Machiavelli's Politics

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INTRODUCTION
Reading Machiavelli

Machiavelli is popularly known—for obvious reasons—as a proponent of "Machiavellian politics." Certain aspects of his work support his dubious reputation and the implied opprobrium. He is often listed along with Thucydides and Hobbes as a classical "realist," who presents a "realistic" view of politics, because he takes such a dim view of human nature. Neither Thucydides nor Hobbes openly and explicitly advises a prince that he must murder the bloodline of the ruler he supplants if he wishes to maintain his conquest, however. Nor do they advocate "cruelty well-used." Especially in his Prince, Machiavelli appears to advocate the necessity of using force and fraud in politics with much more glee than the other "realists."

Serious students of Machiavelli's writings have nevertheless come to hold very different views of his works. The sixteenth-century English playwright Christopher Marlowe is usually included among those who popularized the view of Machiavelli as a "teacher of evil." Yet by beginning The Jew of Malta with a prologue delivered by a character named Machevill who declares that he "count[s] religion but a childish toy, and hold[s] there is no sin but ignorance," Marlowe also suggests that Machiavelli was a Socratic philosopher. Seventeenth-century political theorists such as Baruch Spinoza, James Harrington, and Algernon Sidney insisted that Machiavelli was a republican political thinker. In the eighteenth century, Montesquieu famously declared

that "one has begun to be cured of Machiavellianism," but he and Rousseau incorporated many features of Machiavelli’s republic in their own proposals. In the early nineteenth century Fichte and Hegel declared that Machiavelli’s ideas about unity Italy should serve as a model for Germany; and Marxist commentators such as Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci have continued to see him as the herald of a new form of popular nationalism. In the early twentieth century Friedrich Meinecke argued that Machiavelli was an advocate of "reason of state" or "power politics"; and Benedetto Croce praised him for having declared the autonomy of politics from morality. Michael Oakeshott went further by declaring Machiavelli’s Prince to be a technical handbook exemplifying the evils of "rationalism in politics"; and Jacques Maritain expressed the hope that the end of World War II would mark "the end of Machiavellianism." But in contrast to the enduring popular view of Machiavelli as a "Machiavellian" teacher of tyrants, most scholars in the late twentieth and now twenty-first centuries have understood Machiavelli to be a more benign republican, if not a kind of democrat. 

6. For representative selections of such views, see Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli, eds., Machiavelli and Republicanism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and John M. Najemy, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Leo Strauss would not be included among such scholars by commentators who fail to read beyond the first chapter of Thoughts on Machiavelli (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) in which Strauss expresses some sympathy for the simple and old-fashioned view of Machiavelli as a "teacher of evil," but explicitly recognizes that it is inadequate. (E.g., Quentin Skinner, Machiavelli: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 99, and Barbara Spackman, "Machiavelli and Maxims," Yale French Studies, no. 77, Reading the Archive: On Texts and Institutions (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 137.) Yet Strauss recognizes that "as a matter of principle he [Machiavelli] preferred, in his capacity as analyst of society, republics to monarchies" (TMs, 20). Going even further, Strauss observes that "Machiavelli was the first philosopher who questioned in the name of the multitude or of democracy the aristocratic prejudice or the aristocratic premise which informed classical philosophy. He preferred the more democratic Roman polity to the less democratic Spartan polity. He expressed the opinion that the purpose of the people is more honest, or more just, than the purpose of the great" (127). Strauss points out, moreover, that "Machiavelli’s emphatic attack on 'all writers' is directed, not against the traditional condemnation of tyranny but against the traditional contempt for the multitude." And this observation "may incline us to believe that (Machiavelli) was the philosopher who originated the democratic tradition" (293–94).
7. Strauss goes on, however, to emphasize the division of labor Machiavelli suggests in D 1.58, where he observes that "if princes are superior to peoples in ordering laws, forming civil lives, and ordering new statutes and order, people are so much superior in maintain things ordered that . . . they attain the glory," and suggests that democratic theory proper begins with Spinoza and Rousseau. But, he concludes, "Machiavelli’s book on principalities and his book on republics are both republican" (282). "By radically depreciating the pretensions to 'virtue' of the nobility, and simultaneously making the people honest," Pierre Marient, An Intellectual History of Liberalism, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), suggests that "Machiavelli becomes the first democratic thinker." (16). More recently, Miguel Vatter, Between Form and Event: Machiavelli’s Theory of Political Freedom (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), and John McCormick, Machiavellian Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), have argued that Machiavelli shows the benefits of democratic political action. Vatter argues that the periodic outbreaks of popular fury in riots he characterizes as "events" give rise to historical change by destroying old forms and orders, whereas McCormick emphasizes the "ferocious populism" with which Machiavelli encourages the people to resist oppression by the "grandi." Arguing, in effect, against McCormick’s attempt to show that Machiavelli did not champion a Madison-like republican form of politics, Alisa M. Ardito, Machiavelli and the Modern State (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), contends that Machiavelli precedes James Madison as a proponent of an extended territorial republic.
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John Najemy contends that Machiavelli's famous analysis of the opposition between fortuna and virtù is designed primarily, if not exclusively, to counteract the belief of his good friend Francesco Vettori that human beings do not have control over their own existence.1 Similarly, Claude Lefort maintains that Machiavelli's Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy's History should be read as somewhat covertly showing the young Florentines to whom it is dedicated what they should do to reform their republic.2

The problem with simply historical readings of Machiavelli's works is that they deprive his works of any interest except as historical documents.3 Yet Machiavelli suggests in the dedications to his two most comprehensive works that he is conveying knowledge of broader and more enduring interest. He does not restrict his reflections merely to the needs of particular individuals or of Florence or even of Italy as a whole. On the contrary, he offers advice to the king of France and the Holy Roman Emperor of Germany as well as to his fellow countrymen; and he uses examples from Asia, both ancient and modern, to support his arguments. Moreover, in emphasizing the development of new and larger monarchies in France and Spain, he points toward the emergence of a new international order in Europe.4

Because they emphasize the character of the audience Machiavelli was presumably trying to reach and persuade, contextual readings tend to become rhetorical readings as well. However, those rhetorical readings that emphasize the continuity between Machiavelli and his predecessors fly in the face of his own clear declarations in P 15 and D 1.58 that he has departed from the writings of all previous authors. By presenting Machiavelli as writing in a "civic humanist" or even "classical" tradition, commentators such as Quentin Skinner and Erica Benner diminish, if they do not simply deny, the explicitly innovative character of his work.5 But commentators such as Claude Lefort and Maurizio Viroli, who argue that Machiavelli was actually trying to rouse his contemporaries to take revolutionary political action, face another difficulty.6 There is evidence in Machiavelli's texts that he does not think that his immediate addressees will understand his arguments or be able actually to undertake the glorious enterprises he puts before them. At the beginning of P 6, for example, Machiavelli indicates that the most he expects from Lorenzo is to be able to imitate great men of the past; he does not expect him to be able to become the founder of a new republic or principality. And in the Art of War Machiavelli shows that the young Florentines to whom he dedicated his Discourses on Livy do not know the only art he says a prince should study and practice (P 14). It becomes difficult, therefore, to understand why he says that his two young friends deserve to be princes—except that they would honor and employ him, if they could. They do not know nor are they apt to learn what they would need to know in order to become effective rulers (or to stage a successful revolution in Florence).7

Clough (in "Machiavelli's Political Assumptions and Objectives," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 53, no. 1 (1970): 43–57). But in contrast to Wootten, Clough concludes that "quite apart from its composition for an ad hoc purpose, Machiavelli wanted his Prince to be considered as a blueprint for any new prince with a new principedom, and as such it remains a part of his scheme of social science" (44).


10. Skinner thus modified his reading of Machiavelli greatly when he began to argue that Machiavelli represented a "third way," an understanding of liberty as "non-domination," that not only lay between Isaiah Berlin's two concepts of freedom as either negative or positive, but was also tenable in our time. Quentin Skinner, "The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty," in Bock, Skinner, and Viroli, eds., Machiavelli and Republicanism, 293–309. On the changes in Skinner's thought, see Paul Rahe, "Situating Machiavelli," in Renaissance Civic Humanism, ed. James Hanks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 270–308.

11. Ardito, Machiavelli and the Modern State, 172–82, argues not only that Machiavelli saw that the Italian city-states could no longer be defended from invasions by the armies of the national monarchies emerging in France and Spain and sought to show his contemporaries how a republic could be instituted and maintained over an extended territory. She also shows that Machiavelli predicted the development of entities like the modern nation-state before the fact along the lines Charles Tilly and other historians have shown that such states actually did emerge, after the fact, on the basis of their military power.

12. Strangely enough, Quentin Skinner, Machiavelli (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), and Erica Benner, The Prince: A New Reading (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), both recognize the dramatic change Machiavelli made in the meaning of virtue, especially in The Prince, when he argued that virtue was and should be conceived as what led to political success rather than as a set of characteristics that were, as both Aristotle and Cicero had maintained, good in themselves. Skinner nevertheless emphasizes the continuity between Machiavelli's writings and those of the "classical humanists," and Erica Benner, Machiavelli's Ethics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), goes so far as to argue that Machiavelli not merely drew on ancient political philosophers but was an ethical Socratic.

13. Maurizio Viroli, Redeeming "The Prince" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), contends that in concluding The Prince with a passionate call for the liberation and unification of Italy, Machiavelli purposefully downplayed the difficulties (which, according to Strauss, TM, 61–84, showed that the proposal was not really serious) because Machiavelli wanted to convince his readers to undertake such a project.

