Review Essay: Machiavelli: Radical Democratic Political Theorist?

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John P. McCormick has become the leading proponent of a new democratic—or, now, “populist”—reading of Machiavelli. The authors of all three of the other books reviewed here cite McCormick as a source and inspiration; and he has written positive blurbs for their books. In Machiavellian Democracy (Cambridge University Press, 2011) McCormick argued that Machiavelli’s praise of Roman “offices or assemblies that exclude the wealthiest citizens from eligibility; magistrate appointment procedures that combine lottery and election; and political trials in which the entire citizenry acts as ultimate judge over prosecutions and appeals” constitutes “a robust, extra-electoral model of elite accountability and popular empowerment” very different from, and much superior to, the aristocratic “republicanism” attributed to Machiavelli by the “Cambridge school.” In Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics, McCormick extends his previous analysis by offering “original readings of crucial themes within … The Prince, the Discourses, and the Florentine Histories” (1–2). He also expands his critique of competing interpretations of Machiavelli and Rome by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Leo Strauss, John Pocock, and Quentin Skinner.

McCormick may be correct that previous “realist” and “republican” commentators have understated Machiavelli’s democratic commitments and goals. Like many corrections, however, his advocacy of the democratic or populist thrust of Machiavelli’s thought goes too far in the other direction. He rightly emphasizes Machiavelli’s insistence that all “cities” are divided
into two “humors” (umori) or desires (appetiti): the desire of the great to command and oppress and the desire of the people not to be oppressed. And he correctly stresses the importance of Machiavelli’s statement that the desire of the people is more “decent” (onesto) than the desire of the “great.” But, equating the desire of the people not to be commanded or oppressed with a desire for freedom, McCormick concludes that Machiavelli’s people are by nature “good, decent, and just,” and that their resistance to the rule of the rapacious grandi constitutes a new conception of justice.

Machiavelli’s teaching about the conflict between the two humors is much more complex than McCormick conveys. In The Prince 9, he states that the conflict between the humors can have three results: principality or liberty or license. And in his Florentine Histories (4.1) he explicitly distinguishes between the license sought by the leaders of the people and the liberty that can be achieved only by laws that enable each of the humors to check excesses of the other. In his Discourses (1.2) he presents Rome as the model of a “republic” or “mixed regime” in which, after the creation of the tribunes, all three kinds of government—monarchical, aristocratic, and popular—had their part.

Drawing on selected parts of Machiavelli’s texts, McCormick advocates establishing offices and assemblies that exclude the wealthy, public trials of individuals in front of popular juries that allow the people “to vent their ambition,” and, in his recent publications, the desirability of “princes” like Agathocles and Clearchus who obtain popular support for their governments by eliminating the rich. Instead of a republic that secures the lives, liberties, and properties of most if not all of its citizens, McCormick’s Machiavelli advocates a very one-sided, increasingly violent version of class politics.

In chapter 1 of Reading Machiavelli McCormick argues that Machiavelli presents Cesare Borgia as a secularized version of the Christian account of God’s sacrifice of his son. McCormick initially claims merely to be exploring “the way Machiavelli employs Christian allegory at critical junctures of The Prince” (21); but at the end of the book he explains: “Borgia’s greatest strength … was the loyalty he elicited from the people of the Romagna, whom he convinced to recognize that they … shared a common enemy in the rapaciously lawless Romangnol nobility eliminated by Borgia” (208). McCormick cites D 1.16 where Machiavelli informs a prince that he can obtain popular support by satisfying the people’s desire to have vengeance on those who have oppressed them; he does not note that on the same page Machiavelli also explains that such a prince cannot satisfy his people’s desire to be free; at most he can make them feel that their lives and property are secure under his rule by law.

Declaring that “economic inequality inevitably undermines political equality, and, hence, liberty itself,” in chapter 2 McCormick rereads Machiavelli’s account in D 1.37 of the failure of the Gracchi’s attempt to revive and enforce the agrarian law as an endorsement of their beneficent intentions, but a critique of their imprudence. Because Machiavelli ends his chapter by observing that the nobles would not share their wealth, as they had shared
their honors with the plebs, he intimates (but only intimates because he is writing to wealthy young Florentines) that the brothers should not have tried to persuade the senate to redistribute the lands gained through the expansion of the Roman empire. Like Borgia, Agathocles, and Clearchus, they should have arranged for the wealthy patricians to be slaughtered.

