by the plebs to the gallows and everyone around 'tore off a piece' from the dead man. More importantly, he dismissed the members of the previous government, burned the bags of the offices, and created a new Signoria, with 'four from the lesser plebs, two for the greater and two for the lesser guilds' (*FH* III.16). In addition to this, he made 'a new bagging' and divided the city into three parts, one of these to go to the new guilds, another to the lesser, the third to the greater. At the same time, Michele also used public power for his own personal benefit: to prevent the envy of others, he granted numerous advantages to many citizens friendly to the plebs (including Salvestro de' Medici); and he gave himself the podesteria of Empoli.

In the third stage, no sooner had the new order of Florence begun to function than it was once again challenged by the plebs (*FH* III.17). Though the plebs already had four Signori, the half in the Signoria, they remained unsatisfied, believing that Michele's reform had been too 'partisan' toward the greater people, and that they did not have enough power in the government that enabled them to maintain and defend themselves. Driven by their 'usual boldness', thus, they again took up arms and gathered in the square to demand new orders. di Lando censured the plebs in the mode in which they made their demands and urged them

to put down their arms, but this only enraged the plebs more. Then the plebs founded a different government and order of their own in another place of the city and demanded the creation of a new order that 'eight men among them, elected from the guild corporations, should always live in the palace with the Signori, and everything that was decided upon by the Signoria should be confirmed by them' (*FH* III.17).[42] As before, the plebs used force to threaten the government. Confronted with the arrogance of the plebs, Michele di Lando thought he must 'check this **extraordinary** insolence with an **extraordinary** mode' (*FH* III.17 emphasis added), then he gathered citizens who supported him and conquered the plebs, part of which were drove out of the city and part were compelled to leave their arms and hide.

The defeat of the plebs in the armed struggle thus caused other people to resent the 'stench' of the plebs, and they finally lost their previously acquired positions in the government. As Machiavelli writes, di Lando's reform provided that the Signoria had four members from the plebs, but the new Signoria had only two members from the plebs, or 'two men of such vile and infamous condition' from the perceptive of other people (*FH* III.18). Moreover, the only two remaining plebian Signori were then stripped of their officials by the armed people - Machiavelli does not specify who the people were here, who should include both the greater and lesser guilds. Only a short time later, the city was re-ordered again, which demonstrates the instability of the institutions. Now the power of Florence was in the hands of the greater guilds and the lesser guilds, with the Signoria having 'five of the lesser guildsmen and four of the greater' (*FH* III.18). The plebs were deprived of the right to participate in the Signoria, and the guilds of the lesser people was dissolved. Most plebs were deprived of their offices, except for Michele di Lando himself and some others of 'better quality'.

Thus, the Ciompi Uprising by the plebs was basically over, and the plebs no longer participated in politics as an independent political group but were dependent on other groups. However, the end of the revolt did not put an end to the civil conflict in the city-state.

[42] McCormick argues that this institution could work like the plebian tribune in Rome (McCormick, 2020b, p. 78).

As Machiavelli notes, 'although the republic had been taken out of the hands of the lesser plebs, the guildsmen of lesser quality remained more powerful than the popular nobles, for the latter, to satisfy the former, were compelled of necessity to yield so as to take away the favors of the guilds from the lesser people' (*FH* III.18). Therefore, the city was divided into the popular nobles (the greater guildsmen) and the lesser guilds, 'the popular party' and 'the plebeian' in Machiavelli's words, which implied that the devastating effects of the pleb uprising on the city continued (*FH* III.18). The struggle between the two parties lasted a long time with numerous deaths and exiles.

4.6.3 Analysis from the Perspective of the Common Good

After the Ciompi, the official voice of Florentine Republic positioned the event in a generally negative light. Machiavelli's humanist predecessors Leonardo Bruni portrayed the Ciompi as 'an irrational, anarchic, and destructive mob, susceptible to the worst manifestations of demagoguery in the city's history' in his most authoritative of the city's histories (Jurdjevic, 2014, p. 111). Bruni made clear that the most essential lesson for elites from the Ciompi uprising is that 'never to let political initiative or arms into the hands of the multitude, for once they have had a bite, they cannot be restrained and they think they can do as they please because there are so many of them' (Najemy, 2006, p. 181). As Najemy argues, 'fear of the lower classes became politically potent' because it was deeply rooted in the psyche of non-elite major guildsmen, as well as in the elite (Najemy, 2006, p. 179). The oligarchy was gradually formed and consolidated after the failed Ciompi Uprising of 1378, the trauma and turmoil of which continued to shape the general attitude of the elites towards political conflict: emphasising the value of harmony and unity and denying the legitimacy of conflict (Najemy, 1982a).

In the face of this narrative tradition, Machiavelli could only partially reinterpret the political and moral implications conveyed by this event by inserting a fictional speech into the narrative. As Winter points out, while the anti-elite character of the speech is consistent with the tradition of popular political discourse in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there is no historical record of the speech, which is most certainly a fabrication (Winter, 2012,

pp. 750-751). Machiavelli placed this speech in the middle of two stages of violence by the plebs. In the former stage, the plebs were mainly instigated to violence by some of the major guildsmen and were the instruments of the latter against the Guelphs; after this speech, the plebs took up violent confrontation on their own and independently, and eventually established a government dominated by the minor guildsmen and the plebs. In Machiavelli's narrative, this speech was fundamental to the awakening of the plebs. As Winter notes, the Ciompi Uprising reflected the limitations of the Florentine republican system at the time, precisely because the demands of the plebeians were not easily imported and absorbed into the existing institutional and discursive structures, which led them to resort to violence and provoked the oratory's outraged criticism of power (Winter, 2018, pp. 183-188). Thus, Machiavelli indicates that political conflict constitutes a rupture in historical narrative, a moment to reconsider governing structures and potentially reorganize the distribution of power (Chen, 2021b, p. 55)

Scholars have argued that this anonymous speech hints at Machiavelli's plebeian position (McCormick, 2018, pp. 69-105) or the possibility of plebeian politics (Winter, 2012). However, as Jurdjevic argues, through the speech Machiavelli deconstructs the concept of the aristocracy (or elites) from a sociological and historical perspective (Jurdjevic, 2014, p. 126). Machiavelli not only affirms the essential similarity between the nobles and the people, but also explains, on a general level, why both groups instinctively gravitated towards a hegemonic political style. The people adopt the same logic, tactics and strategies and pursue the same goals as their superiors in the social hierarchy (Jurdjevic, 2014, p. 123). Therefore, the ambitions of the plebs can pose an equally serious threat to order and stability. The plebs are given the guardianship of collective freedom in the ideal Roman Republic in the *Discourses*, but the Florentine people are the ones who are destroying it.

Moreover, scholars who emphasise Machiavelli's plebeian position often find it difficult to explain his high opinion of Michele di Lando, who 'betrayed' the plebs. He is one of the few figures in the *Florence Histories* that Machiavelli rates highest (McCormick, 2020b, p. 77). As Machiavelli writes,

> The campaign having succeeded, the tumults were settled solely by the **virtue**

> of the Gonfalonier (Michele). In spirit, prudence, and goodness he surpassed any citizen of his time, and he deserves to be numbered among the few who have benefited their fatherland, for had his spirit been either malign or ambitious, the republic would have lost its freedom altogether and fallen under a greater tyranny than that of the duke of Athens. But his goodness never allowed a thought to enter his mind that might be contrary to the **universal good**; his prudence led him to conduct things in such a mode that many yielded to his **party** and others he was able to subdue with arms (*FH* III.17 emphasis added).

Machiavelli's emphasis here is on the 'universal good' (*bene universale*), or the common good. This shows that Machiavelli does not stand on one side of the conflict, but on the common good of the republic. When the plebs did not have the institutional means to express their demands, they resorted to violence, which was perhaps understandable to Machiavelli because it was a requirement of 'necessity'. In the orders established by di Lando, the major guildsmen, the minor guildsmen, and the plebs equally shared the government, which is consistent with the universal good of Florence. Therefore, when the plebs were not satisfied with their own guilds and priors and tried to achieve exclusive rule by violence, it couldn't be more justified for di Lando to suppress them in the name of the universal good of Florence.

In this sense, Machiavelli reaffirms his standpoint of the argument of the *Discourses*, as shown in Chapter 2. At the beginning of Book III of the *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli compares the different results of the division between the plebs and the nobles in Rome and Florence:

> For the enmities between the people and the nobles at the beginning of Rome that were resolved by disputing were resolved in Florence by fighting. Those in Rome ended with a law, those in Florence with the exile and death of many citizens; those in Rome always increased military virtue, those in Florence eliminated it altogether; those in Rome brought the city from equality in the citizens to a very great inequality, those in Florence reduced it from inequality

to a wonderful equality. (*FH* III.1) [43]

Then Machiavelli points out that the reason lies in the different ends that the two peoples in Florence and Rome had:

> This diversity of effects may have been caused by the diverse ends these two peoples had, for the people of Rome desired to enjoy the highest honours together with the nobles, while the people of Florence fought to be alone in the government without the participation of the nobles. And because the desire of the Roman people was more reasonable, offenses to the nobles came to be more bearable, so that the nobility would yield easily and without resorting to arms. Thus, after some differences, they would come together to create a law whereby the people would be satisfied and the nobles retain their dignities. On the other side, the desire of the Florentine people was injurious and unjust, so that the nobility readied greater forces for its own defence; and that is why it came to the blood and exile of citizens, and the laws that were made afterwards were not for the common utility but were all ordered in favour of the conqueror. (*FH* III.1)

In this sense, Machiavelli would contend the plebs' desire to create an exclusive government was 'injurious and unjust' and di Lando's scheme to create a government share by all the classes was 'more reasonable'. Only in a government in which all classes participate can the power of all parties maintain a relative balance. It is also in such a government that conflict can be regulated and channelled in an institutional way instead of a violent way. In the Roman Republic the 'perfectly mixed government' consisted of the consuls, the Senate, and the plebian tribunes (*D* I.3-6). The government established by Michele, by virtue of its inclusion of all classes, also might have had the potential to be a perfect government. However, the plebs' unreasonable desire ruined the potential for Florence to establish the most inclusive and stable government.

While noting Machiavelli praise di Lando for never going against 'the universal good', we

[43] For the turn Machiavelli takes in this section in his comparative analysis of the conflict between Rome and Florence, see Bock (1990); Guarini (1990, pp. 188-192).

should also note that 'party' suggests that di Lando could not escape the traditions of parties and factions in Florence (cf. *FH* VII.1) and that Machiavelli also records di Lando's engaging in self-serving behaviour. This suggest that the traditions of parties and factions that existed throughout Florence for at least one century could not be overcome by the virtue of the individual, as will be seen more clearly in the case of the rule of the Medici in Florence.

4.7 The Third Period: The Customs and Institutions of Factional Politics (the Medici)

In the third period, the Medici family established an exclusive rule in Florence by fully utilizing the customs and institutions of factional politics and continued to rely on these customs and institutions to consolidate their power. The relatively moderate and stable tyranny established by the Medici led to a reduction in internal conflicts compared to the previous period, making the political situation in Florence appear more stable on the surface. However, the rule of the Medici also faced serious problems stemming from factionalism, in particular constant internal divisions. Through Machiavelli's discussion of the process by which the Medici family established and maintained their rule, we can discern his implicit criticism of both the Medici family and the factional political tradition on which they relied.[44]

One of the customs that the Medici family habitually employed, which was strongly characteristic of factional politics, was using their wealth to buy friends and followers, thereby forming a community of interests centred around themselves. This is a typical example of 'the private mode to acquire reputation' described by Machiavelli (See 3.4.6). Machiavelli distinguishes between public and private modes of acquiring reputation in a

[44] It is worth noting the complexity of Machiavelli's relationship with the Medici. In general, Machiavelli's entire political career took place during the longest period of non-Medici rule in Florentine history. 1498, when Machiavelli, as a relatively young and inexperienced man (29 years old), became Secretary to the Second Secretary of the Republic, came after the Medici had been driven out of Florence. After the restoration of the Medici in 1512, Machiavelli was dismissed from his office and also imprisoned for a time for his alleged involvement in a conspiracy against the Medici. After this, however, Machiavelli continued to try to advise the Medici, and both *the Prince* and the *Florentine Histories* were dedicated to the Medici.

republic and argues that a well-governed republic should block the avenues for seeking support through private modes (See also *FH* VII.1). The methods Machiavelli lists for gaining reputation through private means were almost all used by the Medici: 'benefiting this or that other citizen, defending him from the magistrates, helping him with money, getting him unmerited honours, and ingratiating oneself with the plebs with games and public gifts' (*FH* VII.1). For example, Cosimo had lent a large sum of money to almost every citizen 'who had any quality' in Florence (*FH* VI.5). Additionally, Bartolomeo, a Medici supporter, killed a virtuous citizen out of anger and jealousy but was not punished (*FH* VI.6-7). [45] Machiavelli also mentions that Piero organized a grand wedding for his son to 'cheer up the city' (*FH* VII.21). Through these private methods, the Medici made many citizens his 'partisans' (*FH* VI.26). The interest community formed by the Medici family not only weakened the functioning of public institutions but also encouraged individuals to accumulate political capital outside of public institutions, evading or even overthrowing public order. It was precisely through their friends and followers that the Medici family not only survived their exile in 1433 but were recalled to power by the Signoria of Florence just a year later (*FH* VI.31-33).