14. Explicitly "deconstructive" readings such as those of Steven M. Fallon, "Hunting the Fox: Equivocation and Authorial Duplicity in The Prince," PMLA (Publications of the Modern Language Association) 107 (1992): 1181–95, and Thomas Green, "The End of Discourse in Machiavelli's Prince," in Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 63–84, go even further. If, as they argue, Machiavelli's text undermines itself, he has no "teaching" or lessons that political actors could use or follow. Such readings contradict Machiavelli's explicit statements concerning his desire to convey something of use that would have an effect.
If Machiavelli did not think that his immediate addressees would understand what he had written, then why did he write? And for whom?

In the preface to the second book of his Discourses Machiavelli complains that the "malignity of fortune" forces him to hope that young people in the future will take the path he has indicated to its completion. He did not publish the Discourses during his lifetime, but he explicitly addresses future readers.

As Leo Strauss contends, Machiavelli sought to attract young readers in particular by means of his exaggerations and understatements.\(^{15}\) He is a notoriously playful, ironic author, who not only seeks to shock the sensibilities of his readers by arguing, for example, that "cruelty" can be "well-used."\(^{16}\) He also tries to entertain them, especially in his comedies. Yet he claims that those comedies have a "useful lesson" lying underneath.\(^ {17}\)

Machiavelli had good reason not to present his most revolutionary thoughts too openly. He had been one of the few officials of the Florentine republic the Medici dismissed when they regained control, because they did not trust him. After they found his name on a list of conspirators, they imprisoned and tortured him. The irony with which Machiavelli describes his own lowly status compared with that of the dedictees of The Prince and Discourses is particularly heavy. As he states in the prologue to Mandragola, a comedy in which everything said can be dismissed as a joke, "the author . . . doesn't stand in awe of anyone, even though he might play the servant to the one who can wear a better coat than he can."\(^ {11}\) He himself was not wealthy or from an aristocratic background, but he had to appeal to those who were in order to convince them of the soundness of his advice and to act on it. He understood that the advisor who counsels a prince will well receive full credit for the wisdom of his advice.\(^ {18}\)

He was thus prepared to let those who understand the implications of the "path" he laid out in his Discourses receive the glory associated with founding a new republic. He also counseled a prince who wanted to found a new regime to which everyone would consent that he should follow the example of Lucius Junius Brutus and use old names in describing offices with new powers (D 1.25). He himself thus used traditional terms such as 'virtue,' 'prudence,' 'mercy,' even 'justice,' giving them new meaning while playing on the old.\(^ {19}\) And in his Discourses he advocated a new, more democratic form of republic in the guise of an imitation of ancient Rome.

If Machiavelli did not think his immediate addressees would understand him, should we not forget about those addressees and their specific historical circumstances and look for Machiavelli's general arguments about what works in politics and what does not? This thought has led to more theoretical, scientific, or philosophical readings of his works.

Few scholars today accept the description of Machiavelli as the first political scientist—as Oakeshott claimed when he identified Machiavelli's Prince as a manual or technical handbook of rules that could be applied by any reader with the requisite authority, or as Benedetto Croce claimed when he found Machiavelli to be an early "positivist" insofar as he distinguished facts from values.\(^ {20}\) (There is, however, a large popular literature applying Machiavellian rules to show how a person can succeed in business or other forms of contemporary leadership.)\(^ {21}\)

A better reason to support the characterization of Machiavelli as the first modern political "scientist" lies in his claim to know only worldly things. Worldly things are sensible and transient. Machiavelli claims, in effect, not to know of any transcendent, eternally unchanging, and purely intelligible forms of being such as the Platonic ideas. Indeed, he suggests that no mortal human being could know any such things. Nor does he find his political analysis on a claim to know anything divine or supernatural. Because he insists that everything in the world of men is always in motion, he sees that political actors have to deal with changing circumstances. His political analysis

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15. TM, 127.
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, aph. 28. On Machiavelli's "irony" see also Kahn, Machiavellian Rhetoric, 39–44; Fallon, "Hunting the Fox"; Greene, "End of Discourse in Machiavelli's Prince"; Benner, Prince.
18. As he states explicitly in D 3 35.
19. The most notorious example of this double use is Machiavelli's statement about Aga-
hocles in P 8: "One cannot call it virtue to kill one's citizens, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion." Yet "If one considers the virtue of Aga-
hocles . . . one does not see why he has to be judged inferior to any most excellent captain" (33).
20. August Buck, Erzväge der Forschung (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), is an exception. He concludes that Machiavelli was the first political scientist and explicitly concludes, following Croce, that Machiavelli established the autonomy of politics.
21. For example, A. Jay, Management and Machiavelli (London, 1967); R. Buckkirk, Modern Man-
does not, therefore, culminate in the formulation of "laws" or "rules" of human behavior. When he does specify such "rules," he also points out that their application must vary as conditions change and that one "rule" may conflict with another (P 3). In P 21 he thus declares: "Nor should any state ever believe that it can always adopt safe courses; on the contrary, it should think that it has to take them all as doubtful. For in the order of things it is found that one never seeks to avoid one inconvenience without running into another; but prudence consists in knowing how to recognize the qualities of inconveniences, and in picking the less bad as good" (91). Machiavelli's writings do not culminate or consist, therefore, in a set of rules or "laws" that can be applied by anyone everywhere at all times.

Machiavelli does look for repetitions or regularities in the motions of things. At the beginning of his Discourses he thus observes that the heaven, sun, elements, and men have not "varied in their motion, order and power from what they were in antiquity" (D 1 Pref.; 6). The motions with which Machiavelli is chiefly concerned, however, are the passions that move men. Because all human beings naturally desire more than they can acquire or achieve, he observes, they always live in competition and conflict with one another. Their relations are, therefore, always contingent and changing. They form cities to protect themselves from the aggression of others; but once they form political associations, they not only try to seize the goods of others. Their cities also divide internally between the grandi, who seek to command and oppress the people, and the populi, who do not want to be commanded and oppressed. According to Machiavelli, there are three possible outcomes of this conflict: principality, license, or liberty. Because he clearly prefers liberty, his analysis is not "value-free" political science.

Nor is Machiavelli primarily a historian, recording and analyzing what happened in the past. Although Machiavelli maintains that everything in the world is continually coming into being and perishing, he also explicitly declares that he is innovating (P 15 and D 1.58). Miguel Vatter suggests that Machiavelli's ability to innovate arises from his turn away from ancient philosophy with its search for eternal truths or forms to history, which is always changing if it is not simply progressive.22 In both The Prince and Discourses

Machiavelli does insist on using historical examples to show that what he is recommending is possible, because what has been done by human beings before should be possible for human beings to do again, if the conditions or circumstances are right. His use of historical examples thus appears to be primarily rhetorical or persuasive. He does generalize, as shown in many of the chapter titles of the Discourses, but as noted above, he also regularly points out exceptions to the rule. Because he uses historical examples to illustrate his points rather than to demonstrate that any particular proposition applies to all places or circumstances in all times, he does not always describe the historical incidents or individuals to which he refers with complete precision or accuracy. In P 2, for example, he conflates two duces of Ferrara (because they, after all, held the same title and office). Likewise, in the Discourses his descriptions of Roman institutions are not altogether precise, because he does not always distinguish the ways in which they operated in the early republic from the late. The innovations Machiavelli claims to make do not appear, therefore, to come simply or even primarily from his turn away from philosophy to history.

Machiavelli could be called a political scientist, Strauss suggests, because he sought and claimed to have discovered knowledge (the literal meaning of 'science') of politics. But Strauss argues, in opposition to almost all other commentators who regard Machiavelli primarily as a political thinker, that his work is more accurately described as philosophy. Indeed, Strauss argues, Machiavelli was the first philosopher who not merely challenged but sought to destroy the Christian-Platonic tradition that maintained that the contemplative life was the highest and best form of human existence. And as such, Machiavelli was the founder of modernity.23

Strauss is famous for maintaining that we need to try to understand a past thinker as he understood himself. But Machiavelli could not possibly have understood himself to be the founder of modernity; that insight is possible only in hindsight.24 Francis Bacon famously acknowledged his debt to Machiavelli for describing what men do rather than what they ought to do, and criticizing the imaginary commonwealths proposed by previous

22. Vatter, Between Form and Event, 1–26. Although I agree with Vatter that Machiavelli, in effect, denies that there is a natural or divinely mandated hierarchy of goods or goals, that he does not think that political order is natural, but that it has to be intentionally constructed, and that he does not accept a cyclical view of history, I think that Vatter goes too far when he denies that Machiavelli has an "essentialist" (i.e., enduring) understanding of human nature and suggests that Machiavelli thinks that human beings are free to construct whatever institutions they desire.

23. Harvey Mansfield, "Machiavell’s Enterprise," New Criterion (October 2011): 3–11, presents a clear and concise account of this argument. Denis Collin, Comprendre Machiavel (Paris: Armand Colin, 2008), observes that Machiavelli did not pretend to be a philosopher, but a man of action. However, Collin contends, in practice Machiavelli is the first philosopher of the modern epoch, as important as badly understood and derided.

