Machiavelli – Politics and the use of violence
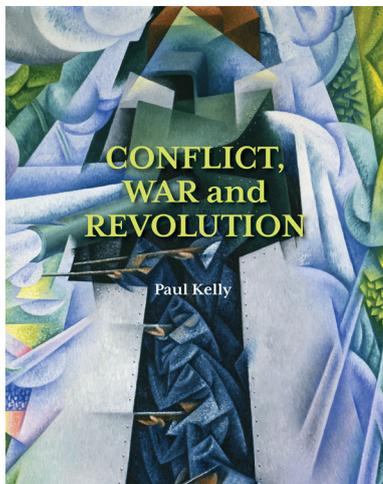
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Chapter 4 from

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CHAPTER 4

Machiavelli

Politics and the use of violence

Machiavelli is one of the most controversial of political thinkers. His ideas have many implications for traditional conceptions of politics, such as the role of the common good and the relationship between political power and moral or ethical obligations. In the context of international political thought, Machiavelli is presented as a realist and an originator of the idea of *raison d'état* (reason of state). I claim here that Machiavelli challenges the idea of stable political societies or peoples, and focuses attention on the founding or refounding of political communities in a world of constant change and revolution. This explains his concern with the character of leadership and the ways in which temporary and fleeting political power should be exercised to create and maintain regimes. Rather than steering a careful path around the idea of ethics in politics, Machiavelli explores the nature of political life outside of a moralistic, ethical and legalistic framework. In this way he poses one of the most striking challenges to the conceptual framework of modern politics.

'**Machiavellian** Adjective: Using clever but often dishonest methods that deceive people so that you can win power and control'

(*Cambridge English Dictionary*)

Many political thinkers and philosophers have given rise to political nouns to name a body of thought or an ideology. Few have given rise to adjectives in common use for describing a style of political action. None has either been as successful as Machiavelli in this respect, or given rise to a description of political behaviour that is unequivocally negative. The earliest reception of his works was hostile. They were placed on the Roman Catholic Church's index of proscribed books (the Index Librorum Prohibitum) in 1552, within a short time after his death. Since then, Machiavelli has been associated with deceit, duplicity, violence and vice – at least in the traditional moral sense. Indeed, 'old Nick' (often a euphemism for the Devil) is often claimed to be derived from Niccolo Machiavelli. Shakespeare has the Duke of Gloucester refer to 'the murderous Machiavel' (Henry VI) as a source of 'schooling' in a type of politics that is clearly not one that elevates the virtues and wisdom of king-ship. 'Machiavellian' is never used to describe anything other than morally questionable and ambiguous behaviours, however much practitioners of high and low politics might praise the successful deployment of the dark arts of diplomacy and strategy. Historians of ideas spend much time addressing the scholarly question of whether this morally ambiguous characterisation is fair to the historical Machiavelli, who was a Florentine diplomat and humanist scholar. But then, history is rarely fair, and the image or type of the Machiavel-lian person is a recognisable and irreducible figure in characterising political actors and actions.

This figure of the Machiavellian actor is a very familiar one in international politics, statecraft and diplomacy, unsurprisingly, given Machiavelli's profes-sion. However, the role also suits the requirements of high statecraft, which involve, if not lying, then 'economy with the truth', manipulation and compro-mising of interests. And, of course, when diplomacy either breaks down or needs a bit of momentum, statecraft may involve the deployment of war and violence. Contemporary international politics is full of examples of Machiavel-lian figures such as Henry Kissinger, a scholar, diplomat and U.S. Secretary of State who is irrevocably associated with this style of statecraft, one that is untrammelled by simple moral principles and norms. Although a most sophis-ticated and erudite scholar, Kissinger was also Richard Nixon's aide responsible for the carpet-bombing of non-belligerent Cambodia, while simultaneously working to withdraw the U.S. from a bloody and futile conflict in Vietnam. He was also central to the United States' engagement with Communist China at the height of the Cold War and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, where both sides pursued rapprochement despite regarding each other's regime as the embodi-ment of political evil. For Machiavellian figures, the world is never black and white or good and evil, although such concepts are not denied value; instead, the real world of high state politics is one of endless shades of grey. The idea of endlessness as well as the intermixing of light (good) and dark (evil) is impor-tant given the Machiavellian image of political activity as constant change, rather than as a series of games culminating in a winner, or else as steady

progress towards a single good, such as human fulfilment, justice or some other utopia. For the Machiavellian, politics has a relentlessness about it that makes those not involved in it suspicious.

Indeed, we can see some of this stance echoing in modern popular hostility to politicians as a class apart, pursuing interests that are not those of the regular public. This suspicion and hostility can be the result of the ways in which the activity of politics is conducted. Politicians are never strictly honest; indeed, in many cases their roles require them to be duplicitous. A treasury secretary who was scrupulously honest and frank about economic policy, or a defence secretary who gave straight answers when asked about state secrets, would both be dangerous and self-defeating actors. But suspicions can also arise because politicians seem to reject morality in their actions. The prevention and prosecution of war and the deployment of violence are the most obvious examples of the conflict between morality and politics.