Another factional political custom that the Medici family skilfully employed was calumny. As previously indicated (3.6.1), in the *Discourses* Machiavelli makes a specific distinction between accusations as a public institution and calumnies that occur in public spaces and praises the Roman Republic for its effective management of the power to accuse. In stark contrast, in the context of the factional conflict in Florence, calumny became a highly effective means for rival factions to discredit each other, diminish their popularity, impede each other's access to office, and subvert their political actions. To illustrate, during the conflict with Lucca in the 1530s, Rinaldo Albizzi, one of the war leaders, was subjected to relentless calumnies from the Medici. Despite the Medici's support for the war against Lucca, they encountered a significant challenge due to the involvement of numerous commanders

[45] Although Machiavelli does not mention the Medici by name, after the account of the murder, he recounts that the faction that had been in power for ten years reformed the offices and deprived its rivals of the right to hold office, it is obvious that this refers to the faction headed by the Medici (*FH* VI.7).

from rival factions. In response, the Medici employed a range of tactics to slander them (*FH* IV.26). The use of calumny made it challenging for Rinaldo to carry out his military operations in Lucca, which demonstrates the Medici's disregard for the common good of Florence in favour of the self-serving interests of their own faction.

After the Medici faction came to power in 1434, one of the key ways they consolidated their rule was by establishing institutions in line with the tradition of factional politics, the most important being the electoral system and the Balìa system (Clarke, 2018, pp. 107-8; Chen, 2021a, pp. 127-9). The Medici faction manipulated the electoral process for key offices, including the Signoria. By making new lists for the lot, removing the names of enemies from the election bags and adding the names of friends and granting the matchmakers the power to select the new Signoria, the Medici faction firmly controlled the appointment of important offices in Florence (*FH* V.4).[46] Additionally, the Medici family frequently established Balìa and small councils to undermine the functions of the traditional councils (*FH* VII.1). By reshaping institutions to meet the demands of factional politics, the Medici family was able to consolidate their rule.

The Medici faction also encountered a number of significant challenges resulting from factional politics, the most notable of which was the emergence of internal divisions following a factional victory. Machiavelli observed that the rapid internal division of the victorious faction was a common phenomenon in Florentine politics. In Machiavelli's words, 'in a city that prefers to maintain itself with sects rather than with laws, as soon as one sect is left there without opposition, it must of necessity divide from within itself, because the city cannot defend itself by those **private modes** that it had ordered in the first place for its own safety' (*FH* III.5, emphasis added). This rapid internal division within the victorious faction is a significant contributing factor to the unending internal conflicts that characterised Florentine politics (*FH* Preface).

In the third period, the leaders of the Medici family, leveraging their exceptional personal talents and abundant family resources, perfected factional governance strategies in

[46] For a more detailed discussion of the Florentine electoral system during the reign of the Medici family, see Rubinstein (1997).

both institutional and customary aspects. This enabled them to exert firm control over the political operations of Florence, allowing factional interests to prevail over the common good. At the same time, the Medici's factional rule served to reinforce Florence's long-standing tradition of factional politics, causing the city to deviate increasingly from the principles and practices of republican governance. In Machiavelli's view, while Medici rule might contribute to Florence's prosperity and stability in the short term, it did not fundamentally enhance the city's institutional and customary structures, rendering it unsustainable in the long run.

4.8 Conclusion

The above analysis shows that, in addition to problems with the design of Florentine institutions, there were also major problems with Florentine customs. Machiavelli argues in the *Discourses* that good customs and good laws go hand in hand: 'for as good customs have need of laws to maintain themselves, so laws have need of good customs so as to be observed' (*D* I.8). On the one hand, the long tradition of factional politics and armed struggle in Florence reduced public orders to mere ornaments, with conflicts often resolved by private and violent means rather than by public and moderate ones. On the other hand, institutions were conceived in the interests of factional parties rather than in the collective and public interest, which further reinforced the tradition of factional politics and armed struggle. In the Ciompi, for example, Michele di Lando, although praised by Machiavelli for defending the public interest of the city, was unable to escape the bondage of factionalism.

Machiavelli's perspective on the maintenance of good order through customs and institutions remains consistent across the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories*, despite the differing emphasis in each. In the *Florentine Histories*, he underscores the indispensability of both customs and institutions for preserving good order, contrasting with the *Discourses*, which places greater emphasis on class-based institutions for conflict regulation. The Roman Republic's mixed regime, centred on the Senate and the Plebeian Tribunes, effectively confined internal conflicts within an institutional framework without relying heavily on good customs. In Florence, however, In Florence, the institutional design is flawed due to the negative influence of customs. The customs of factional politics and armed conflict, unable

to be changed due to the ineffective functioning of institutions, continue to consolidate. This results in a continuous occurrence of internal conflicts.

The above analysis also shows that Machiavelli's view of the nobles, the people and the plebs in *Florentine Histories* is essentially the same as in the *Discourses*. In general, the desire of the nobility to dominate and the desire of the people to be dominated was a source of conflict within every republic. However, after the nominal elimination of the aristocracy in Florence, the internal conflict did not disappear or diminish, and even grew in scope. This suggests that the distinction between aristocracy and people was not absolute, and that the people also displayed a desire to dominate others when they had the resources and ability to do so, in line with Machiavelli's general understanding of human nature (See Chapter 2). The wool workers, for example, were not satisfied with their one-third share of the Signoria and wanted to dominate all the affairs of Florence entirely by themselves. Besides, although the Medici always claimed to represent the interests of the people, and indeed often subsidised the poor, they ruled not for the common good of Florence but for the benefit of their own families as well as factions. Machiavelli, therefore, did not believe that the desire of people was not always just. This is again consistent with the view in the *Discourses* that Machiavelli did not stand fixedly for the nobility or the people, but for the common good of the republics.

With regard to the future of Florence, Machiavelli believed that it needed a radical reform to become a true republic. As Najemy points out, no founder, lawgiver or redeemer emerged in the Florentine Histories. Najemy further argues that Machiavelli believed that a princely reformer could not have emerged in Florence to rearrange the city in anything approaching a successful and beneficial manner (Najemy, 1982b, pp. 575-576). However, as McCormick notes, Florentine leaders could and should emulate the ancient examples of founders and reformers that Machiavelli praised, notably Moses, Romulus and Brutus (McCormick, 2017). For example, a new good order could have been established in Florence if Michele di Lando could have freed himself from the shackles of factional politics, armed the people and created a citizen militia, used violence to reorder when necessary, and set up institutions for mitigating internal conflicts.

Chapter 5 Machiavelli and Contemporary Political Theories

5.1 Introduction

More than five centuries after Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, the *Discourses*, and the *Florentine Histories*, his political thought continues to show enduring vitality. Theorists have offered various interpretations of Machiavelli's ideas from a variety of perspectives, and have attempted to revitalise his concepts as fundamental intellectual assets for modern political thought and practice. This diversity of interpretation underlines the complex influence and significance of Machiavelli's ideas in contemporary political discussions. Machiavelli's insights, particularly with regard to internal conflict, are an essential and valuable resource for contemporary political thought.

In this chapter, I will separately analyse the three influential contemporary interpretations of Machiavelli represented by Skinner and Pettit's freedom as non-domination, McCormick's Machiavellian democracy, and Vergara's plebeian politics. I will examine how they interpret Machiavelli and how they use the intellectual resources provided by Machiavelli to address the political challenges of our time. Later in this chapter, I will give a brief overview of agonism, an important branch of contemporary political theory, and outline its main viewpoints. I will also explore the affinity and covert relationship between agonism and Machiavelli's thought. Finally, I will attempt to use Machiavelli's insights on internal conflict in republics to stimulate new reflections on contemporary agonism.

5.2 Three Interpretations of Machiavelli and Their Relevance to Contemporary Political Theory

5.2.1 The Republican Reading and Freedom as Non-domination

According to David Held, there are four classical models of democracy that have been influential in the history of Western political thought: 'the classical idea of democracy in

ancient Athens; the republican conception of a self-governing community (elaborated in two variants: protective and developmental republicanism); liberal democracy (again, elaborated in two different variants: protective democracy and developmental democracy); and the Marxist conception of direct democracy' (Held, 2006, p. 3). As Held points out, at the heart of republicanism is an emphasis on the active participation of citizens in politics, and there are two distinct variants within it: protective republicanism and developmental republicanism. Developmental republicanism (represented by Rousseau) emphasises the intrinsic value of political participation for the development of the citizen as a human being[47], while protective republicanism (represented by Machiavelli) emphasises the instrumental significance of political participation for the protection of citizens' personal freedom. Moreover, while developmental republicanism is largely inherited from classical democracy in Athens, protective republicanism can be traced back to ancient Rome and its historical influences (Held, 2006, pp. 33-67).

The protective republicanism that Held proposes is similar to the republican paradigm constructed by the Cambridge School in the history of Western political thought. As noted above, the republican reading surrounding Machiavelli and the history of Western political thought has two constituent elements. First, the Cambridge School constructed a republican genealogy, with a free way of life and a republican constitution at its core, in the history of Western political thought, and Machiavelli is considered to occupy a particularly crucial position in this genealogy. Second, the excavation and elaboration of the republican tradition in the history of Western thought complements and enriches contemporary political theory's discussion of the concept of freedom, with the practical intention of stimulating civic action and political participation. On the basis of new historical interpretations, these scholars also hope to find new possibilities for the contemporary political dilemmas. This attempt is what is known as the neo-Roman republicanism, with freedom as non-domination as a central concept.

Skinner developed a theory of neo-Roman republicanism by examining the civic

[47] Developmental republicanism has been revived by political thinkers including Hannah Arendt and Michael Sandel (Arendt, 2013; Sandel, 1996; 1998).

humanism of the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, of which Machiavelli was a central figure, and the republican conception of liberty before and after the English Revolution of the seventeenth century (Skinner, 1991; 2012). Since the 1990s, Pettit has gradually developed a theory of republicanism centred on 'freedom as non-domination', which he claims to have benefited from Skinner's and Pocock's historical interpretations of republicanism (Pettit, 1993; 1997; 2012, p. 8). Under Pettit's influence, Skinner also defines his theory of republicanism through the concept of freedom as non-domination (Skinner, 2012, pp. xi, 70; Browning, Prokhovnik and Dimova-Cookson, 2012, pp. 187-188). Their theory of republicanism was received with great enthusiasm, and a number of influential political theorists in Anglo-American political theory criticised and responded to it, resulting in a rich body of work (e.g., Dagger, 1997; Larmore, 2001; Maynor, 2003; Laborde and Maynor, 2009; Gädeke, 2020). The revival of neo-Roman republicanism thus moved to the centre of contemporary political theory debate.

Both Pettitt and Skinner propose freedom as non-domination based on their critique of Berlin's idea of negative freedom and positive freedom (Berlin, 2002; Skinner, 1990b; Pettit, 1997). Dissatisfied with the Berlin's understanding of freedom presented in terms of a dichotomy, Skinner attempts to break through the limits of negative and positive freedom by examining the conception of freedom in the early days of modern political thought. Skinner argues that the debate between positive and negative freedom stems at a deeper level from an understanding of human nature (Skinner, 2002b, p. 190). Positive freedom theorists believe in people's potential for public spirit and civic virtue, and their political design focuses on how to provide the institutional conditions for autonomy and civic participation, while negative freedom views people's public virtue with distrust, and their political design focuses on guarding against individual wickedness that harms others. Skinner criticizes Berlin's dichotomous understanding of freedom, stating that it is too simplistic and ignores the possibilities of other conceptions of freedom. What is particularly problematic is that positive freedom is not the only one that values virtue and public service; historically there is a form of negative freedom (the neo-Roman freedom) originally closely linked to the idea of virtue and public service, and this has been unreasonably neglected (Skinner, 1984; 2012, p.

33). Pettit similarly argues that this distinction by Berlin has had pernicious effects on political thought, ignoring other different understandings of freedom (Pettit, 1997, p. 19).

In contrast to the liberal conception of negative freedom as 'freedom as non-interference', both Pettit and Skinner define ad defend a republican conception of negative freedom as 'freedom as non-domination' (Pettit, 2012, p. 7; Skinner, 2012, p. 85). They argue that freedom as non-domination captures the key content of freedom better than freedom as non-interference. In Pettit's words, the more fundamental characteristic of freedom lies in the absence of domination, which means that 'you must not be exposed to a power of interference on the part of any others, even if they happen to like you and do not exercise that power against you' (Pettit, 2012, p. 7). Interference refers to the intentional hindrance of the actions and choices of others, whereas domination refers to 'exposure to another's power of uncontrolled interference' (Pettit, 2012, p. 28). According to this definition, any relationship of domination consists of two aspects: first, the other has the capacity to interfere; second, the interference is arbitrary in the sense that it can be exercised at will. On the one hand, if one party can interfere with the other arbitrarily (i.e., without restraint), this creates a relationship of domination even if the former does not actually interfere with the latter. For example, a slave owner may be extraordinarily kind to his slaves and never interfere with their choices, but since he can interfere as much as he wants, those slaves are still not free because their conduct is always subject to the will of the master. On the other hand, not all interference constitutes domination. Only arbitrary interference – interference without regard for the ideas and interests of those subject to interference is domination. For example, if a tax is imposed for the benefit of all (e.g., for the purposes of national defence and the maintenance of public order), then this interference is not arbitrary and therefore does not constitute domination. Pettit points out that although both liberalism and republicanism treat freedom as a value of primary importance, they differ profoundly because of their different understandings of freedom (Pettit, 2012, pp. 10-11).