In chapter 3 McCormick then argues that in the *Florentine Histories* Machiavelli shows that the people of Florence did not abuse their power after they destroyed the nobility. He acknowledges that Machiavelli states that after the people conquered the great, “Florence was stripped not only of its arms but of all generosity” (*FH* 2.42), and that Machiavelli seems to be presenting a more negative view of the people than he had in his previous works when he observes that “the people of Rome desired to enjoy the highest honors together with the nobles, while the people of Florence fought to be alone in the government without the participation of the nobles” (*FH* 3.1). But, McCormick contends, Machiavelli undermines his own negative statements about the people and the plebs by showing that they subsequently granted the defeated nobles a minor part in the government of the city. He blames the popular leaders (including the Medici) for disarming the city as well as for the continuing strident divisions within it. McCormick thus seems to acknowledge, be it unintentionally, that Machiavelli shows that the Roman patricians knew how to deal with the people better than did the Florentine *ottimati*.

In the second part of his book McCormick criticizes other well-known commentators. He faults Rousseau for endorsing the Roman system of voting by centuries, because it gave every citizen a vote, even though the votes of the few wealthy had much greater effect on the outcome than those of the more numerous poor. Rousseau’s arguments in the *Social Contract* have often been criticized for being too formal and abstract. But defenders of Rousseau might respond to McCormick: the subordination of the wealthy to laws made by assemblies and enforced by magistracies from which they are excluded—to say nothing of killing them and expropriating their goods—would constitute classic cases of the tyranny of the majority (if such institutions were not checked, as they are in Machiavelli’s republic, by others).

McCormick begins by noting that “Strauss is remarkably attuned to the surface, democratic, layer of Machiavelli’s political writings” (147). “Strauss acknowledges … that Machiavelli considered ‘the purpose of the people’ to be ‘more honest, or more just, than the purpose of the great.’” However, McCormick objects, Strauss ultimately denies that the people are naturally and morally superior to the great when he “concludes that for Machiavelli, ‘the goodness of the people consists less in its inability to commit impious or atrocious actions … than in its inability to color’ or conceal them (because the people are numerous and cannot deliberate or act in complete secrecy).

Indeed, McCormick faults Strauss along with the leading members of the “Cambridge school,” Pocock and Skinner, fundamentally for the same reason: they do not agree that Machiavelli’s affirmations of the decent ends
and goodness (bontà) of the people mean that he thought common people are inherently, by nature, virtuous and that the “great” are inherently rapacious and evil. McCormick objects to Pocock’s limiting the virtue of the people to military training and service. However, the only time Machiavelli uses the word “virtue” to describe the plebs is in Discourses 1.43 where he reports that the army lost its virtue when the men no longer thought that they were fighting for their own city, but had been ordered to do so by the tyrannical decemvirs. Goodness, honesty, and innocence are not the virtues Machiavelli urges political leaders to learn. Both Strauss and Skinner emphasize the way in which Machiavelli changed the meaning of the word virtù, although they disagree on the character of the change. Both also argue that Machiavelli presents an essentially self-regarding, fearful, acquisitive, and ambitious view of human nature as a whole, as at the beginning of Discourses 1.37.

By equating the conflict between two humors concerning political rule with the socioeconomic class conflict between rich and poor, and then declaring that the differences are “natural” or “inherent,” McCormick distorts Machiavelli by making his arguments far too simple and moralistic. One would not think that differences in wealth would be “inherent” or “natural”; they seem to consist in quantities of external goods, which Machiavelli argues can be changed by force. McCormick accepts a medieval, bodily and naturalistic understanding of the “humors,” because he wants to maintain that the people are always right in resisting command, and that the wealthy are always wicked.

In Reading Politics with Machiavelli, Ronald J. Schmidt Jr. acknowledges that he is following McCormick’s lead in looking to Machiavelli for a fresh resource for democratic thought and practice. However, Schmidt explains, his primary concerns and emphasis are different. Desiring to counteract the political impact of economic inequality, McCormick seeks to revive institutionalized class conflict. Concerned more about the influence billionaires like the Koch brothers have exercised on American politics the last several decades by establishing think tanks, academic institutions, and media outlets, Schmidt does not advocate institutional reform. Instead, he looks to Machiavelli for an example of the way in which an author can formulate “an alternative democratic vision” (25). He concentrates on three phenomena he finds particularly salient for contemporary American politics: conspiracy, apocalyptic prophecy, and exclusion by means of exile or torture.