Yet, the same challenge is not simply confined to the highest level of statecraft. Arguably, all politics is a challenge to morality. This can be because normal morality depends on the resolution of some fundamental political questions, or because politics has its own morality, sometimes referred to as *raison d'état*. Alternatively, as Thucydides' realism argues, perhaps politics is just outside the realm of morality, and so here the normal rules of personal behaviour no longer apply. These hierarchical and spatial perspectives on the relationship between moral norms and political action are most obvious in the realm of international politics, where national interests clash in a world without a common international arbiter or possibly international law. Hence, Machiavellianism is most obvious in diplomatists known for their duplicity, such as Molotov, Kissinger, Gromyko or Zhou Enlai. But the international realm only provides a bigger stage for a style of action that Machiavelli claims is ubiquitous to all politics. One of the questions that will come up in this chapter is this: if international politics is beyond the realm of normal morality, why does this not apply to normal 'domestic' politics? It is not obvious that *raison d'état* applies only in a narrowly circumscribed space in international politics. Machiavelli's challenge is that his teaching informs all politics, and not just diplomacy and high statecraft.

Life and times

Niccolo Machiavelli was a profoundly political thinker whose experience in the political service of his native Florentine Republic shaped his thoughts and formed the basis of his conception of political power and agency. His biography thus provides an important context for his thought. So too does the peculiarity of the city politics of Florence and its place in the international context of the 15th-century regional politics of the Italian peninsula. At this time Italy was neither a single kingdom nor what we would now call a state.

Machiavelli was born into a moderately wealthy Florentine family in 1469. His father was an educated lawyer and Niccolo was given a Renaissance humanist education at grammar school. This comprised the cultivation of literary skills through the study and translation of classical authors, and the development of rhetorical and argumentative skills, particularly through learning the great Roman historians who feature so prominently in his later writings and understanding of politics. This humanist training places Machiavelli alongside other humanist thinkers of the pre-Reformation period (such as Erasmus and Thomas More), especially in using the Roman history and letters as sources, rather than the late medieval preoccupation with natural law, Thomist theology (following the thought of St Thomas Aquinas) and scholastic metaphysics.

When the French King Charles VIII invaded the Italian peninsula in 1494, the Medici family fell from power in Florence and the republic was re-established there. Initially the Medicis were replaced by the radical theocratic government of the Dominican friar and preacher Girolamo Savonarola. With Savonarola's overthrow and execution in 1498, Machiavelli entered the service of the republic in the office of second chancery, which involved writing and translating diplomatic documents and official papers. With the subsequent rise of Piero Soderini as *gonfaloniere* (head of Council), Machiavelli was sent on diplomatic embassies to France and Rome, and, most importantly, to Cesare Borgia (the son of Pope Alexander VI), who was waging a campaign in the Romagna region to unify central Italy as a strong kingdom. These missions exposed Machiavelli to the realities of power and the challenges of successful political action, which informed his understanding of political agency. From 1503 to 1506, Machiavelli was responsible for the Florentine militia, an experience that is reflected in his book *The Art of War*.

After a period of relative success for Florence, including the defeat of the Pisans in 1509, the political climate and prevailing alliances changed. An alliance between the Medicis, Pope Julius II and Spanish troops defeated Florence at the Battle of Prato in 1512. Machiavelli's mentor, Soderini, resigned and the republic was dissolved with the return of the Medicis to power. Shortly after, in 1513, a conspiracy against the Medicis resulted in Machiavelli's arrest and subsequent torture – he was hung by the wrists with his arms behind his back, resulting in dislocation and serious pain. His denials of involvement resulted in his being exiled to the family estate near San Casciano, where he took up a focus on writing. It is often claimed that his political writings were part of a campaign design to secure his return to active politics and government service. He certainly continued an extensive correspondence with many political figures. However, the reality of his situation was more complex. If he was seeking rehabilitation, Machiavelli was unsuccessful, despite some embassies for the republic during the later 1520s. Whilst the Medicis retained a dominant role in Florentine politics and held the papacy under Leo X, Machiavelli was never

sufficiently trusted to take up a significant role in politics. Instead, exile produced his great political works. In a famous letter he describes his life in exile:

> When evening comes, I go back home to my study. On the threshold, I take off my work clothes … and I put on the clothes an ambassador would wear. Decently dressed, I enter the ancient courts of rulers who have long since died. There, I am warmly welcomed, and I feed on the only food I find nourishing and was born to savour. I am not ashamed to talk to them and ask them to explain their actions and they, out of kindness, answer me. Four hours go by without my feeling any anxiety. I forget every worry. I am no longer afraid of poverty or frightened of death. I live entirely through them. (Letter to Francesco Vettori)

His works were circulated and discussed amongst friends and patrons, although only *The Art of War* was published in his lifetime. Despite his diminished political authority at the time of his death in 1527, political immortality was imminent.