Skinner further notes that both neo-Roman writers and non-interventionist liberal thinkers (represented by Hobbes) saw freedom as the absence of slavery, and both held a negative view of freedom, but the key issue was the difference in their understanding of

what constituted ‘slavery’ (Skinner, 2012, p. 83). The neo-Roman republican writers saw slavery not just as a state of physical possession and oppression, but as a condition in which the individual was ‘under the authority of another’ as a result of the master-slave relationship (Skinner, 2012, p. 41). For example, in ancient Greece and Rome there were often benevolent and generous masters, and they often went out on long journeys, but it does not follow that in such cases the slaves were not slaves but free men. Hobbes, on the other hand, believed that a free man is one who can do what he will (whatever his strength and wisdom make possible) without immediate and direct hindrance. In this way, republican freedom is more concerned with status and states of affairs, while freedom from interference is more a freedom of activity.

Importantly, Skinner and Pettit do not see freedom as non-domination as a positive conception of freedom. Pettit argues that the idea of positive freedom is central to the Continental republicanism or communitarian represented by Rousseau (Pettit, 1997, p.???; Pettit, 2012, p. 12). Pettit points out that Rousseau’s conception of freedom is similar to that of Italian-Atlantic republicanism (represented by Machiavelli), but in critiquing ‘the mixed constitution and the contestatory image of the citizenry’, he made a dramatic break with that tradition (Pettit, 2012, pp. 11-18). Whereas Rousseauian communitarian tended to see public activity as superior to private life, it was the enjoyment of freedom in the realm of private life that was celebrated by Italian-Atlantic republicanism. In this republican picture, it is because of this freedom that you can sit on an equal footing with others without having to depend on anyone’s gifts or goodwill. Since Pettit claims that communitarian is ‘normatively unattractive’, he bases his republicanism on Italian-Atlantic republicanism as a form of negative freedom (Pettit, 2012, p. 15).

Skinner, as a historian, attempts to ‘re-enter the intellectual world we have lost and to question the exclusivity of the liberal view of freedom’ by examining the history of liberty in the early years of modern political thought, mainly the civic humanism of Italian Renaissance and the republican ideas before and after the England Revolution (Skinner, 2012, p. 2). By identifying the similarities and differences between the views on freedom of the Neo-Roman writers and those of the pioneering writers of modern liberalism, Skinner hopes to highlight

the basic ideas and theoretical values of the republican view of freedom. As Skinner shows, republicanism consists of three core ideas.

First, the core concept of republicanism is freedom, including external political independence and internal autonomy (Skinner, 1978, p. 26). The opposite of freedom is slavery, a state of being under the laws and authority of others (Skinner, 2012, p. 41). As Skinner points out, the cities of late medieval Italy, which had freedom as their ideal, generally had two very clear and distinct concepts in their contest with the empire and the church: one was their right not to accept any external control over their political life - that is, to preserve their sovereignty; the other concept is their corresponding right to autonomy to defend their existing republican institutions (Skinner, 1978, p. 76). It is worth noting that republicanism claims that individual freedom presupposes the freedom of the community. While not denying individual freedom, republicanism (at least since the Italian Renaissance) stresses that individual freedom is not a gift but needs a man-made free state as an institutional prerequisite.

Second, a mixed and balanced regime is the best regime to ensure freedom. For republicans, the measure of a good system of government is, above all, its durability, and a mixed and balanced system of government is the most durable because it combines the benefits of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy.

Third, virtue is the quality that ensures achievement and sustains freedom in public life. Republicans believe that a peaceful and free life depends not only on the design of the system but also on the virtue of the citizens, chief among which is a love of community, or a spirit and virtue of devotion to the common good. Some republicans even believe that in order to preserve freedom, the most important thing is the political virtue of the citizens, followed by an effective organisation and a legal structure. Machiavelli, for example, particularly emphasised the importance of virtue. According to Skinner's interpretation, Machiavelli saw no necessary connection between public virtue and the traditional morality of the Christianity, and he 'merely equated the idea of virtue with all the qualities needed in practice to save the existence of our nation and to preserve its freedom' (Skinner, 1978, p. 125).

In constructing his theory of republicanism with freedom as non-domination at its core, Pettit tied it closely to a historical tradition (Pettit, 2012, pp. 18-21). He did so for two reasons: first, such an interpretation is likely to be more widely accepted if it has a historical basis (especially, if it comes from authors who are admired by most people); and second, it has greater intellectual credibility. From this, Pettit suggests that a republican government should preserve and promote civil liberties, that the form of government should be constitutional and democratic, and that republican government must emphasise the cultivation of civic virtue.

The goal of republican government is to preserve and promote the civil liberties of its citizens. 'Promoting liberty' entails that republicans are politically radical, holding more radical ideas about solving social problems and preferring to use the power of the state. On a policy level, Pettit set five goals for a republican government (Pettit, 1997, pp. 151-169): to prevent wars, to establish a good legal system, to ensure the social and economic independence of people, to prosper the economy, including raising the level of employment, ensuring the stability of the financial system, providing a good infrastructure for industry and commerce, and providing legal protection for economic activity, and to provide citizens with equal status in society so that they are willing to participate in public life.

Second, the republican form of government is constitutional and democratic, which is primarily intended to prevent the arbitrary abuse of state power (Pettit, 1997, pp. 173-181). In order to prevent the arbitrary use of state power and to eliminate the threat to civil liberties posed by the imposition of laws by the government, a republican form of government must have institutional guarantees. There are two kinds of guarantee: constitutionalism and democracy. Constitutionalism implies the rule of law: on the one hand, the law should be universal, public, and clear and apply to all, including legislators; on the other hand, the rule of law requires that the government should act in accordance with the law and that its discretionary powers be effectively restrained. In addition, Pettit proposes a 'distinctive form of democracy' for the republican government to 'operate on the people's terms' (Pettit, 2012, p. 3). According to this form of democracy, in the short term, democracy can give the people influence over elections and contestatory processes, thus empowering

them in the longer term to force the government to follow widely accepted norms of policymaking. These two processes, which correspond to different time periods, combine to ensure that the people enjoy a high degree of power over the laws that govern and shape their lives, and thus avoid public domination (Pettit, 2012, pp. 3-4, 187-292).

Finally, the republican state requires civic virtue. The republican state is founded on the rule of law, and citizens must obey the law. However, republicans also believe that the law will not function effectively if citizens do not have civic virtue. In Pettit's words, 'the law must support the norm, and the norm must support the law' (Pettit, 1997, p. 242). According to Pettit, four conditions must be met for a norm to be a norm, or for a norm to work. First, people are usually able to comply with the relevant pattern of behaviour. Second, if people behave in accordance with the relevant pattern of behaviour they are appreciated; if they do not behave in accordance with it, they are criticised. Third, appreciation reinforces the behaviour and makes it more likely to occur. Fourthly, the norm is well known, i.e., everyone in the society knows it and is sure that others know it too. If citizens can act in accordance with such a norm, then they have civic virtue. According to Pettit, the benefits of citizenship for a republican state are, firstly, that it helps citizens to obey the law voluntarily, rather than out of fear of punishment; second, that it enables citizens to base their disputes or protests not on their personal interests but on the interests of the group to which they belong; and finally, that it helps citizens to fulfil their civic duties and to stand up for themselves when it comes to social justice. Finally, citizenship helps citizens to fulfil their civic duty to stand up for what is right (Pettit, 1997, pp. 171-177).

5.2.2 A Critique of the Republican Reading and Its Contemporary Implication

Pettit's and Skinner's republicanism rests heavily on the Cambridge School's interpretation of republican writers, including Machiavelli, Harrington, Rousseau, etc. However, the republican reading, particularly in its interpretation of Machiavelli, suffers from significant flaws. As argued in the second and third chapters, Machiavelli's political theory is grounded in his understanding of general human nature, an aspect that the republican

reading largely overlooks. Moreover, a Machiavellian republic features a dynamic and communal conflict between the nobles and the people, which necessitates institutions to regulate conflict and safeguard freedom. The republican interpretation, however, fails to be sufficiently attentive to the social stratification emphasised by Machiavelli and its implications for the institutions necessary to secure freedom.

The republican reading emphasises the pursuit of freedom as non-domination by the citizens of the republic and ignores Machiavelli's emphasis on people's desire for security, power, glory, and wealth. As argued before (section 2.2), according to Machiavelli, human beings are driven by their desires and are in a constant pursuit of them. Skinner's emphasis on the love of freedom as non-domination as a natural human trait is contested by Machiavelli who argues that it is a product of socialization and political circumstances (Skinner, 1991, p. 38). Skinner notes Machiavelli's frequent reference to two opposing groups of citizens, the plebs who do not want to be dominated and oppressed by the nobles and the nobles who seek to dominate and oppress the plebs. However, as previously noted, Machiavelli emphasises that both groups share a common trait, namely the human nature composed of desires for security, glory, power, and wealth. Although Skinner acknowledges Machiavelli's view that most people are not inherently virtuous, he overlooks the fact that both groups are motivated by ambition rather than personal freedom, no matter how high they rise in status. The various cases of conflict discussed by Machiavelli (particularly D I.37 on how the conflict around the Agrarian Law led to the fall of the Roman Republic) demonstrate that internal conflict emerged when there was no longer an external enemy to resist. Furthermore, these conflicts were not driven by the majority's pursuit of freedom as non-domination, but by their innate desire for security, power, glory, and wealth. In this regard, Machiavelli argues that freedom as non-domination was already a political reality rather than a fundamental human desire. Before the enactment of the law, people sought security, power, glory, and wealth, rather than freedom as non-domination. The conflict caused by desire prompted the Romans to consider the need for law as a necessity, as Machiavelli asserts that 'many things that reason does not bring you, necessity brings you' (*D* I.6). Machiavelli acknowledges that those who have adapted to freedom will not be easily

ruled by a prince (*D* II.2, *P* 5), but he only emphasises that conquering cities that have always enjoyed a liberal way of life would be extremely difficult, as freedom in a republic becomes linked with the desire for security, glory, power, and wealth, and the free constitution enables citizens to pursue these desires.

Therefore, Machiavelli's break with his republican ancestors has been 'inadequately delineated' in Skinner's reading guided by his contextualist method (Hulliung, 1984, pp. 26-27). This break is reflected in the fact that, for Machiavelli, social conflict functioned not only to maintain the balance and freedom of different groups, but also, and more importantly, as the fuel of Rome's success and glory in foreign expansion (c.f., Pedullà, 2018, pp. 145-180). As Hulliung argues, this 'predatory' or expansive republicanism claimed by Machiavelli is obscured by a republican reading (Hulliung, 1984, p. 20).

The republicanism proposed by Pettit is thus not consistent with a Machiavellian republic in this respect. His concept of contestatory democracy (Pettit, 1997, pp. 292-297) includes judicial, trial, multi-house and local character systems that allow voters to review or amend decisions of elected elites. However, these institutions are all general and not specific to any particular social class, as opposed to Machiavelli advocates (McCormick, 2011, p. 16). Moreover, according to Machiavelli's view, institutions conducive to freedom cannot be designed by one party of the republic but would emerge from the conflict between the noble and the plebs. The republic therefore needs to remain open to innovation of institutions.

5.2.3 The Democratic Reading and New Democratic Institutions

Focusing on Machiavelli's discussion of political conflict, the democratic reading sees the fierce action of the people against aristocratic rule and oppressive desires as an important means of maintaining political freedom. The democratic reading challenges the republican reading of Machiavelli and critiques the aristocratic tendencies of contemporary republicanism, and it also proposes some distinctive institutional response to the contemporary crisis of representative democracy. Typical of this reading and its contemporary implications is McCormick and his proposal for a 'Machiavellian democracy'

(McCormick, 2011).[48]

According to McCormick, Machiavelli was an anomaly in the republican tradition outlined by the Cambridge School, notably in his populist stance. The classical republicans, such as Guicciardini and Rousseau, were deeply suspicious of the temperament and political capacity of the people, and this suspicion profoundly influenced the design of their institutions. Although they did not directly deny all political rights to the general population, they conceived of a republic in which the nobles remained dominant, and the political space of the people was severely restricted. In contrast to this republican tradition, Machiavelli had a more positive view of the political role of the people and was more sceptical of the ambitions and desires of the nobles to rule. He therefore not only gave extensive political power to the people, but also designed his politics to create strict accountability for the elite. For McCormick, the dominant model of mixed government in the republican tradition was provided by Machiavelli's aristocratic friend Guicciardini, in which the nobles, with their political experience and prudential virtues, dominated and direct popular political participation was strictly limited. The 'Machiavellian moment' would therefore be better described as the 'Guicciardini moment' (McCormick, 2003; 2011, pp. 141-169; 2018, pp. 176-206).