Most Americans think of conspiracies as suspicious oligarchic cabals; but, Schmidt argues, Machiavelli presents conspiracy as a political tactic—full of danger and risks, to be sure, but open to anyone brave enough to try it. He thus invites opponents of the present regime to seek like-minded friends while they (like the founder of the Roman Republic, Lucius Junius Brutus) await their opportunity to act. As Strauss and Harvey Mansfield have shown, in the guise of showing how difficult it is to carry out a conspiracy, Machiavelli indicates how it can be done. However, he does not show that
anyone can undertake such an enterprise successfully, even if she is willing to lose her own life in the process.

According to Schmidt, Machiavelli also holds out hope to those dismayed by the current state of the republic in his treatment of Moses as the armed prophet par excellence. In *Prince* 6, Machiavelli explicitly states that Moses succeeded where Girolamo Savonarola failed, because Moses was armed whereas Savonarola was not. However, Schmidt argues, Moses succeeded not primarily because he was armed, but because he was better able to persuade his followers to do what he ordered. Like the other “mythical” founders Machiavelli praises, Moses was a liberator who took the opportunity not only to free his people from oppression, but also to institute a new government. Such “new princes” may have to use force and kill their opponents, but they can also serve as encouraging examples for would-be reformers. Schmidt uses the example of Moses particularly to counteract the tendency in America to associate prophecy with jeremiads by reminding us that a prophet can also point people to new and better life.

Finally, Schmidt uses the facts of Machiavelli’s own life to protest the use of torture and wars that drive thousands of people into exile. After his name was found on a list of conspirators, Machiavelli was tortured and then sent into exile to his farm outside of Florence. His biography thus leads Schmidt to expound on the dehumanizing effects of both these policies, so common in the contemporary world. Relying on the work of Elaine Scarry, Schmidt argues that the purpose of torture is not to extract information; on the contrary, it constitutes a display of the power of the torturer over his isolated and dehumanized victim. Schmidt concedes that Machiavelli himself not merely continued to seek employment from the Medici lords who had tortured and exiled him; he went so far as to write justifications for such cruelties “well used.” The possible example and encouragement he provides is thus a bit more ambiguous than Schmidt acknowledges.

But Schmidt is not primarily interested in reading Machiavelli’s texts closely nor determining what Machiavelli thought. As he tells his readers at both the beginning and end of the book, he wants to use Machiavelli to help recruit other allies and friends in an effort to replace the neoliberal reduction of republican political contestation to private, market-based decision-making. In doing so, he cites and relies on the arguments of a great many other scholars: democratic political theorists like Wendy Brown, Bonnie Honig, George Shulman, and Hannah Arendt as well as well-known commentators on Machiavelli’s works such as Hannah Pitkin, Miguel Vatter, and Strauss (whose positions Schmidt regularly misstates). Schmidt thus shows that he has read widely, but his is not a truly scholarly work. It is a plea for action.

Yves Winter’s *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence*, on the other hand, is replete with scholarly footnotes as well as arguments with other commentators and political theorists. Like McCormick, Winter “offers an interpretation of Machiavelli’s text that challenges both those who attribute to it a moderate
republicanism and those who see in it the kernel of modern raison d’état. Yet,” Winter states, his “aim … is not to substitute an ostensibly more authentic rendition of Machiavelli’s political beliefs for the ones that currently circulate.” He is too much a historicist to think that possible. Like McCormick and Schmidt, Winter studies Machiavelli to encourage a certain kind of contemporary political activism. But where McCormick seeks to revive class conflict by means of institutional reforms and Schmidt wants to enlarge the democratic imagination, Winter desires to promote an explicitly plebeian politics that regards violence as a legitimate means of pursuing its partisan ends.