24. As Manent, Intellectual History of Liberalism, observes, "Only a complete account of the development of modern thought and politics after Machiavelli could justify crediting him with a founding role" (12).
philosophers; but Machiavelli did not have a modern scientific understanding of nature. As Steven Smith has observed, Strauss indicates the character of his analysis by entitling his book "Thoughts on Machiavelli" rather than, say, "Machiavelli’s Political Thought." There is, moreover, a suggestive parallel between his Thoughts on Machiavelli and Machiavelli’s Discourses on Livy. In his Discourses, Strauss argues, Machiavelli does not explicate Livy’s thought or write a commentary on it. He uses Livy’s text as a means of offering an indirect critique of biblical religion and Livy as a character who delivers speeches or arguments that Machiavelli does not make in his own name. Did Strauss use Machiavelli as a character to deliver his own critique of biblical morality? Thoughts are more secret than discourses.

In his Discourses on Livy, Machiavelli claims to have discovered "new modes and orders." But, Strauss argues, those new modes and orders are not political, as they would appear to be on the surface, so much as philosophical. In his account of "Machiavelli’s teaching" Strauss thus highlights Machiavelli’s critique of religion and his critique of morality. The first is not original, according to Strauss; Machiavelli’s arguments for the political utility of religion are essentially the same as those offered by the falsa sfida or "Averroists." But, Strauss reminds his readers, the founder of the "Averroist" tradition was Alfarabi, and according to Strauss, Alfarabi was a kind of Platonic. Like Plato and Xenophon’s Socrates, Strauss points out, Machiavelli emphasized the importance of studying the human things. Unlike Plato and Xenophon, however, Machiavelli linked his understanding of human beings and their needs to an "Epicurean" understanding of the world in terms of matter in motion. But unlike Epicurus, Machiavelli tried to find and construct the best form of human society.  

A reader might have expected Strauss to present Machiavelli’s critique of morality like his critique of religion in terms of its potential political utility. In teaching a prince to be able not to be good and to use that knowledge according to necessity. Machiavelli claims to be conveying "the effectual truth" of things (P 15). Strauss maintains, however, that "Machiavelli does not bring to light a single political phenomenon of any fundamental importance which was not fully known to the classics." Machiavelli’s only true innovation is to be found in his critique of morality; and that critique constitutes an unwarranted and ultimately pernicious constriction of our understanding of the possibilities of human existence.

The classics understood the moral-political phenomena in the light of man’s highest virtue or perfection, the life of the philosopher or the contemplative life. The superiority of peace to war or of leisure to business is a reflection of the superiority of thinking to doing or making. ... Machiavelli’s philosophizing on the other hand remains on the whole within the limits set by the city .... Accepting the ends of the demos as beyond appeal he seeks for the best means conducive to those ends. (TM, 295-96)

Strauss understands Machiavelli to be a philosopher, because he did not accept any authority but reason and was willing to reason or inquire about all things. But with Machiavelli, Strauss argues, the meaning of philosophy began to change. Instead of an unbridgeable conflict between philosophy and the ends of the city or the desires of the vast majority of its people, Machiavelli "achieves the decisive turn toward that notion of philosophy according to which its purpose is to relieve man’s estate or to increase man’s power or to guide man toward the rational society, the bond and the end of which is enlightened self-interest or the comfortable self-preservation of each of its members" (TM, 296). Machiavelli intended to benefit human beings, Strauss acknowledges; however, the long-run effect of his writings has been to deprive people living in late modernity of an understanding of true human excellence.

Was Machiavelli a philosopher, as Strauss maintains, or a "political theorist" concerned more, if not exclusively, about the "human things"?  

27. In “Die Erneuerung der Philosophie und die Herausforderung der Offenbarungsreligion zur Intention von Leo Strauss’ Thoughts on Machiavelli,” in Politische Philosophie und die Herausforderung der Offenbarungsreligion (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2013), 39-148, Heinrich Meier presents a detailed argument to show that this is exactly what Strauss did, employing all the devices of the “art of writing” which he argues that Machiavelli used.
28. Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 10-18. To say that Machiavelli was an “Averroist” or follower of Alfarabi is to maintain that he argued that religion was necessary to support political order and morality and that philosophers should, therefore, hide their lack of faith.
29. Leo Strauss, "Machiavelli and Classical Literature," Review of National Literature, no. 1 (1970): 10. Unlike “Averroist” philosophers, Machiavelli did not think that there was an eternal intelligible order. However, because he thought that fear of god or gods was an extremely useful instrument for acquiring and maintaining popular support for political order, Machiavelli unlike Epicurus did not try to convince his readers that gods had no reason to concern themselves about human affairs and would not, therefore, reward good behavior or punish bad.
30. Among those who have denied that Machiavelli was a philosopher are Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli," Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas. (New York: Viking, Viking, 1955), 239; and Thomas L.完全没问题，你的答案是正确的。
Commentators who call themselves "political theorists" (as opposed to "political philosophers") celebrate rather than bemoan Machiavelli's containing his thought within the limits of the city. Following Hannah Arendt, these commentators argue that the true character and understanding of politics were lost when Plato convinced his students to turn away from the "cave" and the examination of the opinions debated there to search for transcendent, eternal truths. Unlike the contextual or rhetorical commentators, these scholars do not emphasize the historical or the philosophical so much as the engaged, as opposed to "objective," character of both Machiavelli's "theoretical" enterprise and their own. The best known of these scholars, Sheldon Wolin, contends that in his Prince Machiavelli shows that a certain amount of violence is necessary in order to establish order. But that violence or "cruelty" must be "well-used," at all once and not persistently, lest it arouse opposition and hatred. Once order is established, Wolin concludes, Machiavelli shows in his Discourses how republican institutions can and should be established and maintained. No further violence is needed.

As both Straussian and Harvey Mansfield emphasize, however, at the beginning of the third book of his Discourses Machiavelli clearly insists that a republic must repeatedly be brought back to its beginnings by means of a spectacular "execution" to remind both ambitious politicians and the people at large why they should fear disobeying the law. And, Mansfield argues, the need for the force and "princely" leadership persists in modern republics, although scholars who emphasize the continuity of the "republican tradition" from Aristotle and Cicero to the founding of the American republic do not seem to see it.

Although he generally follows Strauss in his detailed commentary on the Discourses, in another book, Taming the Prince, Mansfield, in contrast to Strauss,


emphasizes the importance of one of Machiavelli's political innovations: his discovery of the need for a unitary executive. Mansfield uses this discovery to show, in opposition particularly to J. G. A. Pocock, that Machiavelli was not merely trying to preserve an Aristotelian notion of deliberative or classical "republican" politics. In The Prince Machiavelli clearly announced that he was articulating a new understanding of human virtù (or excellence); and in the Discourses he showed how such an understanding of virtù provided the basis of a new, "hard-nosed" form of republican politics.

In the following studies of Machiavelli's major prose works, I have tried to incorporate the advantages of all three of these major approaches while avoiding their difficulties or limitations. Like the historians, I take seriously Machiavelli's repeated indications, especially in the dedications of his works, that he is seeking a job from a specific set of people. Such a self-presentation is fully in line with the view Machiavelli frequently announces of human beings in general, that they are self-regarding or, as we would say, self-interested. In other words, Machiavelli shows himself acting according to the principles he articulates. His presentation of himself as a job seeker also means that to make a persuasive case for himself he had to demonstrate his ability to give viable practical advice. The best way to promote one's own self-interest, he repeatedly argues, is to show other people how they can best satisfy their own desires or ambitions. That means he thought that the conquest of Italy, for which he calls at the conclusion of The Prince and promises to the individual who learns the art explained in the Art of War, was both possible and desirable. Likewise, it means that in the Discourses Machiavelli is gradually showing the young Florentine aristocrats to whom he dedicates the work how they could realize their own ambitions to imitate if not improve upon the Romans, by establishing a new and better form of republic on the basis of knowledge, not merely by means of trial and error as had their predecessors. Finally, in his Florentine Histories Machiavelli praises the Medici, who commissioned him to write it, for the prudence they displayed in acquiring a virtual monopoly on political power in Florence. But he also subtly undercut that praise by showing that the Medici were able to acquire that power partly as a result of mistakes made by their predecessors and that they were able to maintain it only because the other four powers in Italy had equally weak foreign policies. He concludes, moreover, that the

French invasion of 1494 showed that the policies pursued by previous Florentine governments, including those of the Medici princes, could no longer successfully be continued.

Machiavelli’s relation to his audience in his comedies is, of course, a bit different from his relation to the individuals he addresses most immediately in his explicitly political writings. In his comedies Machiavelli presents himself initially as a kind of “fool” who seeks to make his audience laugh, especially at him; but he also insists that comedies are intended to benefit as well as to entertain. By means of the presentation of the priest Timoteo in Mandragola, Machiavelli suggests that the Church might play a more positive role in the organization of human life here and now if it restricted itself to sanctifying marriage and legitimizing the procreation so generated rather than engaging in political activity directly. More generally, he shows the way in which human beings can realize their strongest desires by means of a clever arrangement, if and only if they maintain the appearance of conventional morality. And in Clizia he indicates the reasons why he thinks that human life should not be organized according to the objects of human love, as both Plato and Augustine argued, because those objects are often, if not always, “fantastical” and attempts to achieve them destructive.