Furthermore, McCormick argues that Rousseau similarly supports the dominance of elites in republics in his account of the Roman republic through his analysis of Book IV of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (McCormick, 2007; 2018, pp. 109-143). Comparing Machiavelli's and Rousseau's respective appropriation of the Roman constitution, McCormick points out three main differences between them. First, Machiavelli's assemblies were more democratic, in which the plebs had equal rights with the noble and some of which the rich were excluded from in order to maximise popular influence. However, in Rousseau's assemblies, the timocratic voting structure allowed the political and economic elite to control the decisions made by the assembly. Second, Machiavelli emphasised the primacy of the plebian tribunes over other institutions as a guardian of liberty in Rome, whereas

[48] There are other scholars who have proposed democratic interpretations of Machiavelli and explored their relevance to contemporary political theory. Notable among these scholars are Vatter (2012; 2000), Del Lucchese (2009; 2015; 2018), and Holman (2018).

Rousseau blamed the tribunes for the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Roman Empire. Finally, Machiavelli emphasises that patronage, exacerbated by growing socio-economic inequalities, largely contributed to the eventual collapse of the Roman Republic and the unredeemable corruption of the Florentine Republic in his time; and that Rousseau praised the patronage relationship, possibly because it allowed wealthy and wise aristocratic citizens to promote the common good in a way that influenced or manipulated the poor, dependent plebeian citizens. In short, McCormick argues that Rousseau and the Cambridge School were similar in that they both belonged to a republican tradition with elitist tendencies, and that they both supported a general rather than class-specific political system.

McCormick therefore argues that the issue of political accountability that plagues contemporary democracy should be addressed not by drawing inspiration from Rousseau's already influential model of political homogeneity, nor by seeking ideological resources from neo-Roman republicanism proposed by the Cambridge School, but by drawing on Machiavellian model of class-specific popular government. [49] On the basis of criticism of the Cambridge School and Rousseauian homogeneity democracy, McCormick seeks to draw theoretical and institutional resources from Machiavelli's writings to construct 'Machiavellian Democracy' that would revolutionise the institutional design of contemporary democracy and remedy the current shortcomings of an increasingly elitist and insufficiently accountable representative democracy (McCormick, 2011, pp. vii-ix). McCormick summarises the key features of Machiavellian democratic institutional design as 'class-specific, popularly empowering, and elite-constraining' (McCormick, 2011, p. 16). Specifically, Machiavellian democracy includes public offices or assemblies where the veto or legislative power is granted and the participation of the wealthy citizens is prohibited, a process for appointing the magistrate that combines lottery and election, and political trials where all citizens make

[49] Today's representative democracy with competitive elections, as conceptualized by Schumpeter (1942), is increasingly encountering increasing criticism and scrutiny (e.g., Przeworski, Stokes and Manin, 1999; Mansbridge, 2003; Vergara, 2020). One alternative approach under consideration is the implementation of sortition, a method of selecting public officials by random sampling rather than popular vote (e.g., Manin, 1997; Sintomer, 2023). It is in this context that McCormick seeks to draw on Machiavelli's theory to develop a more participatory and egalitarian democracy (c.f., Urbinati, 2011; Smith and Owen, 2011; O'Leary, 2011; Saxonhouse, 2011; Green, 2011; Zuckert, 2019).

the final decision on charges and appeals (McCormick, 2011, p. 2).

McCormick points out at least two serious defects of contemporary representative democracy compared to Machiavelli's ideal model of popular government: the lack of extra-electoral means for common citizens to hold political elites to account and the lack of a quasi-formal distinction between economic or political elites and common citizens (McCormick, 2011, pp. 178-179). McCormick therefore proposes a thought experiment that seeks to add a new institution to the US Constitution to strengthen civic participation and popular control over elites. The core institution is a 'People's Tribunate', a group of fifty-one lottery-selected citizens for a one-year term, and in which political elites (those who had served two consecutive terms in a major municipal, state, or federal office) and economic elites (members of the richest tenth percent of American households) do not have the qualification to be chose as a member. The People's Tribunate has three main constitutional powers: the power to veto legislation, executive orders, and Supreme Court decisions, to call a national referendum on any issue under the principle of majority rule, to impeach officials in each of the three branches of government. At the end of their term, any member of the People's Tribunate can be prosecuted by a subsequent People's Tribunate for misconduct, though McCormick does not mention any provision for checks and balances of the People's Tribunate during their term (McCormick, 2011, pp. 183-185). McCormick hopes that the People's Tribunate will act as a guardian of freedom within the American republic, like the plebeian tribunes and assemblies in the Roman Republic, raising the class consciousness of ordinary citizens and giving them exclusive institutional channels for political participation, thus excluding interference and corruption of elites and enabling ordinary citizens to check elites with vigour and intensity that electoral politics itself cannot provide.

5.2.4 A Critique on the Democratic Reading and New Democratic Institutions

McCormick's interpretation of Machiavelli, while focusing on his distinctively populist side, obscures one of the most important themes of Machiavelli's political thought: that the freedom and power of the republic relies on the mutual struggle and interdependence of the

nobles and the plebs. McCormick argues that Machiavelli's general description of human nature lacks substance and that his distinction between the humours of the nobles and the plebs deserves more attention. However, as shown in the previous cases of conflict in the chapters two and three, human greed is context-dependent and subject to political and psychological structures. When oppressed by the nobles, the plebs may have limited desires, but they can also display a strong tendency to expand and dominate under certain circumstances. In Machiavelli's view, those who wish to maintain have greater reason to create tumults than those who wish to acquire (*D* I.5). Usually those who wish to maintain refer to the nobles and those who wish to acquire refer to the plebs, but sometimes it is the plebs who become those who wish to maintain and create conflict (e.g., *D* I.37). Similarly, Machiavelli argues that 'the end of the people is more decent than that of the great' (P IX). However, he does not mean that the ends of the people are always decent.

McCormick's democratic interpretation also ignores Machiavelli's emphasis on the positive role of nobles or elites in the republic and the republic's quest for expansion. The virtue of the nobles is of vital importance to the maintenance and renewal of the republic. As noted before, the plebs are prone to make mistakes and act on blind impulse to the detriment of the common good, not only because they lack sufficient understanding and judgement and are easily deceived by appearances and immediate conditions, but also because they lacked ruling and leadership skills. In the Roman Republic, when the plebs erred, it was usual for the nobles to persuade them by various means to gain their support and understanding, leading them in expansion and pursuit of glory while maintaining political stability at home. But in the Florentine Republic, as Machiavelli points out, the nobles lost their virtue in arms and generosity of spirit, which the plebs never possessed, because they were denied an opportunity to participate in politics forced to imitate the lifestyles of the plebs. It eventually caused Florence to become increasingly 'humble and abject' (*FH* III.1). When a republic falls into serious corruption and inequality, it is always elites that, by extraordinary means, establish the laws of the republican system, return the republic to its beginnings, and restore its spiritual vitality and political freedom (*D* III.1).

Moreover, most Roman generals were from aristocratic elites who led the Roman army,

which was composed of both nobles and commoners, in foreign expansion and the establishment of great feats. McCormick argues that imperial glory was never a conviction for Machiavelli, but merely a rhetoric to lure young aristocratic men (McCormick, 2011, p. 56). However, Machiavelli believed that freedom and imperial expansion were the two most important values that the Republic should pursue, and even that the value of freedom lay in promoting the expansion of the republic.

In this way, for Machiavelli, a republic should not be one in which nobles despise and reject plebs, nor one in which nobles reject or even destroy nobles, but one in which the two are bound together, needing each other, in and through relations of conflict and struggle, and in which this conflict is channelled through laws and institutions that create an inclusive community that can accommodate both to the greatest extent possible. In short, in the Machiavellian republic, nobles and plebs not only struggle but also cooperate in the process of struggle, maintaining a balance between them, whereas in the McCormick's model the emphasis is more on how the plebs can control the elites.

5.2.5 The Radical Reading and Its Programme

Left-wing scholars have developed a keen interest in Machiavelli's political thought regarding political independence and conflict, as a response to the defeat of the workers' movement in Western Europe and the setbacks to Marxism since the mid-twentieth century (Breckman, 2015). Radical scholars, sometimes political activists, including Louis Althusser (1999), Claude Lefort (2012), Antonio Negri (1999), Chantal Mouffe (2013), Miguel Abensour (2011), Martin Breaugh (2013), and Camila Vergara (2019; 2020), have reflected on the philosophical premises of Marxism and sought new theoretical support from historical political thought to explore new political possibilities in post-Marxism era. The focus here is on Vergara's diagnosis of contemporary political maladies and the remedy she prescribes. According to Vergara, representative democracy suffers from systemic corruption, 'a form of political decay that manifests itself as an oligarchization of power in society' (Vergara, 2020, p. 2). This corruption is the result of social and economic power structures, driven in particular by the ineradicable tensions between the wealthy ruling elites and common

citizens. Therefore, it cannot be addressed by the existing institutions but only by conceiving new ones. Vergara examines the institutional and normative innovations proposed by Machiavelli, Nicolas de Condorcet, Rosa Luxemburg, and Hannah Arendt to find ideological resources.

Vergara argues that Machiavelli's interpretation of the political experience of the plebs in the Roman and Florentine Republics can be considered as belonging to 'a plebeian-materialist strand' in the theory of the mixed constitution (Vergara, 2020, pp. 6, 126-143). Machiavelli's plebeian position is reflected in his choice of the plebs over the nobles as the guardian of freedom, as the former only aspired to be free from rule. Vergara rightly points out that Machiavelli believes that a free republic required a dynamic balance between the nobles and the plebs, which could only be achieved through institutionalised political conflict, enabling the nobles to satisfy their ambition to rule and the plebs to defend freedom through active participation in political power. In an ideal republican order, desires and conflicts are expressed and tamed through institutions and oriented towards the common good. Vergara argues that the authority of the Senate and consuls in the Roman Republic was derived from tradition, while the authority of the plebian leaders was not based on the sacred and original foundations of Rome, but on the power exerted by the plebs and their essential role in defending freedom. In moments of necessity, the plebs forced the nobles to give way through illegal means (e.g., mobilisation, occupation of public space, and violence) to preserve freedom. However, the legislative and administrative power of plebs, gained through open conflict, was easily lost as a result of inevitable corruption. The key problem, as the conflict over the Agrarian Law reveals, was that 'the authority of the tribunes was never entirely severed from the popular force through which it had originated, and thus never entirely respected by the ruling elite' (Vergara, 2020, p. 128). Machiavelli thus seeks to correct the 'institutional imbalance' that existed in the Roman Republic by formally constitutionalising the power of the plebs to resist domination from the nobles (Vergara, 2020, p. 128). Overall, Vergara suggests that Machiavelli's freedom was not the result of an institutional balance between two unequal powers, as in the case of Polybius, but of the plebs' periodic resistance to the inevitable and constant excesses of the nobles. While it was

theoretically possible to achieve a stable balance between the nobles and the plebs, the crucial guardian of freedom - the right to make final decisions - has to be kept in the plebs.

Vergara argues that Machiavelli equipped the plebs with two constituent powers in the political structure of a republic to combat the oppression of the nobles: 'periodic revision and creation of fundamental laws and institutions' and 'extraordinary popular punishment' (Vergara, 2020, p. 135). While Del Lucchese correctly emphasises the significant role of constitutional power in maintaining and renewing the republic, Vergara contends that in Machiavellian theory, the constituent power should only belong to the plebs, as its primary purpose is to counteract the oppression of the nobles (Vergara, 2020, pp. 135-143). Consequently, only the plebs have the power to modify the fundamental institutions and legal structures of society and to impose necessary violence on those who violate liberty as an exceptional punishment to awaken the fears that the elites had felt or would feel when the political order was established.

While highlighting the structural problem of modern democratic politics, Vergara also critiques certain flaws in the republican and democratic solutions. First, she criticises Pettit and other proceduralist republicans for not acknowledging the existing inequalities in access to the means of collective action. She argues that 'to put the burden of keeping corruption at bay on individual agency is thus a recipe for disaster because it allows for the silent, gradual, apparently consented-to slip into oligarchy' (Vergara, 2020, p. 35). Second, while McCormick's proposal to enhance the power of the common citizens through class-specific institutions such as the tribunate aligns with Vergara's approach, she contends that his suggestion to exclude the wealthiest 10% of households from the tribunate violates the fundamental right of equal liberty that every citizen should enjoy in a free republic. She also asserts that the lottery as a method of choice generates weaker inclusion and unstable legitimacy (Vergara, 2020, pp. 226-235).