According to Winter, Machiavelli puts forward the position Antonio Gramsci called “popular realism.” Machiavelli’s thought is “realistic,” because it deals with concrete historical conditions, not abstract ideas; and it is materialistic, because it deals with bodies, although it involves the imagination in conceiving ways things could be different. Unlike “conventional” realism, however, Machiavelli’s “political pedagogy” is not addressed to “statesmen.” Nor does it emphasize the importance of leadership. Despite appearances to the contrary—Machiavelli’s most famous treatise is not merely entitled The Prince but explicitly addressed to a prince—and the fact that a relatively small number of human beings were literate at the time he wrote, Winter contends that “Machiavelli offers … popular education in the interpretation of violence that is of use to the people in advancing a politics of freedom” (25). This reader cannot help but wonder how many ordinary people would be interested in—or capable of understanding—the highly theoretically informed and extremely scholarly hermeneutics of violence that Winter himself presents.

Like McCormick, Winter emphasizes the conflict between the two “humors” Machiavelli sees inherent in every political association. Like McCormick, he also cites Machiavelli’s statement that the desire of the people not to be oppressed is more “decent” than the desire of the grandi to dominate. Further like McCormick, Winter argues that the conflict between the two humors becomes more violent as a result of increasing socioeconomic inequality. Unlike McCormick, however, Winter thinks that “Machiavelli has little confidence in people’s natural capacities. Political virtues, he insists, are not natural—they are learnt and practiced” (25). For that reason, Winter seeks to bring out the ways in which Machiavelli seeks to teach the people to interpret violent acts rather than advocate institutional “remedies” such as the tribunate that the people might employ in attempting to resist the rapacity of the oligarchs.

As the title of his book indicates, Winter emphasizes the different kinds or “orders” of violence Machiavelli depicts. Unlike Hobbes, Machiavelli does not describe a violent prepolitical “state of nature.” Instead he shows not only that violence in different forms permeates political life, but also that violence can be “productive” when directed against oligarchic elites. In explicit opposition to Weber, Winter begins by distinguishing “violence” (a word Machiavelli does not often use because of its immoral connotations) in the
form of spectacular uses of “cruelty” from “force.” “Spectacular” uses of violence are aimed not so much at affecting its specific target (who is often dead) as at arousing a complex emotional reaction—fear, but not hatred, and awe—in the spectators. Precisely because its aim is not clear, spectacular cruelty appears to be excessive and irrational, yet as such, it arouses an attempt on the part of its witnesses to interpret its meaning. “Force,” on the other hand, usually refers to “the political use of arms. It is frequently metaphorized in military terms and refers to the deployment or threat of physical violence, to the infliction of injuries, and to executions.” Although Machiavelli also uses forza to describe subhuman and supernatural motions, physical violence “has a privileged status in politics, because it is the mode in which force, especially when exercised by states, often manifests itself” (87). However, precisely because, in contrast to spectacular “cruelty,” force can be measured and its use deemed “efficient” (or not) in terms of its object, force “is a constitutively unstable and precarious mode of action” that needs to be “stabilized” by law and religion. Machiavelli suggests that force “works best … when it operates not as an alternative to public opinion but directly manufactures consent, as modeled by the armed prophets” (88).

Although it is difficult for any reader to ignore the importance of “arms” in Machiavelli’s texts, Winter is much more interested in the instances of “spectacular cruelty.” Like many commentators, he uses Cesare Borgia’s display of the severed body of his former minister, Remirra de Orca, in the public square of Cesena to illustrate the “theatricality” of Machiavelli’s presentation. The most original part of Winter’s analysis consists in his argument that Machiavelli’s account of the display of the results of the killing and dismemberment is more effective than Machiavelli’s plagiarist Niño’s description of the trial and punishment. Niño’s description implicates Cesare in the cruelty from which he sought to distance himself and so solidify popular support for his government. Unlike most previous commentators, but like McCormick, Winter presents Borgia as acting purely on behalf of the people and not (in contrast to the section of The Prince he quotes) out of his self-interest in retaining rule of the province he had seized. Winter’s emphasis on the educative effects of Machiavelli’s account that left the people not merely “satisfied” by the punishment of the man who had oppressed them with his cruelty, but “stupefied” as to its meaning, seems to constitute an implicit response to Michel Foucault’s argument in Discipline and Punish that the institution of regular norms and expectations constitutes a much more effective means of controlling a population than spectacular punishments. Although Winter acknowledges that Machiavelli thought the people need to be politically educated by means of training and practice, he barely mentions the importance Machiavelli attributes to military training in the use of arms for both the people and their leaders, much less the competition among members of the elite for popular favor that Machiavelli sees as the primary way a free people protects itself from the rise of a tyrant. Like McCormick Winter relegates all worries about the rise of such leaders to
the historical dustbin (despite the many examples of the rise of tyrannical “popular” leaders in the twentieth century). The only threat to popular freedom they see is posed by the wealthy (or otherwise “privileged”) elite.