Like some of the commentators who emphasize the rhetorical character of Machiavelli’s texts, I argue not only that he addresses specific individuals or audiences but also that he provides evidence that he does not think that his particular addressees will understand or be able and willing to take his advice. In other words, his works have a distinctly ironical cast. This point has often been made about The Prince; it is the basis of the reading of The Prince as satire, famously suggested by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and reintroduced more recently by Mary Dietz. The ironical character of Machiavelli’s addressing the arguments contained in his Discourses to Cosimo Rucellai and Zanobi Buondelmonti has not been recognized by previous commentators, because they have not read the dedication in light of what Machiavelli shows about these young Florentine aristocrats in his Art of War. But commentators who do not read the arguments of the Discourses as addressed to these young men and their ambitions tend to miss the way in which Machiavelli gradually leads them from desiring merely to imitate the grandeur of Rome to wishing to found a new and better form of republic, in which all citizens would be eligible to be elected to the highest offices and individuals suspected of trying to overthrow the republic would be subject to trials in front of large popular juries. Concluding simply that Machiavelli is an admirer of Roman imperialism, they miss the new confederal form of republican foreign policy Machiavelli recommends in the second book of his Discourses (as well as his implicit foresight into the balance of power politics that would develop among the European nations). Such commentators also miss the way in which Machiavelli gradually attempts to wean his young ambitious readers from a desire for glory by urging them to take more account of their own personal safety. But the fact that Machiavelli did not expect the specific individuals he addresses to take his advice does not mean that his advice is bad or intentionally misleading. There is considerable evidence that he thought that the small city-states in Italy were no longer defensible and that they needed to be united—if not simply by conquest, then in the form of a federation.

Machiavelli’s indications that he does not think that his immediate addressees will understand or act on the basis of his recommendations do mean that he was writing for a broader future audience. But two questions immediately arise: What more generally was he trying to teach his future readers? And why did he insist upon addressing particular individuals in their specific circumstances as well as using specific historical examples?

Machiavelli does not write as a “political philosopher,” as that term is usually understood. He does not present his thought in the form of deductions from first principles or axioms the way Hobbes does in the Leviathan. He shies away from abstract generalizations and turns to history. But he does not adhere to the ancient notion of cycles, nor does he trace a generally progressive path or development. Nor does he offer a great many historical examples as data or evidence from which he derives a general theory. As noted above, his use of historical examples is partly rhetorical.

36. I disagree, therefore, with Markus Fischer, Well-Orderd License: On the Unity of Machiavelli’s Thought (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), who maintains that Machiavelli “elevated glory or greatness to the highest good” (86).


38. In D 1.2 and FH 3.1 he describes the cycle of generation and decay in regimes only to declare immediately thereafter that it does not hold.

In P 6 he observes that most people do not believe that anything they have not seen or experienced is possible. As he states in D 1. Pref., he reminds his readers of what people have done in the past in order to persuade them that human beings can still perform such great deeds. Machiavelli also uses historical examples and suggests "remedies" for particular problems at specific times and places because in a world in which everything is always in motion, political decisions always apply to particular circumstances, which necessarily change. The knowledge he claims to have acquired from his reading of ancient histories as well as his own practical experience in politics would not be of any use to political actors if it did not help them make such decisions. However, if they are to be useful, his analyses and recommendations cannot be restricted to the specific individuals and their immediate circumstances (because these hold only for a moment).

Machiavelli's writings nevertheless have a philosophical basis and character. As Strauss and Paul Rahe both point out, Machiavelli's political recommendations are associated with an "Epicurean" view of nature as a whole in which everything is always in motion, either coming into being or passing away. But Machiavelli does not remain a mere observer who quietly contemplates the natural order. In fact, he does not look at human motions and emotions on the basis of that understanding of nature so much as he adopts that understanding of nature as a result of his reading and experience of human actions and opinions. Like Socrates, he could be said to have been seeking self-knowledge in seeking knowledge of "the human things." In D 1.39 he declares:

Whoever considers present and ancient things easily knows that in all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there always have been. So it is the same thing for whoever examines past things diligently to foresee future things in every republic and to take the remedies for them that were used by the ancients, or if they do not find any that were used, to think up new ones through the similarity of accidents. But because these

40. Although Pierre Manent agrees that Machiavelli "ne construit pas de système. Ce qu'il dit paraît aussi peu abstrait que la vie même" (Enquête sur la démocratie: études de philosophie politique [Paris: Gallimard, 2007], 267), he observes that Strauss and Lefort, using completely opposed modes of interpretation, both conclude that Machiavelli was a philosopher whereas Strauss points to Socrates as the model of a philosopher who concerned himself primarily with the human things and to the Epicurean foundations of Machiavelli's conception of nature. Lefort, Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel, 425 (Smith trans., 180), derives a new ontology from Machiavelli's account of the conflict between the two humors.

41. If a leader is put in power by an army, he may have to allow that army to oppress the people. However, Machiavelli uses the example of Hiero of Syracuse to suggest (P 6, 13, 19) that it would be better, once he is in power, for the leader to see that the army which elevated him is eliminated.
42. In D 1.44 he declares that "a multitude without a head is useless." And in D 1.57 he explains, "There is nothing more formidable than an unshackled multitude without a head, [but] there is nothing weaker; for even though it has arms in hand, it is easy to put it down... When the spirits of men are cooled a little and each sees he has to return to his home, they begin to doubt themselves and to think of their safety, either by taking flight or by coming to accord" (115). These declarations would appear to contradict the contention by both Vatter, Between Form and Event, and McCormick, Machiavellian Democracy, that the people are the "creative" force in history.
alone to pursue their private endeavors. Only a few want to rule, and Machiavelli addresses his books to these few. However, by arguing that the people should be able to elect the individuals who rule them (for short terms and with rotation in office) and that those accused of attempting to overthrow the republic should be tried in public in front of large popular juries, who determine their innocence or guilt, I argue, Machiavelli suggests that the people can best determine whether the government has actually secured their lives, liberties, families, and property. This is the sense in which they are wiser. Without popular consent, Machiavelli sees, no state has a firm foundation. That is the sense in which a government based on the people is more stable than that of a single prince.

Because he treats the Discourses primarily in terms of Machiavelli’s “spiritual war” against Christianity, Strauss does not pay much attention to the new form of republic Machiavelli introduces there. He does not emphasize the need for competitive elections or rotation in office that Machiavelli draws from the Roman experience (or the fact that, according to Machiavelli, one of the two main causes of the fall of the Roman republic was the prolongation of commands). Mansfield brings out the importance of Machiavelli’s introduction of the executive power; but neither he nor Strauss points out that the regular “executions” Machiavelli states are necessary to preserve a republic all take the form of public trials. They are not examples of the use of “extraordinary” force, if “extraordinary” means extralegal (as it often does). As Machiavelli argues in D 1.7, large public trials are ways in which the people can “vent their humors,” their anger or resentment against those who rule and claim to be better than the ruled, and so preserve the rule of law instead of allowing a civil war between the two “humors” to develop. According to Machiavelli, “all the laws that are made in favor of freedom arise from the disunion” of the two humors, that of the great and that of the people (D 1.4, 1.16). In both The Prince and Discourses Machiavelli seeks to teach his readers how to design laws and institutions like the French parlement (a court) that guide the two humors so that each can check the excesses of the other.

However, those commentators who present Machiavelli as part of a “republican tradition” that represents a third understanding of human liberty as “non-domination” (in contrast to the negative and positive concepts of liberty distinguished by Isaiah Berlin) overestimate the effect of law per se in inculcating “civic virtue” in naturally selfish human beings—at least as Machiavelli sees it. In P 12 he famously states that “the principal foundations . . . [of] all states . . . are good laws and good arms.” And “because there cannot be good laws where there are not good arms, and where there are good arms there must be good laws,” he leaves out the reasoning about laws and speaks only of arms. In other words, laws are not good unless they are enforced. But, he emphasizes in the third book of his Discourses, arms are not good unless they are organized (D 3.30–31). Human beings can be trained to be good and reliable soldiers, but he does not argue, as Pocock does, that military training in itself makes an individual or a people virtuous. Machiavelli writes of “corrupt” or “non-corrupt,” not virtuous or vicious peoples. Virtù is a quality of an individual leader. And, he emphasizes, laws that work well so long as the people are not corrupt cease to work when they become corrupt (D 1.18). According to Machiavelli, it was the threat of a foreign invasion that kept the Roman people noncorrupt until the end of the Punic war. Laws and institutional innovations such as the censorship were not sufficient to check the growing corruption. Rome needed a leader such as Fabius Rullianus who understood how to reorder the population so that they would continue to elect virtuous leaders. Since the strength of the humors varies under different circumstances over time, republics need leaders who understand the need regularly to readjust the balance between them and are able to design institutional “remedies” to do just that.