Inspired by the theory of plebian mixed constitution proposed by Machiavelli, Condorcet, etc., Vergara has put forward her own project in her work (Vergara, 2020, pp. 241-264). Her proposal involves the addition of an independent plebeian political structure to existing representative democracy, based on a decentralized and highly inclusive system of

local councils. These local councils, modelled on Condorcet's primary assemblies, are open to all those who do not hold any position of political or religious authority over others. By majority vote, any council has the power to veto decisions made by representative bodies, propose new laws, or even initiate the process of revising the constitution. If a resolution is approved by a majority of councils within the appropriate jurisdiction, it becomes the will of the people and will be enacted into law. To ensure the implementation of the people's will, the constitution also provides for a tribunal selected by lot. Vergara emphasises that this new plebeian branch would be autonomous and would not aim to achieve self-government or direct democracy, but rather to serve anti-oligarchic purposes: to judge and censor the ruling elites (Vergara, 2020, p. 5).

5.2.6 A Critique on the Radical Reading

The problem with Vergara's interpretation of Machiavelli is similar to that of McCormick. They both correctly see that a free republic requires a dynamic balance between the noble and the plebs or the few and the many, and that the balance can only be achieved through institutionalised political conflict. However, both of their interpretations overemphasise the purity of the plebs and ignore the positive role of the elite. First, as noted earlier, Machiavelli argued that the plebs did not always possess the humour not to be ruled. For example, Vergara argues that Michele di Lando's use of force to suppress the revolt of Ciompi meant that he betrayed the plebs, but as noted earlier (section 4.6.3), Machiavelli appreciated di Lando because the order established under di Lando's leadership had its share of major guilds, minor guilds and plebes. The plebs, on the other hand, tried to hold all the power independently at the time, which in Machiavelli's view was a serious mistake (*FH* III.1, 17). Moreover, Vergara claimed that the plebs should have the constitutional power to regularly renew the order of the republic. However, in Machiavelli's view, the renovation of the order is not something that can only be done by plebs. According to Machiavelli, drawing the republic back toward its beginning depended either on 'the virtue of a man' or 'the virtue of an order' (*D* III.1). The orders in Rome were 'the tribunes of the plebs, the censors, and all the other laws that went against the ambition and the insolence of men' (*D* 3.1). The orders

here include not only tribunes of the plebs but also censors, therefore requires both the plebs and the nobles. With regard to the reliance on 'the virtue of a man', most of the figures in Machiavelli's examples belonged to the aristocratic elite.

Second, Vergara argues that the political structure of Rome was not perfect and that the Senate could completely ignore the institutional power of the plebs, which ultimately led to the downfall of the Roman Republic. However, Machiavelli clearly asserts that the Roman Republic became 'a perfect republic, to which perfection it came through the disunion of the plebs and the Senate' (*D* I.2). He emphasises that as long as these institutions operate effectively, a stable dynamic power equilibrium can be established within the republic. Thus, Machiavelli underscores the critical importance of maintaining these institutions to counteract the corrosive influences of ambitious individuals and corruption. As noted earlier (3.6.4), in his examination of how conflicts over Agrarian laws precipitated the republic's downfall, Machiavelli not only critiques the nobles but also holds the plebs accountable (*D* I.37).

5.3 Machiavelli and Contemporary Agonism

Dissatisfied with the depoliticization of pluralism and the emphasis on consensus presupposed by liberalism, contemporary agonistic theorists offer a prescription for contemporary politics by emphasising conflict between different perspectives and interests (Wenman, 2013; Wingenbach, 2013). Agonistic theorists, including William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, Chantal Mouffe, James Tully, David Owen, and Mark Wenman, claim to have drawn intellectual resources from Machiavelli, Nietzsche, Arendt, Foucault, and others. Nevertheless, the ways in which contemporary agonism has been influenced by Machiavelli have never been fully addressed. Moreover, Machiavelli's insights on the institutionalisation of conflict within the republic can also contribute to contemporary agonistic theory.

5.3.1 Agonism and Agonistic Democracy

Agonism can be defined as a political theory that emphasises the inherent value of

political conflict (Foucault, 1982; Connolly, 2002; Honig, 1993; Mouffe, 1993; Tully, 2008; Fossen, 2008, p. 376; Wenman, 2013, pp. 3-27). The term agonism comes from the Greek '*agon*', meaning contest or strife, and was brought to the attention of Foucault, Honig, and Owen by Nietzsche's influential essay 'Homer's Contest' (Nietzsche, 2017; Foucault, 1982; Honig, 1993; Owen, 1995; 2002). According to Wenman, there are three core elements of agonism (Wenman, 2013, pp. 28-58). First, agonism accepts constitutive pluralism, which does not believe that there can be any transcendent measure to adjudicate between conflicting values, while rejecting the liberal concept of pluralism. By emphasising that plurality refers not only to the differences between groups and individuals but also to 'the circumstances that constitute and condition the identity of these groups and individuals', agonism also alerts citizens to the manipulation and distortion of plurality by dominant interests and values (Wenman, 2013, p. 29). Second, the agonistic vision of the world is tragic: conflict, suffering, and strife are universal phenomena in social and political life, not temporary conditions in a process towards reconciliation or salvation.[50] However, the fact that one has no hope of ultimate redemption from conflict does not mean that we are completely powerless in the face of fate. Rather, agonism as a strategic doctrine with its concern for the interplay between freedom and necessity, argues that there are ways in which we can make political conflict work to the advantage of all parties. Finally, agonism argues that conflict in political life can and should be regulated in such a way as to produce political good. By distinguishing between constructive and destructive conflict, or to use Mouffe's term 'agonism and antagonism', agonistic theorists emphasise that agonistic struggle can bring a range of benefits, including but not limited to contributing to the expression of individuality and promoting recognition, independence, and social equality.

[50] According to Wenman, the tragic version is characterized by the belief that 'no programme of action can be pursued without entailing loss' (Wenman, 2013, p. 44). He cites Machiavelli's statement that 'all choices involve risks, for the order of things is such that one never escapes one danger without incurring another; prudence lies in weighing the disadvantages of each choice and taking the least bad as good'. Wenman also notes that both Connolly's and Tully's theories include elements aimed to alleviating the tragic dilemmas facing humanity (Wenman, 2013, pp. 44-5). It is crucial to distinguish between the strong version of the tragic vision (Mouffe and Honig), emphasising the inevitability of conflict and confrontation, and the weak version (Connolly and Tully), which highlights the possibility of mitigating or mediating conflict.

From these core ideas, advocates of agonism have constructed a variety of theories of agonistic democracy. As Wenman points out, in the context of political diversity, political fundamentalism and globalisation, liberal democracy is challenged by, among other things, agonistic democracy (Wenman, 2013, pp. ix-xv). Overall, contemporary agonistic democracy theories, while accepting the fundamental legitimacy of liberal democratic constitutionalism, seek to emphasise the genuine innovation of modern politics - the moment of freedom that does not subsume judicial or dialectical forms of decision and integrate a paradoxical combination of multiple values in a truly open-ended struggle (Wenman, 2013, pp. 264-265). A distinctive feature of agonistic democratic theories is the recognition that political disagreement or conflict is a natural and necessary part of a healthy democratic society, which distinguishes them from liberal democracy that seeks to eliminate conflict through consensus. By exploring ways in which conflict can be a productive and constructive political good and introducing genuine novelty to institutions, agonistic democratic theories have the potential to be a necessary component in the struggles of various disadvantaged groups for independence and against arbitrary power (Wenman, 2013, p. 263).

5.3.2 Machiavelli and Agonism

Contemporary agonism can be traced back as far as Nietzsche's influential essay 'Homer's Contest'(Nietzsche, 2017), and Nietzsche's reflections on contest and *virtù* were influenced by Machiavelli's concept of *virtù*. Also influenced by Machiavelli's *virtù*, Arendt further developed theories on freedom and political action. Honig was inspired by Nietzsche and Arendt to propose a dichotomy between virtue theories of politics and *virtù* theories of politics. Foucault used Nietzsche's agon in his analysis of power. Influenced by Nietzsche and Foucault, Tully further developed theories on the various forms of struggle for citizen participation.

In the 'Homer's Contest', Nietzsche cites Hesiod's distinction between the good and evil Eris-goddesses, noting that the good Eris represents 'jealousy, grudge and envy' that goad people to act to contest, thus inspiring the Greeks to cultivate their virtues and promote the well-being of the state (Nietzsche, 2017, p. 177). In Nietzsche's account, the public culture of

Greek society fosters human virtue through 'an institutionalised ethos of contestation', inspiring citizens to strive to surpass one another in their quest for greatness and nobility (Owen, 1995, p. 139). It was under the inspiration of 'an institutionalised ethos of contestation' that 'every great Hellene passes on the torch of the contest; every great virtue strikes the spark of a new grandeur' (Nietzsche, 2017, p. 177). At the same time, the Greek city-states would design institutions to prevent the competition from ending when the best men came along. The most famous such institution was the ostracism, which Nietzsche argued was indicative of the core of Hellenic idea of competition: 'it loathes a monopoly of predominance and fears the dangers of this, it desires, as protective measure against genius – a second genius' (Nietzsche, 2017, p. 178). The competition education of the Greek demanded that every talent must reveal itself through struggle. The selfishness of the individuals was both stimulated to bring honour to themselves and restricted to be an instrument for achieving the well-being of the mother state. Conversely, without competing ambition, the Greek city-states would have decayed and fallen.

Nietzsche saw the competition education as a key reason for the great virtue of the Greeks, and the virtue that Nietzsche appreciated was fundamentally anti-Christian and close to what Machiavelli called virtù. Nietzsche expresses his appreciation of Machiavellian virtù and his criticism of Christian virtue in the second section of *The Anti-Christ*:

'What is good? - Everything that enhances people's feeling of power, will to power, power itself.

What is bad? - Everything stemming from weakness.

What is happiness? - The feeling that power is growing, that some resistance has been overcome.

Not contentedness, but more power; not peace, but war; not virtue, but prowess (virtue in the style of the Renaissance, virtù, moraline-free virtue).

The weak and the failures should perish: first principle of our love of humanity. And they should be helped to do this.

What is more harmful than any vice? - Active pity for all failures and weakness -

Christianity ’(Nietzsche, 2005, p. 4).

As Owen points out, Nietzsche’s appeal to the Renaissance idea of virtù is grounded in ‘his own commitment to realism in ethics and politics’ (Owen, 2019, p. 68).[51] Nietzsche argues that the essence of the Renaissance is ‘the revaluation of all Christian values, an attempt using all means, all instincts, all genius, to allow the opposite values, noble values to triumph (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 64). Renaissance civic humanist thinkers sought to restore the love of worldly glory as a worthy human purpose in the context of reconciling classical ethics and Christianity. Machiavelli went further, almost completely rejecting Christianity in favour of worldly glory as almost the only worthy goal (Owen, 2017). The pursuit of worldly glory requires specific qualities and capacities, i.e., virtù, which refers to ‘those capabilities required for, and manifest in, virtuosi performance in a domain of human conduct constitutively exposed to chance and necessity’ (Owen, 2019, p. 78). Nietzsche saw Cesare Borgia as a spiritual example of Renaissance virtue, as it would have had serious consequences for Christianity if Borgia had become pope.

Nietzsche makes clear that his realist vision of politics is inherited from Thucydides and Machiavelli, whose ‘absolute will not to fool themselves and to see reason in reality—not in ‘reason,’ still less in ‘morality’’(Nietzsche, 2005, p. 225). Premised on a tragic conception of the world that acknowledges that the world we live in is only partially comprehensible to us, their political realism seeks a sober analytical exploration of a range of political scenarios and explores strategies for human survival and glory (Owen, 2019, pp. 79-80). Political realism is best exemplified in Machiavelli’s redescription and condemnation, or in Nietzsche’s term, re-evaluation, of classical and Christian virtues (generosity, benevolence, fidelity, etc.). Machiavelli, for example, pointed out that although keeping faith was established as an unconditional obligation by Christianity, many people in the world at the time were unable to

[51] For an account of Nietzsche’s reading of Machiavelli’s books, see Owen (2019, p. 75). For an exploration of the relationship between Machiavelli’s thoughts and Nietzsche’s, see Dombowsky (2004); Von Vacano (2006). Nietzsche appreciates Machiavelli several times in his books. In addition to *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche also appreciates Machiavelli’s *The Prince* in *Beyond Good and Evil* (Nietzsche, 2001, pp. 29-30).

do so, which would lead, if one still insisted on keeping faith, to making oneself dependent on others. Therefore, both Nietzsche and Machiavelli emphasise the classical virtue endorsed by Thucydides and the Roman historians (Livy, Tacitus, et al.): prudence, which is concerned not with what others say, but with what they do (Owen, 2019, p. 84). Nietzsche's freedom is thus 'the will to self-responsibility', which is a continuous process of self-overcoming that points to Nietzsche's commitment to human flourishing. Nietzsche's 'sovereign individual' is an autonomous individual who is 'able and disposed to set his own ends as challenges to overcome and to bind his will to the task of realizing these ends as meeting these challenges' (Owen, 2019, p. 83). In short, inspired by 'the institution of the agon and of agonal culture', the sovereign individual, through the ongoing agonic practice, seeks to achieve virtù and worldly glory (Owen, 2019, pp. 81-2).