In the second half of his book Winter examines Machiavelli’s accounts of the three different kinds or occasions for the use of what turns out to be spectacular violence in politics: foundings, reproductions of the founding experience, and open conflicts or “tumults” between the people and the oligarchs. Acknowledging Machiavelli’s insistence that a founder needs to act alone, Winter argues against both Arendt’s interpretation of the founding in terms of making (as opposed to acting) and the “transcendental” interpretations of such acts by Miguel Vatter and Thomas Berns. The violence has to be “spectacular” in order to create a political memory. Machiavelli himself apparently did not think that such memories lasted, since they needed to be revived every five to ten years through the threat of a foreign invasion or, better, the public accusation or dramatic self-sacrifice of an exceptional individual (D 3.1). By institutionalizing trials of outstanding individuals before large popular juries, Winter recognizes, Machiavelli shows how “some forms of anti-oligarchic violence may be formalized in institutions of punishment” (166).

Winter is most interested, however, in retrieving what he calls “the logic of plebeian violence.” In his Florentine Histories Machiavelli describes several mob executions in which individuals are not merely killed and dragged about by the people, but their bodies are torn apart and pieces literally ingested by members of the crowd. These are clearly instances of cruelty, unlike force, without proportion; and, Machiavelli shows, such cruelty can be used not only by the state but also by those struggling against the state (181). What readers learn is, first, that “popular vengeance needs to be relished with the senses,” and, second, “that violence manifests a popular refusal of conventional forms of punishment. Not only is the retribution publicly performed but the hyperbolic imagery of bodies torn apart by hands and teeth also indicates that a kind of excess is central to the successful enactment of such revenge” (182). Machiavelli often refers to the “rage” and “fury” of the multitude; and “hatred is a resource for the people … that, unlike material wealth, is inexhaustible” (183). Winter contends that “Machiavelli analyzes plebeian violence, and the passions that sustain it—anger and hatred—as a form of popular resistance. As an insurrectionary political form,” he shows, “such popular resistance has more direction and focus than an isolated riot, yet it resists institutionalization.” Plebeian violence is not “a natural expression of popular justice, as if the plebs’ conception of justice were limited to vengeance.” On the contrary, “riots and popular executions convey a revolt against the judicial and fiscal apparatuses of the state and the symbols that epitomize them” (185). Winter concedes that “this spontaneous form of insurrectionary politics has inherent limitations.” Indeed, the challenge with which he concludes his book is “to organize and develop political forms that go beyond conventional juridical categories yet do not fall back into an apparatus of domination.” Winter refers to the fate of the natural leader, Michele de’
Lando, who arises spontaneously out of the Ciompi mob, gives it direction, but then encounters the opposition of other would-be plebeian leaders, and is finally not merely co-opted, but killed by the Medici. He concludes that “the central unresolved question of Machiavelli’s plebeian politics is that of organization and leadership… . One of the lessons of the Ciompi revolt is that plebeian leaders are highly susceptible to cooptation by elites” (189). The question with which he leaves his readers is whether and, if so, how any form of politics that resists institutionalization, especially when it is violent, can result not merely in destruction, but have lasting, positive consequences.

In Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation, Christopher Holman responds, in effect, by arguing that Machiavelli shows that all political action is essentially creative. However, human actors have to be open to having the orders they create both for themselves as individuals and in a community questioned, criticized, and reformed, because nothing in this essentially changing world lasts.