Religion is one of the means by which “the great” (princes or nobles) maintain control of the people (P 18, D 1.11–15). But in both his Discourses and Florentine Histories Machiavelli is very critical of the effects the Church has had in Italy. Its prelates set bad examples of vicious rather than virtuous behavior. Because the Church has no arms of its own, moreover, it is forced to bring foreign armies into Italy in pursuing its own political goals. However, as he indicates with the example of the Swiss, the Christian religion is and can be compatible with republican politics and an effective military (D 1.12). Likewise, he shows how Ferdinand used the Christian religion to justify his war against the Moors and to raise money from both

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43. As Fischer, Well-Ordered License, 20, also points out.


the people and the Church to support the development of the army with which he was able to unify Spain (P 21). As the rise of the national monarchies in both Spain and France indicates, Christian beliefs in themselves do not prevent the emergence of strong principalities. Machiavelli objects to the political role the Church has played in Italy by keeping its principalities and republics divided and so weak. At two points in the Discourses he states that the Christian beliefs of his contemporaries have made them weak by making them unwilling to employ some of the harsh methods of conquest and control used by the ancients (D 2.2, 3.27). But in the first case he suggests that the weakness derives "from the cowardice of the men who have interpreted our religion according to idleness and not according to virtue. For if they considered how it permits us the exaltation and defense of the fatherland, they would see that it wishes us to love and honor it and to prepare ourselves to be such that we can defend it" (132). And in D 2.5 Machiavelli suggests that Christianity may be dying of its own accord (although it may also last for another 1,500 years). In sum, in The Prince, Discourses, and Florentine Histories Machiavelli reminds his readers how Christian princes and even popes have successfully organized and led armies. That is, he shows that modern political leaders can and did use the Christian beliefs of their people not merely to maintain but to extend their dominion. Machiavelli's treatment of Christianity specifically, as well as of religion more generally, thus appears to be a part of his attempt to introduce a new and better understanding and practice of politics more than an attempt to obliterate such beliefs altogether.

Machiavelli emphasizes the importance of politics because he sees that our desires naturally put human beings into competition and thus into conflict with one another. Human beings form political associations in order to protect their own lives, liberty, and property. But once political societies are formed, the opposed desires of those who wish to rule and those who do not wish to be ruled threaten to tear them apart in civil war that most often result in the imposition of a tyranny. Politics is crucial—and this is the most important lesson Machiavelli continues to convey to his readers—because human beings cannot achieve anything great or barely even survive in the absence of political order. It is absolutely imperative, therefore, that we learn how such orders are best established and maintained.

Strauss's critique of Machiavelli is not simply or primarily that he sought to destroy Christianity, using its own methods of "propaganda" over time to persuade his readers to adopt a new and better understanding of human life on earth. In the end Strauss faults Machiavelli for not recognizing and conveying the superiority of the philosophical way of life as Plato did in his dialogues. Machiavelli criticizes Christianity for having "glorified humble and contemplative more than active men" (D 2.2, 131). Twice in the Discourses he suggests that it might be best to withdraw from political activity altogether, because it requires human beings to act in nasty, destructive, and deceptive ways (D 1.26 and 3.2). But he insists that such a withdrawal is impossible. For "whoever does . . . , if he is a man notable for his quality, lives in continual danger." (Machiavelli does not, although he could, point to the death of Socrates as an example.) "Nor is it enough to say [like Epicurus]: 'I do not care for anything; I do not desire either honors or useful things; I wish to live quietly and without quarrel!' For these excuses are heard and not accepted; nor can men who have quality choose to abstain even when they choose it truly and without any ambition, because it is not believed of them; so if they wish to abstain, they are not allowed by others to abstain" (D 3.2, 213–14).

Machiavelli's political philosophy is, therefore, explicitly practical and engaged rather than merely theoretical or contemplative. He seeks to teach his readers how to act effectively so that his writings will have an effect as well. The effect he seeks is not, however, of the kind the "political theorists" who write in order to affect contemporary politics and policies wish to have. The effect he seeks is, first and foremost, on the broader understanding of politics his readers have and use; it is not limited nor is it intended to be limited to his immediate audience and circumstances. The major challenge Machiavelli poses to ancient political philosophy consists in his claim that writers need to show how their works improve the lives of ordinary people. By showing the ambitious how to organize the lives of their people so that they live more safely and prosperously, the philosopher not only secures himself from persecution but also benefits others.

In the following studies of Machiavelli's major works I have attempted to show how the moral revolution he effects in The Prince lays the foundation for the new form of democratic republic he proposes in the Discourses. Not believing that ambitious politicians would serve the public interest or common good out of the goodness of their own hearts, he sought to persuade them that the best way of achieving their own ambitions was to secure the lives, families, and properties of their subjects or fellow citizens. In the Discourses he then describes the kinds of laws and institutions that enable both "the great" (or those who wish to be so) and the people to attain as much as possible of what they desire. Because human beings act primarily on the basis of their passions, Machiavelli attempts to show his readers what those
passions are and how they can be guided to have productive rather than destructive results. Since those same passions lead human beings to work against the laws and institutions that restrain them, Machiavelli also counsels future leaders that they must constantly be on the lookout for new problems and devise new remedies for them.

Although Machiavelli claims in his dedications to The Prince and the Discourses, and only in the dedications to these two works, that they contain everything that he knows, he continued to write. 46 In the second half of this study, I thus examine Machiavelli's later works in approximately the order in which they were written to see the way in which he develops certain aspects of his thought that were slighted if not altogether ignored in his more comprehensive works. In Mandragola Machiavelli shows his audience how the analysis of the passions underlying political life applies to private life. In the Art of War, Machiavelli explains more concretely how and to what extent he thinks the ancient principles of organization he advocated in both The Prince and Discourses should be applied in modern circumstances. In his Life of Castruccio Castracani he then indicates that mastery of the art of war will not suffice to make a petty tyrant into a great founder. It is necessary to master the arts of peace as well. Religion is the most important of those arts, but by quoting the sayings of the cynic philosophers, Castruccio demonstrated a complete lack of respect for the moral and religious beliefs of his people. In his comedy Cizia, Machiavelli illustrates what sorts of appearances of conventional morality need to be maintained and why devotion to transcendent, ill-defined, and thus illusory "fantasies" is destructive. Finally, in his Florentine Histories, Machiavelli shows in more or less explicit contrast to Rome why the partisan divisions in Florence produced a vacillation between tyranny and license. His fellow citizens never secured liberty for themselves because no one knew how to design a set of laws that would do so. He tried to teach them, but no one listened—or understood.

Machiavelli is widely acknowledged to have been a great literary artist, and I treat each of his works as an artistically designed whole. In his prose works I attempt to show how the argument that unifies the work is directed to the particular concerns of the individual or individuals to whom Machiavelli dedicates the work. But I also seek to bring out the irony with which Machiavelli treats both the dedicatees and his own advice to them in order to show that he is addressing a more general lesson to a broader audience. As with his treatment of Livy in the Discourses, so in Mandragola, The Life of Castruccio Castracani, and Cizia, I identify and analyze the significance of the changes Machiavelli makes to his sources in order to bring out the novel interpretation he is presenting. 47

In contrast to the critics who fault Machiavelli for making contradictory statements and thus failing to adhere steadily to any one position, I seek to show that Machiavelli's works form a coherent whole—both individually and as a corpus. In his prose works he argues dialectically, first taking up one position, then examining the criticism or alternative to that position, then coming to a provisional conclusion, and then subjecting that conclusion to further examination. In his fictional works he presents sets of characters acting on the basis of different understandings of what is important and what works, then shows which characters succeed or fail and indicates the reasons why. In all cases, he depicts human beings acting on the basis of their strongest passions, their fears and their hopes. By showing that some of these fears and hopes are illusory, he warns his readers against them. In all cases, he shows that human beings will live and prosper only if there is a person or "prince" able to design "orders" that organize and direct their efforts to achieve the means of satisfying their various desires so that they do not come into open and violent conflict, as they inevitably will if left merely to follow their natural inclinations. Since no individual lives forever, Machiavelli recognizes, the knowledge of how to create and maintain such orders in changing circumstances is the most valuable gift one human being can present to another. The reward for acquiring and spreading such knowledge is not glory, because an author who understands the transitory character of everything in the world knows that there is no such thing as "eternal" glory. The human race itself belongs to the transitory forms of

46. Strauss, TM, 17-20, was the first to make this observation. He uses it particularly to argue that Machiavelli's not including the soul or afterlife in either of these works indicates that he did not claim to know anything about them. However, when Strauss discusses Machiavelli's philosophy, especially in relation to Socrates, he refers to The Life of Castruccio Castracani. TM, 223-25.
existence in this world. Glory is, moreover, a matter of public opinion, and the public tends to valorize extraordinary acts of what appears to be self-denial more than more ordinary deeds that actually contribute to the welfare of the community. Machiavelli was willing to appear less than he was, to present himself in the guise of a man seeking a job rather than someone with princely knowledge, in order to create conditions under which not only he but also others could live, think, and write more freely.

No one who reads Machiavelli can deny that he emphasizes politics more than philosophy, religion, or literary form (although these are all relevant aspects of his work). In the following study I have therefore sought to emphasize, first and foremost, what Machiavelli sought to teach his readers about politics, not merely in his immediate context, but most importantly in order to improve human life in the future.

Biographical Background

Because Machiavelli presents almost all of his writings in the context of his attempt to regain public employment from the Medici, it is useful to know something about the facts of his life. He claims to be writing, at least in part, out of his own economic need. In the dedications to The Prince and Discourses he also states that the knowledge he wishes to convey arises from his own practical political experience. It is thus useful to learn something about his experience as a secretary to the Florentine republic before he was dismissed by the Medici in our efforts to understand his later writings.