After Nietzsche, Arendt also saw the importance of Machiavelli's concept of *virtù* and took it as the best illustration of freedom. In the essay 'What Is Freedom', Arendt points out that both the anti-political philosophical tradition and the Christian tradition completely neglect to understand freedom in terms of the process of action, denying the coexistence of freedom and politics. On the contrary, Arendt claims that 'men are free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift for freedom—as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same' (Arendt, 2006, p. 141). According to Arendt, freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli's concept of *virtù*, the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of *fortuna* (Arendt, 2006, p. 140). To further illustrate the identity of action and freedom, Arendt sets up the performing arts as the original model of action for at least three reasons (Arendt, 2006, pp. 140-142). First, in both action and performing arts, in contrast to the art of making, the key is the completion of the activity itself, rather than an end product that exists independently of it. Second, both require a particular capacity, or 'virtuosity', which is inherent to the nature of each particular activity. Third, both require an audience before which the actors' virtuosity can be displayed. The freedom of action is therefore the same as the freedom of the performing arts.

Arendt refers to the source of action as 'principle', which is not a motive and does not

prescribe any particular goal and it becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself (Arendt, 2006, p. 140).To prescribe action in terms of principle rather than motives or aims is to guarantee the autonomy and independence of action. In Machiavelli's case, the principle of political action is glory, a criterion that is independent of good and evil as moral criteria. Glory is expressed in the confrontation between *virtù* and *fortuna*, and it is only in this continuous process of confrontation that human being manifests their *virtù* and excellence. In other words, *virtù*, excellence, and glory lie in 'the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it' (Arendt, 2006, p. 140). Machiavelli's demonstration of the interaction between *virtù* and *fortuna* also suggests a relationship in which human being and the world play with and advance each other. As Arendt argues, it is Machiavelli who first rescued political action from the mode of production that has been in place since Plato and restores its character as a performing art.

Moreover, in the confrontation between *virtù* and *fortuna*, the capacity of political action has to open up new beginnings is brought to the fore. Arendt notes that each person is a newcomer and a pioneer in terms of their birth, and that the human condition of plurality means that each person is unique. Machiavelli's portrayal of the many people who rose from humble situations to positions of supreme glory demonstrates the close relationship between political action and beginnings. The confrontation between *virtù* and *fortuna* demonstrates a dynamic and infinite field of political possibilities. It is capable of breaking the cycle of the life process, freeing man from necessity and giving him freedom, and further offering him the opportunity to break out of his perishable life to strive for immortal glory. In the quest for freedom and immortality, political action acquires its autonomous and sublime status.

Inspired by Nietzsche and Arendt (partially influenced by Machiavelli as well),[52] Honig

[52] Honig points out that Machiavellian and Nietzschean *virtù* is always expressed as the excellent quality of male and as opposed to the weakness of female; but *virtù* is not always bound by this opposition, for its destructive power changes all generative oppositions. According to Honig, the highest manifestation of virtue, as described by Machiavelli, is the ability to be like Fortuna, to be capricious, unpredictable, and cunning, and even to surpass Fortuna and become a better woman than she is. Therefore, the essence of Machiavelli's *virtù* lies in transcending insurmountable

proposes a dichotomy between virtue theories of politics and *virtù* theories of politics. Honig refers to theories that 'displace conflict, identify politics with administration and treat juridical settlement as the task of politics and political theory' as 'virtue theories of politics'. On the other hand, she refers to theories that 'see politics as a disruptive practice that resists the consolidations and closures of administrative and juridical settlement for the sake of the perpetuity of political contest' as '*virtù* theories of politics' (Honig, 1993, pp. 2-3). Honig criticizes 'virtue theories of politics' for attempting to construct order and systems based on some foundational truth to curb excess, residue, and resistance, which ultimately proves unsuccessful because political space is inherently imperfect, and the residues produced often trouble and disrupt political space. It is precisely due to these perpetually arising political residues that virtue theorists seek to ensure the perpetuity of political competition. Honig argues that the perpetuity of competition affirmed by theories of political character is not a celebration of a world lacking stability, but a recognition of the eternal existence of competition (Honig, 1993, pp. 15-16). Honig emphasises the 'undecidability' of democratic norms and authority, asserting that claims to democratic norms and authority (such as autonomy, equality, and freedom) are indeterminate when relying on their claimed opposing concepts (heterogeneity, inequality, conquest) (Honig, 1993, p. 107). Political claims are always marked by undecidability as there is an uncertain 'gap' between their manifestation and the ideals or authorities they seek to construct.

Based on this agonistic understanding of politics, Honig finds creative potential in Nietzsche's and Arendt's discourses on *virtù*. As Honig argues, Nietzsche's *virtù* not only arouses hostility towards the lies concealed within order but also replaces virtue at its more positive level, becoming a form of excellence in self-overcoming ethics. Similarly, Arendt also seeks to break the closures of moral and political systems through *virtù*, creating new possibilities. Moreover, Arendt's *virtù* is more political and institutional than Nietzsche's, enabling citizens to embrace the ruptures, genuinely unsettling joy, and uncertainty of democratic political action (Honig, 1993, p. 13). Honig points out that *virtù* and virtue respectively symbolize the impulses to sustain the drive for competition and to ultimately

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boundaries (Honig, 1993, p. 16).

shed the burdens of competition, continually interacting and generating new political spaces through ‘a democratic politics of augmentation’ (Honig, 1993, pp. 14, 200-211).

In Foucault’s analysis of power, he highlights that at the heart of power relations are ‘the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom’, which constantly stimulates power relations (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). The essence of power relations is about ‘agonism’ because power relations involve reciprocal incitation and struggle. It is an eternal provocation, rather than a face-to-face confrontation that paralyzes both sides (Foucault, 1982, p. 790).

Tully further develops Foucault's agonistic understanding of power and proposes an approach to public philosophy centred around practice. Tully points out that Foucault uniquely connects the practice of freedom, the modification of (political) game rules, and agonic activity, expanding the concept of agonism. According to Tully, Foucault argues that human activities should not only be understood as ‘games with rules and techniques of governance’, but more importantly, as ‘games of freedom within and against the rules of the games of governance’ (Tully, 1999, p. 168). In these agonic games, players modify the rules through their words and actions, thereby modifying their identities as players. Tully criticizes Habermas and other neo-Kantians for overlooking the fact that freedom to speak and act in different ways within a game often modifies the rules or even changes the game itself. Therefore, Tully, similar to Honig, believes that political activity is never enclosed by a single boundary. Tully further applies Foucault’s agonistic understanding of power to struggles for recognition and new, dispute-specific sites of citizen activity, exploring the ways and characteristics of the struggles for diverse forms of citizen participation (Tully, 1999; 2008).

Drawing inspiration from Nietzsche and Foucault, Connolly develops a unique theory of agonistic democracy that revolves around ‘temporality, embodiment, and pluralism’, emphasising the ethical political values of agonistic respect and critical responsiveness (Wenman, 2013, p. 99). Connolly rejects the complete reduction of human suffering and conflict to flaws in social structures, instead acknowledging the importance of responding to the existence of residual forms of suffering, even in well-functioning societies. Thus, any form of exciting competition can be found in any society because ‘each identity is fated to

contend - to various degrees and in multifarious ways - with others it depends upon to enunciate itself' (Connolly, 1991, p. 92). The contentiousness of identity claims, therefore, requires specific forms of ethos to safeguard diverse and democratic cultures. The ethos supported by Connolly include agonistic respect, presumptive generosity, and critical responsiveness. These agonistic ethos require us to not only recognize connections and differences with others but also revise our self-identifications accordingly, as the attention to the contingency and contentiousness of the self is a prerequisite for learning and practicing openness to others. Connolly thus calls for cultivating 'a public ethos of engagement in which a wider variety of perspectives than heretofore acknowledged inform and restrain one another acknowledged before' (Connolly, 1999, p. 5), allowing pluralism to be nurtured as a source of rich interaction among citizens. As Norval notes, this interdependence between collectivities and individuals contrasts sharply with the liberal narrative, which tends to portray identities as entirely isolated and independent of others (Norval, 2014).

Mouffe proposes an agonistic model of democracy to reconcile the contradiction between freedom and equality as two opposing logics that cannot be reconciled in theory or practice (Mouffe, 2000, p. 80). Mouffe agrees with Schmitt's understanding of the political as the friend-enemy distinction and argues that the possibility of antagonism is an inseparable part of the ontological condition of human beings (Schmitt, 2008, p. 26; Mouffe, 1993, p. 3). The purpose of Mouffe's agonistic democracy is to prevent the emergence of antagonism by establishing constructive competition between us and them. In agonistic democracy, citizens are, on the one hand, friends because they share allegiance to the values and traditions of liberal democracy; on the other hand, they are also, in a sense, 'adversaries' because they have conflicting interpretations of these values. This requires active citizen participation in public life to ensure individual freedom through public service (Mouffe, 1992, p. 7). Mouffe criticizes deliberative democracy supported by theorists like Habermas and others for exacerbating conflicts and making antagonism more likely to occur (Mouffe, 1999). In contrast, Mouffe's agonistic democracy candidly acknowledges the ineradicable presence of competition and seeks creative ways to transform enmity into more constructive forms of

competition.[53]

5.3.3 Machiavellian Institutional Agonism

The agonism proposed by Connolly, Tully, Honig, and Mouffe have been inspired to varying degrees by Machiavelli. In Machiavelli's theory of internal conflict, we can also find similarities to agonism, such as the emphasis on the inevitability of conflict, the management of internal conflict through power balance and compromise, and the promotion of constructive ways to resolve conflict. However, contemporary agonistic theories primarily focus on the ethos and lack a clear elaboration of the institutions necessary for the generation and maintenance of conflict or competition. This point is particularly evident in Connolly's analysis of agonism. As Howarth argues, contemporary agonistic perspectives suffer from an 'institutional deficit', whether in terms of criticizing existing institutions or providing more positive alternative solutions (Howarth, 2008, pp. 189-90). By fully considering Machiavelli's reflections on internal conflicts within a republic, we can discover that some particular types of institutions are of utmost importance for agonistic democracy. Moreover, Machiavelli's discussion of institutions and customs inspires us to focus on the mutual achievement of ethos and institution.

Connolly emphasises the importance of cultivating a specific form of spirit to safeguard a diverse and democratic culture: agonistic respect and critical responsiveness (Connolly, 1993a, p. 382). As Wenman suggests, Connolly's focus on ethos is influenced by Nietzsche's affirmative spirit embodied in the concept of the Overman (Wenman, 2013, pp. 104-109). Confronted with the modern society grounded in value plurality combined with groundlessness, Nietzsche's ethical message is that we should find the courage to affirm life, even in its most strange and challenging aspects (Nietzsche, 2005, pp. 153-229). Nietzsche's emphasis on the nobility of action aligns with Machiavelli's perspective, who believes that a life of action is a truly meaningful life, concurring with Boccaccio's statement, 'Better to have acted and regretted than to have regretted not acting' (Machiavelli, 1988, p. 228). Nietzsche emphasises that, in order to combat nihilism, individuals must become the authority for

[53] For Mouffe's critique of Honig and Connolly's agonism, see Mouffe (2013, pp. 1-18).

himself which is also to say to become responsible for himself (Owen, 1995, p. 119) and continually strive to enhance and expand their self-governing capacity. Connolly argues that Nietzsche has made convincing contributions to identifying the spirit and temperament that are most suitable for late modern democratic life (Connolly, 1993b, p. 197). Furthermore, he reinterprets Nietzsche's concept of the overman, considering it as 'a voice in the self contending with other voices, including those of ressentiment' (Connolly, 1991, p. 187).

Agonistic respect is at the core of Connolly's ethical political model, described as a spirit or emotion in which individuals can accept the 'comparative contestability' of their beliefs (Connolly, 1999, p. 8). Connolly argues that agonistic respect should be recognized as a civic virtue, promoting a more constructive form of competition where actors increasingly engage in respectful competition and selective cooperation to avoid conflicts between identities. Moreover, the widespread dissemination of agonistic respect provides the best opportunity for non-violent coexistence of diverse beliefs, serving as the best antidote to fundamentalist politics. This ethos needs to be embedded within the institutions and public values of modern democratic nations (Connolly, 2005, p. 65). Critical responsiveness further elaborates on the concept of agonistic respect and plays a significant role in open and non-dialectical politics. Connolly suggests that we should avoid emotive attraction as it can hinder our acceptance of new things. Instead, we should maintain reflection, respond positively to new possibilities, and refrain from categorizing new initiatives as morally abnormal. The ethos of critical responsiveness provides others with the opportunity for self-affirmation in the cultural space, enabling them to transcend negative cultural labels (Connolly, 1995; 1999).

Therefore, Connolly's agonistic remedy for the tyranny of intensive minorities primarily focuses on the ethos aspect while overlooking the role of institutions. As Wenman points out, Connolly tends to interpret social and economic injustices primarily as a result of existential anxiety. Consequently, he emphasises individual moral dimensions in seeking solutions rather than addressing the fundamental social structures or the potential for transformation (Wenman, 2013, p. 101). Thus, Connolly primarily highlights the destructive impact of agonistic respect on society, mitigating the resentful emotions triggered by human survival

anxieties and suffering. However, Connolly does not provide a constructive theoretical framework concerning the procedures and objectives of democratic decision-making (Wenman, 2013, p. 119). Similarly, Owen suggests that Connolly faces difficulties in applying Nietzsche's theory and further development is needed using the resources provided by Nietzsche, with closer links to issues of institutional design and policies (Owen, 2008). Schaap also argues that agonists understand democracy not from an institutional perspective but from a spiritual perspective, aiming to postpone the moment of decision and affirm the openness of political life (Schaap, 2006, p. 270).