Like all the authors in this review, Holman presents a new interpretation of Machiavelli as a “method of thinking radical democracy.” Like Schmidt and Winter, Holman makes no claim “to touch the truth of Machiavelli’s political thought” or to produce “a systematic explication of the whole of Machiavelli’s oeuvre” (4). Like Schmidt, he proposes to follow Machiavelli’s example: “Rather than seek to represent the trajectory of past events [or texts] in a linear and straightforward mode, he alters, elides, and invents lessons and events in order to invest them with a specific meaning … that is then redeployed in his own context for the sake of achieving a contemporary political goal” (4). Holman acknowledges that “there is nothing original about suggesting that Machiavelli is capable of contributing important content to a theory of radical democracy.” In particular, he cites the work of Claude Lefort. “Despite important contributions by figures such as Miguel Vatter [and] Filipp Del Lucchese,” he also notes, “within the Anglo-American world the democratic Machiavelli has come to be appreciated within mainstream political science only recently … as a result of the many publications of John McCormick.” He nevertheless claims to be the first to show that “Machiavelli generates an entirely unique defence of democratic rule” ethically grounded in “an affirmation of the universal [human] capacity for creative innovation” (5) in a thoroughly contingent, historical world.

“Under the influence of the Epicurean philosophical tradition,” Holman contends, “Machiavelli provides a cosmological account of a world” characterized by “its fundamentally chaotic and indeterminate being” (8). Since nothing in this world has any inherent essence, order, or nature, humans find themselves capable of perpetually remaking themselves and their social world. “This capacity is expressed in Machiavelli’s concept of ambition … [as] a fundamental human striving to transgress existing forms and construct new realities” (9).

On the basis of this general characterization of Machiavelli’s thought, Holman proposes a new understanding of the relation between
Machiavelli’s two major works. Instead of the now “standard” view of The Prince as specifying the kind of “virtuous” actions necessary to establish political order and the Discourses as describing the constitutional republic that can be erected on that violently and fraudulently imposed foundation, he interprets The Prince as an account of the activity of the creative individual subject and the Discourses as a description of the way that creative activity can be extended to an entire community.

If all forms of worldly being are continually changing in themselves as well as in relation to others, Holman sees, no human being or humanly constructed order can remain the same. For that reason, Machiavelli declares in both Prince 25 and Discourses 3.9, a virtuous prince (or individual) must adapt his character and deeds to the times. Likewise, Machiavelli concludes his Discourses by observing that “a republic has need of new acts of foresight every day if one wishes to maintain it free” (3.49). Holman thus criticizes McCormick for taking Agathocles to be Machiavelli’s ideal “popular prince,” because he had all the wealthy and politically powerful grandi in his city massacred by his soldiers. The elimination of his potential competitors was one, but only one, of the varied strategies Machiavelli shows that Cesare Borgia employed in laying the foundations of “good government” in the Romagna. As a political leader able to vary his approach in different circumstances, Cesare thus provides a better example of political virtù. Machiavelli concedes that Borgia’s judgment and flexibility failed in the end when he allowed Giuliano della Rovere to become pope. But, Holman concludes, “through his emphasis on the performativity of the prince as an actor upon a stage theatrically embodying a multiplicity of diverse roles, Machiavelli reorients political activity as a good-in-itself…. Virtù is the human capacity that allows the actor to seize upon the occasioni presented by fortuna in order to generate new human realities.” And in Prince 6 Machiavelli declares, “These occasions … made these men happy and their excellent virtue rendered the occasions known; hence their countries were ennobled and became very happy” (126–27).

There is, however, a certain tension between the joyful glorying Holman sees a virtuous political actor and his people taking in his achievements and the contingency of worldly existence that requires human beings to create ever new forms of self-expression and social organization, because no form of existence or order can remain the same. How can an individual or group take satisfaction in achievements they know to be essentially transient, needing to be reformed, if not replaced with the creations of others?

Holman emphasizes Machiavelli’s attribution of ambition to all human beings and their desire for novelty. At the beginning of Discourses 1.37 he observes:

It is the verdict of the ancient writers that men are wont to worry in evil and to become bored with good, and that from both of these two passions the same effects arise. 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.

However, Holman ignores Machiavelli’s own explanation of the cause of this
conflict and its effects: “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.” It seems that Machiavelli did
not think that human beings are ever happy or satisfied—certainly not for
long. Indeed, he explains: “From this arises 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” (trans. Mansfield and Tarcov).