He was born on May 3, 1469, into a minor branch of a venerable old Florentine family. His father, Bernardo di Niccolò di Buoninsegna, had a law degree, but he does not seem to have earned much from his profession, and the revenue from their land in the Val di Pesa barely sufficed to support a wife and four children. Bernardo could not afford to hire an illustrious tutor for his sons, Niccolò and Totto, but he did see that they learned Latin, grammar, arithmetic, and composition. He loved books and owned copies of Macrobius, Priscian, Donato Acciaiuoli on the Ethics of Aristotle, and the Decades of History from the Deterioration of the Roman Empire of Biondo, as well as Livy's History of Rome. (Bernardo agreed to prepare an index that took him nine months to complete in order to obtain the last.) Niccolò thus had an opportunity to read and study these works, as well as Cicero's Philippics, De officiis, and De oratore, the Ethics of Aristotle, the Cosmography of Ptolemy, a Pliny in translation, Justin, Biondo's Italic illustrata, and the Bible, which his father is known to have borrowed.48 It is not clear how Machiavelli acquired the classical humanist education Florentine public officials at that time were expected to have. According to the Memoirs of the fifteenth-century historian Paolo Giovio, Machiavelli received the best part of his classical training from Marcello Adriani, when he was a professor at the university of Florence. After Adriani was appointed first chancellor of the Florentine republic in 1498, Machiavelli was chosen to be secretary to the second chancery where he "also ranked as one of the six secretaries to the first chancellor, and in this capacity he was shortly assigned the further task of serving the Ten of War."49

As a young man Machiavelli witnessed the rise and fall of a series of different governments in Florence. The year he was born Piero de' Medici died and rule of Florence passed into the hands of his sons, Giuliano and Lorenzo. Florence was a "republic" in name and law, but the city had been ruled effectively, if not tyrannically, by a member of the Medici family ever since Cosimo was brought back from exile in triumph in 1434.50 One of Cosimo's grandsons, Giuliano, was murdered as a result of the Pazzi conspiracy in 1478, but Lorenzo "the Magnificent" followed the example set by his grandfather and became a great lord and patron of the arts. Lorenzo died in 1492. Two years later his son Piero lost control of Florence after he ceded fortresses to the French rather than resisting their invasion of Italy. Machiavelli thus saw the stationing and quartering of the French troops in Florentine homes before they marched south and devastated large parts of Italy. He also observed the rise and fall of the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola.

After he returned to Florence in 1487, Savonarola began preaching to larger and larger crowds, castigating the Florentines for their luxurious, sinful mode of life and urging them to repent. In a sermon he gave during Advent in 1492 he predicted that a new Cyrus would come from beyond the mountains. Serving as the "sword of God" to punish Florence, he would not and could not be opposed. In 1494 both the friar and his flock thought his prediction had come true when French troops led by Charles VIII invaded Italy and met no serious resistance.

49. Skinner, Machiavelli, 7.
50. Machiavelli describes Cosimo's return as a triumph in his Florentine History 4.33. He wrote the Histories, in which he traces the rise and, effective but not actual, fall of the Medici, on commission from Cardinal Giulio de' Medici before he became Pope Clement VII.
Savonarola led the Florentine delegation that successfully negotiated an agreement with the French not to sack but only to occupy Florence, and not to reinstate the Medici but to establish the most democratic form of government Florence had ever had. Savonarola himself never had an official role in the government of the "Great Council" of three thousand members who appointed all magistrates (choosing from a list of names drawn by lot), passed or rejected laws proposed by the Signoria (the traditional ruling body of the commune), and elected a smaller council of Eighty, who advised the Signoria and appointed ambassadors. Savonarola was nevertheless responsible for the design of this government and exercised great influence on it. But that influence did not protect him from prosecution by the clergy, whose anger had been aroused by the friar's fiery denunciations of the corruption of the Roman Church. After he disobeyed the pope's order in 1495 that he cease preaching, on May 13, 1498, the Signoria authorized the interrogation and torture of Savonarola in the presence of the papal envoy and general of the Dominican order. A week later, Savonarola was hanged, burned, and his ashes thrown into the Arno, so that they could not be collected and venerated as relics.

The rise and fall of Savonarola affected Machiavelli in two different ways. First, his observations of these tumultuous years in Florence gave rise to some of the conclusions he recorded later about political life more generally. In his Discourses, for example, he takes the friar's ability to arouse popular sentiment and gather political support by passionately appealing to people's religious hopes and fears and interpreting natural phenomena as signs of the divine will to show that such appeals can be made successfully in modern as well as ancient times. But he also suggests that the friar contributed to his own downfall by not paying sufficient attention to his own reputation. His influence depended not on his office or powers but on the perception of his "learning, prudence, and virtue." Having successfully advocated the passage of a law establishing an appeal to the people by criminals condemned to die in state cases, he did not support five citizens who sought to make such an appeal shortly after the law was passed and thereby undermined his own standing with the people. Indeed, Machiavelli comments, Savonarola's failure even to criticize the officials who had not enforced the law made people think either that the law he had championed was not wise or that he condoned a partisan enforcement of it (D 1.45). As a result, the friar lost much of his popular support. Savonarola was not able, moreover, to communicate his own understanding of what was necessary to his followers and subordinates. In The Prince Machiavelli famously cites Savonarola as an example of an "unlearned prophet" who necessarily failed because he was unarmed. But, Machiavelli explains in D 3.30, the problem was not that Savonarola did not understand the need to use force, as had Moses, "to kill infinite men." Savonarola did not have the authority to use that force; he was only an advisor behind the scenes and not an officer of the republic, and "he was not understood well by those who followed him" who did not have such authority. Machiavelli does not explicitly say what prevented Savonarola's followers from understanding him. His description of the character of Savonarola's influence on his fellow citizens suggests, however, that some of the friar's inability to communicate his own understanding of what was politically necessary might be traced to the figurative mode of speech he used in his sermons, in which he attributed everything to God. And the lack of clarity in his indirect mode of speaking was reinforced by


52. In D 1.11, Machiavelli observes that the people of Florence, who do not appear to have been either ignorant or coarse, were persuaded by "Friar Girolamo Savonarola that he spoke with God." Machiavelli does not take a stand on whether it was true or not, "because one should speak with reverence of such a man." He does observe "that an infinite number believed him without having seen anything extraordinary to make them believe him," even though in 1.55 he reminds his readers of "how much had been foretold by Friar Girolamo Savonarola before the coming of King Charles VIII of France into Italy." Machiavelli rather clearly indicated what he thought about the truth of Savonarola's claims, however, in a letter he wrote to Riccardo Becchi, the Florentine ambassador to the Holy See on March 9, 1498. In this letter Machiavelli first summarizes two sermons that Savonarola, fearing that the newly elected Signoria would not support or defend him against the pope, gave after he had withdrawn from preaching in the city at San Reparata and began speaking "boldly" at his home church in San Marco. Taking as his text a passage from Exodus, "but the more they oppressed them, the more they were multiplied," Savonarola first argued that "when it comes to action, prudence is right reason," and right reason might counsel one to go into hiding, as he had. He then sought to encourage his followers by promising that through suffering and good people grow in both spirit and number. He finally provided a bridge to his sermon the next day, by saying that the dissension in Florence might cause a tyrant to rise up among them, but that this tyrant would eventually be driven out of Italy. The next morning he returned to Exodus where it says that Moses slew an Egyptian, and reported that "God had told him that there was someone in Florence who sought to make himself a tyrant and . . . to excommunicate the friar." But after he heard that the Signoria had written to the pope on his behalf, Savonarola dropped all such talk of tyrants in Florence and tried to set the people against the pontiff. "Thus," Machiavelli concluded, "in my judgment, he acts in accordance with the times and colors his lies accordingly." Machiavelli and His Friends: Their Personal Correspondence, trans. and ed. James H. Atkinson and David Sices (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), 9–10.
Savonarola’s unwillingness if not inability as a representative and spokesman for the “prince of peace” to take direct part in government or enforce the laws. His followers could not perceive the thoughts that lay hidden in the friar’s public speeches and deeds, and the friar either did not choose or was not able to communicate his understanding of the need to use force to eliminate the opposition in private.

The second way in which Savonarola’s rise and fall affected Machiavelli was that the diminished influence of the friar’s followers after his execution led almost immediately to Machiavelli’s election to public office. As chief of the Second Chancery and secretary to the Ten of Liberty and Peace, a commission that oversaw Florentine military matters and foreign affairs, Machiavelli was sent to negotiate with such notable figures as Caterina Sforza Riario (1499), King Louis XII of France and the cardinal of Rouen (1500), and Cesare Borgia (1502). These missions, as well as his later visits with Pope Julius II (1506) and at the court of the Emperor Maximilian (1507–8), provided material for his later reflections.

After Piero Soderini was named gonfalonier for life in 1502 (and the Florentine constitution then came, in effect, to duplicate the constitution of Venice with this addition of a lifelong executive like the doge), Machiavelli became one of Soderini’s most trusted advisors and representatives. As he shows at the conclusion of his First Decennial, an epic poem in which he details the suffering of Italy in the decade following the French invasion in 1494 and the only work he published while in office, Machiavelli had become convinced that the political divisions that made Italy vulnerable to foreign invasion would never be overcome until Florence rearmed itself. With the support of Piero’s brother, Cardinal Francesco Soderini, Machiavelli thus pressed the gonfalonier to reestablish the militia Florence had lacked for more than two hundred years. The proposal aroused much opposition, especially from Soderini’s aristocratic opponents, who accused him of wanting to become a tyrant (by obtaining a bodyguard). The cardinal advised Machiavelli to begin recruiting and training in the countryside, where an armed force would pose a less direct threat to citizens in power. After the mercenaries the Florentines hired in an attempt to retake Pisa were ignominiously defeated, in 1506 the Council created the nove ufficiali dell’ ordinanza e militia fiorentina (the nine officers of the Florentine ordinance and militia). Machiavelli was made secretary and threw himself wholeheartedly into the effort of recruiting and training a native Florentine army. On June 8, 1509, fifteen years of war ended with a Florentine victory over Pisa, thanks to Machiavelli and his battalions. Machiavelli then received authorization from the Ten to raise a detachment of light horse to supplement his infantry, but he did not have time or receive adequate support to recruit and train an army capable of defending Florence from the Holy League (founded in 1511 by Pope Julius II in alliance with the Venetians, Spanish, English, Swiss, and the Holy Roman Emperor against Louis XII of France). Although France defeated the Holy League at the Battle of Ravenna in 1512, the French commander, Gaston de Foix, was killed, and King Louis ordered his troops to withdraw. Florence was left alone to face the Spanish troops that had been defeated at Ravenna. Because they lacked supplies, the Spanish commander tried twice to negotiate a settlement with Soderini, but he and the Council refused their terms. Soderini asked Machiavelli to do something to restrain the Spanish, but with the body of Florentine troops kept at home to defend the city, Machiavelli and his ill-trained troops were not able to withstand the Spanish at Prato.