Machiavelli's thinking on internal conflict can help address the shortcomings of contemporary agonism in this regard. By examining Machiavelli's arguments on how to maintain a state, particularly his discussions on how to regulate conflicts toward favourable outcomes in the *Discourses* and *Florentine Histories*, we can see that Machiavelli emphasises not only the maintenance of the arena of conflict through institutions but also the mutual achievement of ethos and institutions: institutions are necessary for a certain ethos, and the ethos is necessary for the maintenance of institutions.

As argued earlier (Chapter 3 and 4), Machiavelli regards institutions as crucial for regulating internal conflicts within a republic. Despite the destructive nature of internal conflicts in the Roman Republic, if effectively regulated by institutions, they can be resolved within the framework of institutions, directing the interests of plebs and nobles towards the common good of the city. The institutions admired by Machiavelli aim to provide each individual and group within the republic with a position in politics, creating a balance and interdependence among different groups. Good institutions not only maximize the alignment between factional interests and the common interests of the republic but also provide channels for the humours of the nobles and the plebs, confining conflicts within the bounds of institutions and ensuring that the outcomes of conflicts align with the common good. For example, in Rome, the plebeian tribunes had the power of veto, which allowed them to block the implementation of policies that were clearly detrimental to the plebs. Additionally, the tribunes had the power to press charges and punish administrative officials and prominent citizens who violated the freedoms of citizens or undermined the civic life of the

republic. Machiavelli argues that the conflicts between the plebs and the nobles in the Roman Republic not only created new institutions favourable to freedom but also empowered the republic for external expansion, making it strong and free.

Furthermore, Machiavelli emphasises that good customs and good institutions complement each other, as he claims that 'as good customs have need of laws to maintain themselves, so laws have need of good customs so as to be observed' (*D* I.18). Here, customs can be understood as the spirit, ethos, moral ideas, or culture of the citizens within the republic. On the one hand, institutions could influence customs. For example, the religious system established by Numa made the Romans mild, obedient and civilized, facilitating collective actions of the republic such as gathering the plebs and dispatching armies (*D* I.11-14). On the other hand, customs could influence institutions. Numa's religious practices contributed to the establishment of good laws and institutions in Rome because the people were more inclined to obey (*D* I.11). Machiavelli believes that any republic, even with good institutions, will inevitably corrupt over time, indicating that the customs of the citizens no longer adhere to the moral principles advocated by the republic. Machiavelli admires the Roman Republic's appointment of censors as 'the arbiters of the customs of Rome', which was a significant reason why the Romans delayed corruption for a long time (*D* I.49). The early Roman Republic demonstrated how good customs and good institutions mutually reinforced each other. However, in contrast, much of the history of the Florentine Republic, as portrayed by Machiavelli, illustrates the deterioration of institutions and customs, with both factors negatively influencing each other. As indicated in Chapter 4, Florence had serious problems with factional politics in its customs, making it extremely difficult to establish a reasonable institutional framework to regulate conflicts. People often resorted to private and violent means rather than public and gentle methods to resolve conflicts. On the other hand, the establishment of institutions was conceived based on the interests of factional parties rather than the common good, further reinforcing the traditions of factional politics and armed struggles. Machiavelli claims that reforming the institutions and customs of Florence is nearly impossible (c.f. *FH* IV.1; *D* I.18).

As I have argued earlier (3.2), the key distinction in Machiavelli's account of the nobles

and the plebs lies not in their status or family lineage but in their possession of power and their subjection to the rule of law. Whether the inherent human greed, desire for acquisition, and insatiability manifest in concrete actions depends on the specific environment: under the constraints of the law, people are compelled to behave well, whereas in the absence of legal constraints, human greed reveals itself without restraint. In today's society, we can still observe conflicts similar to those Machiavelli demonstrated, such as the conflicts between those who hold political power and those who are governed, the wealthy and the poor, the elite and non-elites, the White and Non-White, male and non-male. Issues including significant political and ideological differences, economic inequality, racial inequality, and gender inequality can perhaps be analysed using insights from Machiavelli's theory. Machiavelli emphasises the necessary differentiation between the few and the many, and applies special regulatory pressure on the few. This helps us consider, theoretically, what types of political systems and approaches can better handle the relationship between conflict and order in modern societal conditions.

5.4 Conclusion

In the preface of Book I of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli claims to seek out 'new modes and orders' that would bring about the 'common good' for everyone. To achieve this, he resolves to venture onto an unexplored path in order to present a correct understanding of history that would benefit everyone or, at the very least, 'show the path to someone who with more virtue, more discourse and judgment, will be able to fulfill this intention of mine'. Today, people are still willing to study Machiavelli's works because his ideas are recognized as being just as relevant in our time as they were in his. The notion of the 'common good' he speaks of applies not only to the people of Florence and Italy at the time but also to us in the twenty-first century. However, interpretations of Machiavelli vary greatly, reflecting the depth and complexity of his thoughts. This diversity of interpretations keeps Machiavelli's ideas a subject of intense debate and discussion, and from them, we can find valuable insights applicable to contemporary politics.

Is Machiavelli a republican, a democrat, or a radical? The above analysis indicates that

these three influential interpretations of Machiavelli all have their biases. Of course, this is partly due to the ambiguity and polysemy inherent in Machiavelli's texts. As Winter argues, there is no definitive answer to the question of Machiavelli's 'true intention' because the polysemy of his texts makes it impractical to ensure a singular meaning. The contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes unique to Machiavelli's texts give them a particular constitutive openness, allowing us to unearth various forms of political commentary and argument (Winter, 2012, p. 738). This chapter not only builds upon the interpretations of Machiavelli in the previous two chapters to analyse the biases of the three interpretations but also points out the problems with contemporary political proposals based on these interpretations. Lastly, this chapter connects contemporary agonistic democracy with Machiavelli's theories of internal conflict and tries to offer new exploratory political possibilities for contemporary agonism.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.1 Summary

Through the analysis of internal conflict in the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories*, this thesis presents the rich connotations of Machiavelli's theory of internal conflict. Machiavelli believes that the internal conflict between the plebs and the nobles in the republic could be advantageous for the freedom and power of the republic. Machiavelli's revaluation of social conflict is not only ground-breaking at the time but also unique in the history of political thought. During the late Roman Republic and the Renaissance, there was a prevailing negative view of political conflict in Rome, considering it as the source of chaos and ultimately the cause of the downfall of the republic. Machiavelli, however, believes that the causes of internal conflict in a republic were not only rooted in the antagonism between the nobles and the plebs but also in the insatiable pursuit of desires by individuals. Therefore, internal conflict within a republic could never be completely eliminated. The focus should instead be on how to regulate conflicts through institutionalisation, which creates new institutions conducive to freedom and provides power for the republic to maintain and even expand itself.

In Chapter 3, fourteen cases of internal conflict in the *Discourses* were analysed from the lens of institutional and extra-institutional conflicts. The analysis demonstrates that in healthy republics, regulating the conflict between plebs and nobles and reducing the impact of corruption on citizens through stable institutions are crucial. This ensures that the outcome of the conflict aligns with the common good of the republic. If the conflict is not regulated by proper institutions, it can easily lead to civil war or tyranny, which will lead to the loss of freedom. However, even under these conditions, institutions are constantly open to attack from potential tyrants, nobles, and plebs pursuing their own advantage, thus necessitating a focus on their maintenance and reproduction. If the institutions fail to function as they should and the citizenry becomes corrupt, extraordinary measures (violence) are needed to renew the order of the republic. Machiavelli is aware of the precariousness and risks associated with using violence but believes that some circumstances necessitate it.

Machiavelli holds that conflicts in the republic must be institutionalised and that he accentuates the importance of the maintenance of institutionalised arenas of conflict. Machiavelli's stance carries a distinct flavour of populism, challenging the prevailing disdainful attitude towards the common people at the time. However, he is not solely in support of the common people, but rather adopts a dual perspective of elites and the people. He emphasises that both the plebs and the nobles can and should serve the common good equally through their agonistic encounter.

Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive analysis of three representative cases of internal conflict during three distinct periods in the *Florentine Histories*, aiming to elucidate the reciprocal influence between Florentine customs and institutions. Machiavelli, with deep regret and concern, asserts that the internal conflicts endured by the Florentine Republic were not only the most notable among all republics but also inflicted the most devastating consequences. Drawing a comparison between Rome and Florence, Machiavelli argues that the conflicts between the nobles and the people endowed the Roman Republic with freedom and strength, whereas in Florence, these conflicts resulted in enslavement and weakness. The underlying reasons for this disparity lie in the Florentine people's unreasonable pursuit of exclusive power and the citizens' quest for personal reputation through private means, resulting in factionalism and confrontations between various factions and sects. On one hand, Florence's enduring tradition of factional politics and armed conflicts rendered public order a mere facade, as disputes were consistently settled through private and violent methods rather than public and peaceful ones. On the other hand, the city's institutions were designed to cater to the interests of factional parties rather than serving the common good, thereby perpetuating the ethos of factionalism and violence. Moreover, the Florentine elites employed the rhetoric of civic humanism, emphasising unity and harmony, as a means to maintain their rule, thereby complicating genuine reforms and the establishment of an authentic republican order. Faced with such a distorted order plagued by factions and oligarchy, Machiavelli endeavoured to address these challenges by advocating for the institutionalisation of conflict resolution.

In Chapters 2 and 5, three influential contemporary interpretations of Machiavelli are

presented and analysed, with a particular focus on connecting Machiavelli's theory of conflict with the concept of agonism in contemporary political theory. The republican interpretation argues that Machiavelli is a staunch defender of traditional republican values. Skinner and Pettit, drawing upon the republican interpretation of Machiavelli, propose a republican theory centred around the concept of freedom as non-domination. However, this interpretation falls short in adequately addressing Machiavelli's theory of social stratification and conflict, resulting in deficiencies within its republican framework. The democratic interpretation, represented by McCormick, views Machiavelli as a pioneer of plebeian politics. It sees the intense actions of the plebs against aristocratic rule and oppressive desires as crucial means to maintain political freedom. McCormick also proposes a form of 'Machiavellian democracy' as a solution to contemporary political challenges. Although this interpretation recognizes Machiavelli's distinct plebeian undertones, it overlooks Machiavelli's general understanding of human nature. Consequently, it neglects his endeavour to establish a more inclusive republican regime that prioritizes the common good as its ultimate objective through the institutionalisation of conflict between the plebs and the nobles.

Next, I connect Machiavelli's theory of internal conflict with a significant branch of contemporary political theory, known as agonism. Agonism, which traces its roots to Nietzsche, Arendt, and Foucault and has been further developed by scholars such as Conolly, Tully, Honig, and Mouffe, is based on a tragic vision of the world and emphasises the inevitability of political competition. Its objective is to explore constructive approaches for managing conflicts. Notably, Machiavelli not only shares intellectual affinities with the origins and evolution of agonism but also aligns with its core ideas. However, existing agonism theories primarily focus on ethos rather than institutions, whereas Machiavelli offers us an opportunity to develop an institutionalised agonism that underscores the complementarity of ethos and institutions.

Next, I will explore the tension between *virtù* and *fortuna* in Machiavelli's theory and elucidate its connection to the theory of conflict. Subsequently, I will elaborate Machiavelli's conflict theory from the perspective of populism, equality, and the common good. Finally, I

will discuss the tension between liberty and empire in Machiavelli's thought, with the hope of inspiring future research in this area.

6.2 Virtù and Fortuna

The question of the relationship between *virtù* and *fortuna* constitutes a central theme that pervades almost all of Machiavelli's works. In essence, for any agent—be it an individual, a sovereign, or a republic—*fortuna* represents that which is beyond the agent' control, while *virtù* pertains to the agent's own capabilities. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli posits that 'fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, but that it lets us control roughly the other half' (*P* XXV). While drawing parallels between fortune as a dominating force and a river, or even a woman, Machiavelli simultaneously contends that individuals have the capacity to make preparations in advance to exercise significant control over fortune or to boldly and vigorously conquer it. Consequently, within a world governed by fortune, a virtuous individual should endeavour to minimize the role that fortune plays in their life. Moreover, *virtù* implies that, on certain occasions, driven by the demands of necessity, agents may undertake actions that deviate from traditional moral norms in service of the country's interests. In the context of internal conflict within a city, citizens may sometimes find it necessary to manifest virtues that contravene moral standards. For instance, as shown before (4.6), in the face of the plebs' arrogance, Lando decisively employed violence to suppress them and subsequently re-establish a rational and inclusive political order. Machiavelli thus commends Lando as 'a sagacious and prudent man who owed more to nature than to fortune' (*FH* iii.16).