As McCormick and Winter emphasize, Machiavelli maintains that every
“city” or political community is divided into two humors, and that the
laws that preserve freedom arise from the conflict between them. These
radical democrats thus take Machiavelli to be contending that class conflict,
even or especially when it is violent, is good. Like Winter (and Vatter),
Holman observes that Machiavelli states that a prince can make or unmake
the “great.” So, he concludes, the division between the people and the great
is not a result of their having different natures (as Machiavelli himself
states in D 1.58); the great are great merely as a result of convention or the
prince’s will. And if no ruler or government elevates some over others or
allows them to become wealthier, there will be no group that becomes con-
scious of its superior position and wants to maintain it. As a result, there
will be no antagonistic conflict. There will be agonistic competition among
the infinitely various human beings in a world in which all existence is con-
stantly changing, as they endeavor to express and thus create themselves.

Relying on Machiavelli’s statements in Discourses 1.37 and 1.55 that it is
easy to establish a republic where the people are equally poor, Holman
argues that economic equality is the necessary and sufficient condition for
the emergence of his Arendtian-sounding democracy in which a diverse plu-
rality of citizens not merely reveal who they are, but continually interrogate
and recreate themselves by participating in public deliberations. Holman
acknowledges that Machiavelli does not make such a proposal. He also
notes very late in the book that Machiavelli often writes in terms of necessity.
In fact, Machiavelli often writes about human nature and the strong attach-
ment human beings feel to their own lives and property. Holman simply
ignores some of Machiavelli’s famous statements. For example, in The
Prince he assures his readers that “truly it is a very natural and ordinary
thing to desire to acquire, and always, when men do it who can, they will
be praised or not blamed” (P 3, 14–15). He also advises a prince that
“above all, he must abstain from [taking] the property of others, because
men forget the death of a father more quickly than the loss of a patrimony”
(P 17, 67). And in his Discourses (1.37), he not only reports that the Roman
patricians were willing to share their “honors” or political offices with the plebs, but also notes that they were not willing to give up their property. Machiavelli also states more generally that “men cannot be given trouble without a reward, nor can the hope of attaining the reward be taken away from them without danger” (D 1.60). And he explains the prosperity of free states by observing that a citizen of such “does not fear that his patrimony will be taken away, and ... knows not only that [his children] are born free and not slaves, but that they can, through their virtue, become princes.” It is this assurance that a person can keep and enjoy the goods he has produced that gives rise to “men in rivalry think[ing] of private and public advantages, and both ... grow marvelously” (D 2.2, 132).

The gap between Holman’s new interpretation of Machiavelli as an advocate of “creative self-interrogation and expression,” about which Machiavelli does not write, and Machiavelli’s texts, which emphasize not only the self-regarding characteristics of human nature, but also the education of leaders who recognize the need for continuing institutional reform, leads this reader to ask: Why do the theorists of radical democracy seek to enlist the aid of Machiavelli? Why not simply describe the advantages of a completely egalitarian polity that Machiavelli never contemplated or thought possible? The cynical answer might be that they are professors who find it useful, if not necessary, to publish their political opinions in an apparently scholarly mode. A more substantive answer would be that all these radical democrats are opponents of liberalism. Machiavelli argues that politics involves conflict, not consensus; and, as the radical democrats see more clearly than many previous commentators, he is ultimately a friend of the people. He does not have a doctrine of individual rights, state of nature, or social contract; he clearly privileges politics over economics, and he is not shy about advocating the need to use force.

What the radical democrats do not see or acknowledge, although Machiavelli clearly does, is that a popular political leader who organizes and trains his own troops can become a tyrant instead of a liberator. There are institutional ways of preventing this from happening, but people have to understand what those institutions are and why they are necessary. Like the popular leaders Machiavelli criticizes both in Rome and Florence, the radical democrats seem to be more intent upon destroying their wealthy oligarchic opponents than on making those relatively more secure, ambitious individuals check each other by competing for popular favor. The radical democrats take what they like from Machiavelli’s texts and ignore the rest. Machiavelli’s own political prescriptions may be based on an inadequate or outdated notion of human nature. But if that is the case, the ways in which his understanding of human nature is inadequate have to be shown, and the critic cannot rely on an “interpretation” of Machiavelli in making his own political proposals.