Hearing that four thousand men had been slaughtered there, the Florentines capitulated to Spanish demands that they dismiss Soderini and allow the Medici to return as private citizens. Within two months the Medici had again made themselves masters of Florence, sent Soderini into exile, and dismissed Machiavelli from office.

Machiavelli was ordered to remain within the dominions of Florence for a year and to pay a surety of one thousand florins (supplied by his friend Francesco Vettori and his relatives Filippo and Giovanni Machiavelli), but forbidden from entering the Palazzo Vecchio (the locus of the Signoria and his former office) for a year. He was nevertheless called back within a month to testify, when his successor decided to investigate Machiavelli’s management of the huge funds collected to pay the militia, but after a thorough investigation no malfeasance was discovered. Shortly thereafter, however, Machiavelli was implicated in a conspiracy against the Medici, when his name was found on a list of probable sympathizers, drawn up by Pietro Paolo Boscoli. Machiavelli was imprisoned and tortured but did not confess.

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53 Ridolfi, Life, 15, reports that Machiavelli was elected five days after the execution.
54 See D 3.6, FH 7.22, 8.34; P 3 and 7; P 25 and D 1.27, 3.9, 3.44; D 2.11, 2.19.
56 Machiavelli dispassionately summarizes the events leading to the downfall of the republic and the reinstatement of the rule of the Medici in his Letter to a Noblewoman after September 16, 1512, Machiavelli and His Friends, 214–17.
to any crime. He was freed in the celebration of Cardinal Giuliano de' Medici's election as Pope Leo X on March 11 or 12, 1513, and left Florence to live in the country house his father had left him.

Machiavelli was one of the few officials of the old republic who were dismissed when the Medici took over, and he began imploring Francesco Vettori to use his influence to help him regain a position almost as soon as he retired to Sant' Andrea. Trying to retain their personal ties while distancing himself politically, Vettori invited Machiavelli to visit him in Rome and promised to do whatever he could when the time was ripe. When nothing happened and Machiavelli renewed his requests for assistance, Vettori responded in a letter of November 23, 1513, by describing the way in which he had been forced by a combination of expense and lack of success to withdraw from most political exchanges in Rome. Oppressed by the expenses of his position as ambassador, which exceeded his salary, he had stopped giving dinner parties and returned the silver plate people had loaned to him in the hope that he would speak to the pope on their behalf. With probable reference to Machiavelli's own petitions, Vettori said that he had done what they wished without any effect, so he had determined to rid himself of this chore and not to annoy or burden anyone else.

To document the boredom and powerlessness of his current situation, Vettori then described his daily routine. Rising at ten, after breakfast he would go every other morning to the palace, where he would say twenty words to the pope, ten to Cardinal de' Medici, and six to Giuliano the Magnificent or, if he were not available, to Piero Ardinghelli, and finally to any ambassadors who happened to be present. Afterward Vettori would return home for lunch with his household, walk through the church and the garden, and, if the weather were fine, take a short horseback ride outside of Rome. At nightfall he would come home and read some of the many histories he had acquired, especially of Rome. Referring back, it would seem, to Machiavelli's enthusiastic response to his first invitation to join him in Rome, Vettori concluded that this was the life he was urging Machiavelli to share—"a private life of seeing the sights and coming back home to joke, laugh, and read."

This letter from Vettori prompted Machiavelli's famous response on December 10, 1513, in which he replied to Vettori's description of his day with one of his own. The close parallels between the two suggest that we should not take Machiavelli's description of his life too literally. Our knowledge of "Machiavelli" is to a considerable extent a product of his own presentation of himself in his letters and writings. The differences between the two men's descriptions of their days nevertheless bring out the vast distance between a pedestrian and an uncommonly acute mind.

Machiavelli's account of his work outside before daybreak, followed by an interlude of reading love poetry, conversations on the road with passersby from which he learned about the various tastes and fancies of men, a meager lunch at home, raucous games and squabbles with artisans and laborers all afternoon at the inn, culminating in his four hours of study at the "ancient courts of ancient men," is designed not merely to rebuke Vettori for complaining about his reduced economic circumstances and lack of influence. It is also supposed to remind Vettori of how much more Machiavelli has suffered (and so, presumably, to arouse his sympathy). Whereas Vettori had withdrawn into private life not only in order to reduce his expenses, but also in order to avoid pleas for help that he had found he could not give, Machiavelli had been forced out of office and thus to go without any salary whatsoever. He concludes his letter by observing that he cannot remain as he is for a long time "without becoming despised because of poverty."

But even in conditions of economic stringency, we see, Machiavelli sought to experience life to the fullest, from the basest necessities to the highest thoughts. Like primitive men, he began his day with hunting. He did not capture many thrushes (which would have provided little food, in any case), and when they gave out, he had to find not merely another "pastime," but another form of economic support. Still arising with the sun (in

57. Machiavelli and Vettori had become friends in 1508 when they served together as representatives of Florence in Germany at the court of Emperor Maximilian. The party of aristocrats who opposed Piero Soderini had initially pressured him to send a "well-born" young man instead of his loyal servant, but Soderini found that he could not rely on Vettori's reports and sent Machiavelli to join him. The conditions were not propitious, but Vettori and Machiavelli became not merely cooperative colleagues, but friends.


60. Machiavelli to Vettori, p. 111.

61. Machiavelli does not state the connection explicitly, but his account of his thrush hunting could be seen as an oblique reference to the suffering he endured in prison and the failure of a former plea to Giuliano for help. In addition to two sonsnes he wrote about his suffering in prison, Machiavelli dedicated a third to Giuliano which began, "I'm sending you, Giuliano, if I might, several thrushes—a small gift, I guess, but good to make Your Lordship think a bit of your poor Machiavello in distress." Last and Liberty: The Poems of Machiavelli, trans. Joseph Tusiani (New
contrast to Vettori's breakfast at ten), Machiavelli found that his attempt to sell wood cut on his land involved him in arguments both with the woodcutters he employed and with former friends who tried to cheat him out of any profit he might have made from selling his wood. In his personal life as well as in his more theoretical writings, Machiavelli thus saw that human relations are fundamentally self-regarding and competitive. His economic endeavors appeared to be as fruitless as Vettori's conversations with other politicians at the Vatican. So following the model set by Vettori in his letter, Machiavelli says that he withdrew to find refreshment. He stopped at a spring to read love poetry—Dante or Petrarch, or one of the "minor poets" like Ovid—and in reading about their amorous passions, he remembered

York: Ivan Obolensky, 1963), 46. In a learned and provocative reading of the letter of December 10, 1511, Najemy suggests that the comparison Machiavelli draws between himself bearing the bundle of cages on his back and Geta, the servant of Amphitryon carrying his master's books on his back, reveals Machiavelli's sense of his own plight. Geta e Birra was an early fifteenth-century verse novella that was a remake of a twelfth-century neo-Latin comedy, Geta, by Vitale de Blois, which was in turn adapted from Plautus's Amphitryon. Machiavelli could assume that Vettori would know the story; there were at least four printed editions in his lifetime. In the novella Geta accompanies his master Amphitryon to Athens to learn philosophy. After experiencing much hardship for the sake of their studies, Amphitryon decides to return. His wife Almenta sends their second servant, Birra, to meet her husband and Geta at the port; but seeing Geta struggling home loaded with books, Birra hides in a cave. The first parallel Najemy finds between Machiavelli and Geta is thus that both have books that they want to unload on a friend who ducks. (However, in the letter Machiavelli expresses uncertainty about whether he should give his book to Vettori or present it to Giuliano himself. He has reason to doubt that Vettori will press his case; so far he has not.) The second parallel Najemy finds between Machiavelli and Geta is that both have endured considerable hardship to acquire an arie e scienza that both believe will make all their suffering worthwhile by transforming and immortalizing them, but they cannot persuade or even gain the respectful attention of a former colleague. Pretending not to see that Birria has tried to hide in order to avoid helping him, Geta stands outside the cave and brags about the knowledge he has acquired. He emphasizes the hardship, the hunger and pain he has suffered in order to learn philosophy, but he concludes that what he has acquired now makes him happy, because his name will be spread throughout the world. Once a person has learned something, he further observes, that knowledge can never be taken away. Geta does not succeed in persuading Birria to come out and help him, however, until he throws a stone into the cave. Najemy does not recognize that the similarities between Machiavelli and Geta end there. Machiavelli is not in a position to force Vettori to show his land. Moreover, in the novella Geta disavows the knowledge he thought he had acquired, after he comes to doubt his own identity as a result of his confrontation with a divine copy of himself at his former home. Najemy does not go so far as to claim that Machiavelli doubted the value of the knowledge he had acquired. He does suggest that "his self-comparison to Geta announces that the letter of 16 December was to be a parable of his year of 'exile' and of what he now fears might be a disappointing 'return' home with The Prince in hand" (Between Friends, 230). The problem with reading the entire letter in terms of this early comparison is that the comparison occurs in the section on thrust hunting, an activity Machiavelli explicitly says that he has had to give up. He had to try to find other means of economic support and entertainment, and he is taking a new tack in appealing to Giuliano with a new kind of gift. Rather than asking for mercy, Machiavelli is offering instruction and assistance in ruling. He is not approaching either Vettori or Giuliano merely as a supplicant.