Machiavelli, while advocating the utilization of one's *virtù* to conquer fortune, underscores the importance of aligning one's actions with the characteristics of fortune: 'We are successful when our ways are suited to the times and circumstances, and unsuccessful when they are not' (*P* XXV). This quality of discerning the most suitable course of action based on specific circumstances and adhering to it is termed 'prudence'. Prudence is the 'judge and guide' of virtue, directing it to reconcile itself with its fortune according to the circumstances (Mansfield, 1996, p. 39). Therefore, rather than asserting that *virtù* conquers fortune, it is more accurate to state that *virtù* enables individuals to better accommodate the

whims of the goddess of fortune. Given the capricious nature of fortune, it is fundamentally impossible to adopt a singular approach to confront it. Prudence instructs us to select the most suitable course of action in accordance with necessity in the face of new situations brought about by the goddess of fortune, achieving the closest alignment and coordination with fortune. *Virtù* cannot genuinely conquer fortune; what individuals can do is, when the wheel of fate exhibits a tendency to cast them off, timely leap from wheel to wheel.[54] However, Machiavelli holds a sceptical or even negative view regarding whether individuals can truly possess the *virtù* of prudence primarily because individuals cannot alter their natural inclination (*P* XXV; *D* III.9).

In this context, the advantages of a republican system become evident. Machiavelli argues that 'a republic has greater life and has good fortune longer than a principality, for it can accommodate itself better than one prince can to the diversity of times through the diversity of the citizens that are in it' (*D* III.9). By providing examples of Scipio and Fabius, Machiavelli demonstrates that the virtue of a republic encompasses the virtue of all citizens, and it enables republics to select citizens accustomed to particular modes of action in response to necessity as leaders and representatives, thus aiding republics in better adapting to fortune (Burelli, 2023).

From the outset of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli praises the virtue of the Roman Republic (*D* I.1). He disagrees with the view, held by ancient writers including Plutarch and Livy, that fortune is the primary reason for Rome's success. On the contrary, he strongly asserts that virtue is the primary cause (*D* I.4; II.1). Specifically, Machiavelli emphasises that it is the virtue of the Roman armies that allows them to acquire an empire, while the order and

[54] That man most luckily forms his plan, among all the persons in Fortune's palace, who chooses a wheel befitting her wish, since the inclinations that make you act, so far as they conform with her doings, are the causes of your good and your ill. Yet you cannot therefore trust yourself to her nor hope to escape her hard bite, her hard blows, violent and cruel, because while you are whirled about by the rim of a wheel that for the moment is lucky and good, she is wont to reverse its course in midcircle. And since you cannot change your character nor give up the disposition that Heaven endows you with, in the midst of your journey she abandons you. Therefore, if this he understood and fixed in his mind, a man who could leap from wheel to wheel would always be happy and fortunate, but because to attain this is denied by the occult force that rules us, our condition changes with her course (Machiavelli, Tercets on Fortune).

mode of governance established by Romulus enabled them to maintain it (*D* II.1). It was within the institutionalised framework of conflict that the Roman Republic armed plebs, expanded continuously, and conquered foreign lands. In this process, 'every day it falls to its citizens, both in particular and in public, to make experiment both of their virtue and of the power of fortune, it will always happen that they are of the same spirit in every condition of time and will maintain their same dignity' (*D* III.31).

6.3 Plebian Politics, Equality and the Common Good

In the dedication of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli states that this book contains everything he has learned and acquired through 'a long practice and a continual reading in worldly things' and he considers it the most precious gift he can offer to his friends. He emphasises that the book is intended for those who 'for their infinite good parts deserve to be princes'. Francesco Guicciardini can be considered one such person. However, Guicciardini strongly criticized Machiavelli's *Discourses*, specifically targeting his views on political conflict expounded in the initial six chapters of the book. Guicciardini remarked, 'To praise division is like praising the disease itself because the medicine is effective' (Guicciardini, 1965, p. 188). It seems that Guicciardini failed to grasp the true essence of Machiavelli's ideas. Machiavelli believed that political conflict should not be regarded as a disease afflicting republic, but rather as an issue that every community must confront and address. By delineating the necessary conditions and boundaries within which political conflict should operate, it can be integrated into the routine functioning of republican politics, leading to favourable political outcomes. Machiavelli advocated for the regulation of political conflict through institutional channels to distinguish it from armed conflicts between individuals or factions, thereby averting disorder and extreme situations involving bloodshed and violence. Through the incorporation of competitive and confrontational elements into the political structure, Machiavelli potentially laid the theoretical groundwork for the design and practice of modern politics. As Machiavelli's analysis of the confrontational interaction between the Roman plebs and nobles implies, the openness, diversity, and inclusiveness of modern politics, as well as the achievement of political consensus and common interests that

encompass all citizens through compromise, can only be partially guaranteed through a political process characterized by negotiation, competition, and conflict.

Machiavelli argued that Rome's mixed regime possessed a mechanism for continuous self-renewal. The balance of power and interactions within the mixed government, notably the political confrontations between the nobles and plebs, served as both a corrective force and a means to keep the political system in an open state, continually responsive to the political demands of the populace. Within this context, Machiavelli expressed optimism, stating that even amidst the numerous challenges and unforeseen circumstances encountered throughout its existence, 'if a republic were so happy that it often had one who with his example might renew the laws, and not only restrain it from running to ruin but pull it back, it would be perpetual' (*D* III.22, c.f., III.1, III.17). The idea of returning to the beginning involves reflecting on the political body's past, yet through this retrospective journey, an infinite future is revealed. Thus, Machiavelli suggests that the Roman Republic could be a perpetual entity, and Florence could likewise achieve this by drawing lessons from Rome.

An increasing number of theorists have devoted attention to Machiavelli's emphasis on and elevation of the status of the multitude (e.g., Del Lucchese, 2009; McCormick, 2011; Vatter, 2012). Indeed, compared to the elitist stance of classical political philosophy and civic humanism, Machiavelli presents a distinct form of populism, which is relatively rare within the republican tradition. In Machiavelli's view, all individuals share a common nature, characterized by insatiable desires. Nobles are not inherently superior to plebs, nor are commoners inherently inferior to nobles. In specific political matters, such as the appointment and dismissal of officials, the plebs demonstrate virtues superior to those of the nobles. However, Machiavelli doesn't exclusively align himself with the common people. When discussing conflicts between the plebs and the nobles, Machiavelli adopts a dual perspective of both the plebs and the nobles. He suggests that reasonable political practice should involve both elite nobility and common people, who mutually struggle and mutually need each other, and channel this mutual conflict and need into the realm of law and institutions, creating a political community that can accommodate both sides to the greatest

extent possible. Machiavelli believes that the necessary prerequisite for a stable republic is a constitution that assigns a proper role to every component of society, and everyone must participate when they know what they must do. Therefore, Machiavelli advocates for a more inclusive republican political system and constantly seeks to establish a well-functioning political order that can accommodate all voices, actions, and even conflicts.

In such a political system that can accommodate conflicts and struggles, the main form of conflict between plebs and nobles is the confrontation and interaction of two opposing desires. In this structure, it is not that the interests or desires of the nobles are inherently superior to those of the plebs, nor is it the other way around. In the dozens of conflict cases, both the nobles and the plebs have committed errors by placing their interests above the common good of the republic. In most cases, through reasonable institutions, the desires of the nobles and the plebs engage in fierce but harmless conflicts, resulting in outcomes that both sides can accept and that are beneficial to the republic as a whole. From this perspective, both the nobles and the plebs are equally important components of the republic, and both are mutually dependent, with neither being dispensable.

6.4 Political Conflict and Continual Adaptation

In the final chapter of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli states: 'it is of necessity…that in a great city accidents arise every day that have need of a physician, and according to their importance, one must find a wiser physician'(*D* III.49). In the ensuing sections of this chapter, Machiavelli meticulously discusses the ingenious and effective strategies deployed by the Romans when confronted with various abrupt threats. As aptly noted by Pedullà, this chapter distils the essence of 'political classicism' in the *Discourses* (Pedullà, 2018, pp. 257-8). It underscores the fundamental truth that politics can never attain a state of perpetual equilibrium; thus, there exists an unceasing imperative to reflect upon unforeseen developments. This imperative, in turn, underscores the critical role of a republic's citizens, in diligently studying history, emulating successful precedents from antiquity, assimilating lessons from past failures, and nurturing their own political virtues.

Machiavelli's theory of conflict may indeed hold contemporary relevance. Rooted in the acknowledgment of the inescapable nature of conflict, politics must proactively engage with the diverse manifestations of conflict. This engagement necessitates the establishment of robust legal frameworks and governance structures capable of both regulating and accommodating these conflicts. In extraordinary circumstances, particularly when faced with acute threats such as corruption, traditional political structures may prove inadequate, demanding the intervention of virtuous citizens to craft innovative governance models or restore the fundamental principles of virtue. In essence, a political community cannot exist in a state of perpetual harmony but rather thrives within the dynamic equilibrium of opposing forces. The enduring success of the Roman Republic can be largely attributed to the citizens' remarkable capacity to devise adaptive strategies and institutional frameworks for every emerging challenge. As conveyed in the final chapter of the *Discourses*, 'a republic has need of new acts of foresight every day if one wishes to maintain it free'(*D* III.49). The institutions of the community should give all persons, whether plebs or nobles, those who do not wish to be ruled or those who wish to rule, the right and opportunity to contribute to the freedom of the community.

6.5 Freedom and Empire

In Machiavelli's view, a free republic not only needs to free itself from external authorities but also needs to avoid internal tyranny. First, the 'free republic' primarily refers to those city-states that are 'far from all external servitude and were at once governed by their own will, either as a republic or as a principality' (*D* I.1). Furthermore, republics, in particular, need to be vigilant of the desires and ambitions of nobles. Consequently, an element of popular government should be incorporated into the institution of the republic to facilitate the supervision and control of the powerful minority. In contrast to the nobles' desire towards oppression, the people's desire to avoid being ruled makes them better suited to assume the role of 'guardians of liberty'(*D* I.4). To comprehend the concept of a free republic as the absence of both internal despotism and external domination, it should be noted that this idea was not originally formulated by Machiavelli. Skinner points out that

during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and even in the city-states of medieval Italy, liberty was often associated with 'active participation in the governance of the state' and 'freedom from external interference' (Skinner, 1978, p. 163). To a large extent, Machiavelli inherits this understanding of liberty from civic humanists. However, what sets him apart from civic humanists is his adjusted perspective, focusing more on the impact of a republic's system of liberty on its imperial expansion.

For Machiavelli, the preservation of liberty in a republic is intrinsically linked to its expansionist endeavours.[55] Machiavelli states that the perfection of Rome's system of liberty was completed by the establishment of the plebeian tribunes. This institution integrated the rule of the people into the mixed constitution of the republic, granting the plebs their rightful share of power. This office was initiated during times when the plebs threatened to leave the city in the face of external threats, thereby compelling the nobles to accept its establishment (see 3.3). In other words, the plebs gained political power through their indispensable role in the expanding republic's armed forces. The establishment of the mixed government not only maintained internal freedom within the republic but also contributed to preserving its external freedom. Due to their deep commitment to their own republic, the plebs were more inclined to promote the expansion and greatness of the republic. Following the end of the monarchy, the Roman Republic rapidly became exceptionally powerful. Machiavelli pointed out that this remarkable phenomenon is not difficult to understand because 'it is not the particular good but the common good that makes cities great' (*D* II.2).

However, imperial ambition inevitably clashes with freedom. On the one hand, Machiavelli candidly asserts that Rome's imperial expansion came at the cost of the destruction of the freedom of the neighbouring city-states. The wealth of these city-states enriched Rome's treasury and the continuous influx of their citizens provided Rome with an abundance of armed forces (*D* II.2). On the other hand, and more importantly, as Rome's expansion progressed, the virtuous cycle between expansion and freedom began to deteriorate. Machiavelli identifies three key factors contributing to the decline of the Roman

[55] For comprehensive insights into Machiavelli's perspectives on empire and expansion, see Hulliung (1984); Armitage (2002); Hörnqvist (2004); Newell (2009); Regent (2011).

Republic: The Agrarian Law and subsequent turmoil it caused (*D* I.37), the prolongation of commands of armies (*D* III.24), and the corrupting influence of the conquered territories (*D* II.19). In essence, it was expansion that led to the fall of the Roman Republic. While the Republic's institutions facilitated a somewhat virtuous cycle between freedom and expansion, it did not spare the republic from its inherent frailty. As such, Machiavelli is acutely aware of the tension between empire and freedom in the context of a Roman style expansional republic (Armitage, 2002). On the one hand, he recognizes the pursuit of imperial glory as a noble endeavour. On the other hand, he approaches the necessity of expansionist strategies with realism and intellectual honesty, acknowledging the challenges that expansionist republics may face and confronting the inevitable decadence of such republics.

Machiavelli's predilection for an expansive republic has a substantial impact on the contemporary applicability of his political philosophy. Consequently, when contemporary agonism, emphasising both the ethos and institutions, derives insights from Machiavelli, it necessitates envisioning alternative state configurations while upholding the fundamental tenets of his ideas. Although this issue carries considerable significance, it falls outside the purview of this thesis and warrants subsequent research in the future.

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