his own. Unlike Vettori, Machiavelli did not have a courtesan living close by. He had to substitute intellectual recollection and enjoyment, therefore, for immediate physical pleasure. The delight Machiavelli took in his thoughts—whether they were memories or appreciations of the beautiful words—might have been greater than the pleasure he would have experienced in an actual but fleeting erotic encounter, but this intellectual delight was also transitory. So, again following the model set by Vettori, Machiavelli took a walk—not in a garden, however, but along a public road to the inn, where he spoke to the other people passing by, asked them for "news of their countries, learned various things, [including] the varying tastes and diverse characters of men." Like Vettori, Machiavelli also lunched at home—but in implicit contrast to his wealthier friend, he ate the foods his poor villa and small patrimony permitted. But instead of taking another solitary walk or ride like Vettori, Machiavelli went back to the inn, where he passed the afternoon playing games and arguing with the artisans there. He has more democratic tastes and sympathies than his aristocratic friend. And, he reports, the disputes and insults hurled among these ruffians served to shake the mold from his brain and allowed him vociferously to protest the malignity of his fate. Having thus overcome both his indolence and his resentment, Machiavelli was prepared, when evening came, to return home. There he took off his "everyday dress, full of mud and dirt," and donned "royal clothes" before he entered his study and went into "the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received lovingly by them," he ate "the only food... for which he was born." Vettori, too, wrote that he read histories in the evening, especially of Rome. But he did not suggest that he entered into a dialogue with the authors of, or characters to be found in, these histories. Where Vettori appeared to move, rather passively and certainly ineffectively, from one activity to another, Machiavelli emphatically learned from all the activities he undertook, whether they involved necessary work or leisure, and took his place in the company of base or highly intelligent and cultured human beings. Machiavelli seems to claim, indeed, that he encompassed the depth and breadth of possible human experience in a single day. The only thing lacking—but it appears to be the crucial thing for Machiavelli—was participation in public life.62

62. In his subsequent correspondence with Vettori, Machiavelli admits that the other thing lacking was immediate amorous passion. As later in Cilia, so in his earlier letters, Machiavelli occasionally presents himself in the role of a "Tool for love." Najemy does not believe that Machiavelli actually fell in love with an unnamed and only very generically described woman, who, Machiavelli tells Vettori in a letter of August 3, 1514, led him (like his visits to the courts of ancient

In contrast to Vettori's breakfast at ten, Machiavelli found that his attempt to sell wood cut on his land involved him in arguments both with the woodcutters he employed and with former friends who tried to cheat him out of any profit he might have made from selling his wood. In his personal life as well as in his more theoretical writings, Machiavelli thus saw that human relations are fundamentally self-regarding and competitive. His economic endeavors appeared to be as fruitless as Vettori's conversations with other politicians at the Vatican. So following the model set by Vettori in his letter, Machiavelli says that he withdrew to find refreshment. He stopped at a spring to read love poetry—Dante or Petrarch, or one of the "minor poets" like Ovid—and in reading about their amorous passions, he remembered

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Even though we cannot take it as a literal or factual description of Machiavelli’s life in exile, scholars have rightly emphasized the importance of his letter of December 10, 1513, for two reasons. First, in this letter Machiavelli presents himself as a man of thought more than of action, more clearly perhaps than he does anywhere else. The books he reads are “the only food which is mine, and for which I was born.” Regarding himself as an equal of the great men of old, he turns in their company without shame, i.e., without restraint or a sense of his own inferiority; and they do not receive him “lovingly” but also “in their humanity” answer the questions he puts to them about the reason for their actions. Machiavelli finds not merely consolation but happiness in these conversations. “For four hours at a time,” he feels no boredom, forgets all trouble, and does not fear poverty or death. As in his dedications to both The Prince and the Discourses, Machiavelli shows not merely that he regards knowledge of the deeds of great men as the most valuable possession a man can have; his suggestion that he found conversing with the great men of old to be the utmost satisfaction in life is very like what Socrates claimed for his own peculiar mode of existence, if in a more historical and bookish form.64 Unlike Socrates, however, Machiavelli insists that the “fruits” of his conversations need to be manifested in practice.

The second reason Machiavelli’s letter of December 10, 1513, is so important is that in it he makes it clear that he is not writing simply or solely to relieve his own poverty, although that creates a certain kind of necessity. More specifically, in this letter Machiavelli tells Vettori that in the months since he left prison he has composed a small treatise entitled De principatibus (Of principalities) in which he has investigated not merely “what a principality is,” but “of what kinds they are, how they are maintained, [and] why they are lost.”65 As he indicates in the dedication he later wrote to Lorenzo, Machiavelli informs Vettori that the treatise contains the fruits of his fifteen years of study of “the art of the state” in practice as well as in books.

The reason Machiavelli gives for his having written down “the capital I have made from the conversation” he has had with ancient authors is not, first or initially, that he thinks that he can capitalize on the knowledge he has obtained by using it to obtain a political position. It is, rather, “because Dante says that what has been learned does not become knowledge unless it is retained.” In other words, Machiavelli wrote down his thoughts, first, to organize and secure them as knowledge for himself. He thought, second, but only second, about the book’s possible use—by the Medici and to obtain a position with them for himself.

In his previous correspondence with Vettori Machiavelli did not mention the fact that he was writing a book. He tells Vettori about it only after he has completed a draft and shown that draft to another mutual friend, Filippo Casavecchia.66 He is now debating with himself and others about whether he should present it to Giuliano, and if so, whether he should present it himself or ask Vettori to present it on Machiavelli’s behalf. He worries that if he gives the treatise to Giuliano, “his Magnificence” will not read it, and that Giuliano’s “right hand man” Ardenghelli will claim authorship and thus take credit for his work.

Machiavelli nevertheless feels driven to make his work public (although not strictly speaking to publish it) by a twofold “necessity.” The first form of the necessity is economic. Because he is consuming himself (and his resources), he worries about making himself contemptible through poverty. Machiavelli is driven not by poverty per se, we see, but by his fear of contempt or, correspondingly, concern about his own standing and reputation. (He stated earlier in this very same letter that his study of ancient works made him forget his poverty; and he assured Vettori earlier in their

64. Machiavelli to Vettori, P 110.
65. In Between Friends Najemy contends that the Prince is directed first and foremost to Vettori’s insistence that fortune rules human affairs, the view Machiavelli explicitly addresses in chapter 25 of the work we now know as The Prince. Many readers have understood Machiavelli’s little treatise as concerning primarily the opposition he draws between fortuna and virtù. Pocock, Machiavellian Moment; Skinner, Machiavelli; and Bennett, Prince are a few of the most notable recent examples. Yet in his letter of December 10, 1513, Machiavelli appears to have thought that Vettori was more valuable as a possible messenger than as an intellectual interlocutor or even as an editor. He certainly does not suggest that Vettori voiced the question that inspired him to write.
Indeed, these "princes" will acquire more for themselves as well as for their people if they establish institutions and laws that not merely encourage their subjects to procreate and produce by securing the fruits of their labor, but give everyone an incentive to work for the benefit of the public by making everyone eligible for the highest offices on the basis of merit rather than heredity or wealth. A man like Machiavelli, born into modest, if not humble circumstances, would have fared better in the democratic republic he sought to persuade his readers to found than in the oligarchical republic he was forced by circumstances to try to improve. As he saw it, his self-interest and the public interest were perfectly consistent.  

67. In "The Discourses, and Machiavelli’s Last Days," Machiavelli Reprints 9, no. 1 (1967): 79-107, Cecil H. Clough states that "one of the weaknesses of the Renaissance tracts and treatises on politics, especially the Florentine ones, is that the authors could not detach themselves from the political scene. The solution that each one presents often ended to further the personal and family interest of its author" (87). Although he explicitly wrote about his need to acquire employment, I am arguing that Machiavelli had a much broader and more magnificent understanding of his "self-interest." He aspired to reform the way in which people thought about politics and thus their practice. In doing so, he could and would benefit them much more than he would benefit himself. Consistent with his principles, he presented himself as acting for his own benefit and thus dissipated the grandeur of his own ambition in order to obtain the cooperation of others.  

66. Responding to Vettori’s initial invitation to visit him in Rome, Machiavelli assured his friend that "if these new masters of ours see fit not to leave me lying on the ground, I shall be happy and believe that I shall act in such a way that they too will have reason to be proud of me. And if they should not, I shall get on as I did when I came here: I was born in poverty and at an early age learned how to scrimp rather than to thrive" (letter of March 18, 1513, Machiavelli and His Friends, 222).