Thought, theory and works

Machiavelli's most famous books on the art of politics are *The Prince* (1513), *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy* (1513–1517), *The Art of War* (1519–1520) and the *Florentine Histories* (1520–1525). He was also author of numerous minor historical writings, as well as major dramatical and literary works, all displaying the skills of a Renaissance humanist as well as those of a trained diplomat and political observer. Each work merits careful attention in its own right, because each is written in its own terms and not as part of an unfolding philosophical system. This poses important interpretative challenges in reading Machiavelli and speaking about his thought or 'theory' as if that were a single body of structured ideas, derived from a shared set of premises and methodology. Much attention in Machiavelli scholarship has been devoted to reconciling the doctrines of *The Prince*, which offers guidance to Lorenzo di Medici on how to acquire and hold supreme political power, with the argument of the *Discourses*, with its defence of republican liberty and politics. Are these different works part of a single grand theory? Or are they occasional works that are not supposed to be linked – the first being an attempt by the author to acquire political office and favour, while the second gives Machiavelli's preferred version of political society and politics? Is the vision of republicanism developed in the *Discourses* modified by that embodied in his other great historical study, the *Florentine Histories*? How does *The Art of War* fit with these dominant works? The relationship or contrast between these works is an historical question: we can legitimately ask what Machiavelli was trying to do with these works and how they fit together.

But in taking this historical approach one must remember Quentin Skinner's salutary warning against the mythology of doctrines, or the crude assumption that an author must have an unfolding theory to be discovered (1969). If a doctrine assumes one interpretation, then the reader or historian will be looking for it at the expense of other explanations of difference and distinction between texts. Skinner warns careful intellectual historians to avoid that error. All that said, the way we read these works does not have to be narrowly historical, with the connections being no more than a shared series of historical problematics. Indeed, we can miss lessons about the way Machiavelli has affected our language of politics by taking too narrow and historical an approach, placing all the emphasis on the original meanings of the author, as opposed to those of their readers across long periods of time. Debunking ahistorical readings is one important task of interpretation. Yet it also risks falsely implying that there is a single true account of Machiavelli's thought that is independent of its political interpretations and uses. Readers can often find a higher synthesis or unity that is immanent in the works, even if that did not cause their production or if it was not the intention of the author. Whilst intentions might be historically singular, thought is not. This book examines paradigms that are more than just the intentions of the author but which remain sufficiently close to the texts, times or thinkers that they can bear the weight of the interpretation. The argument here is that Machiavelli contributes a different and new paradigm of politics and political agency, one that links across and is illustrated by his key works. However, I do not assert the historical claim that Machiavelli was intentionally trying to articulate a single logical theory, unlike Hobbes, for example.

That Machiavelli is novel, iconoclastic and even revolutionary is a familiar argument, although the ways in which he achieves this status are contested. What is certainly clear is that the method and approach of these works are quite different to those of predecessors. Unlike Thucydides, Machiavelli is not an historian. Although Thucydides' *History* has a moral that can be used to support theoretical positions, he intended to do no more than give an account of the war between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians where the narrative is shaped by the direction of events, as it appeared to one who witnessed them. Machiavelli uses history in a way more explicitly directed towards informing political understanding and practice in a world of rapid and continuing change. The historical enquiry is precisely designed to elicit an underlying pattern or explanation of political phenomena:

> Prudent men are in the habit of saying, neither by chance nor without reason, that anyone wishing to see what is to be must consider what has been: all the things of this world in every era have their counterparts in ancient times. This occurs since these actions are carried out by men who have and have always had the same passions, which, of necessity, must give rise to the same results. (Machiavelli 2008, p. 351)

History clearly provides lessons, but Machiavelli is also clear in this passage that the historical record is the basis for reflection and is not self-interpreting. As we shall see later, Machiavelli's method is more complex than simply reading off the historical record because that is contested. It is not misleading to see Machiavelli's writings as contributing to what would now be considered empirical political science. Whilst there is much that distinguishes Machiavellianism and modern behaviouralism, they share an important characteristic in that they take the phenomena of political experience for granted as the object of enquiry. There is no constructive theory of the state or the constitution in Machiavelli's writings, nor is there a prescriptive model of political organisation that the successful politician should seek to achieve. Whilst Machiavelli does support republicanism, his position is not prescriptive – to paraphrase Steven Lukes, for Machiavelli it is 'republicanism for the republicans and cannibalism for the cannibals' (2003). It is for this reason that many commentators spend a considerable effort situating Machiavelli's politics in the context of the Italian city states of the 15th century (Coleman 2000).

Machiavelli's political science is also interesting because it departs from the philosophical or theological meta-narratives that we find in great political philosophers such as Plato, or theologian/philosophers such as Augustine, where there is an underlying philosophical or theological position that explains the order of the universe. Most importantly, Machiavelli's political science denies an ethical or divine order that endorses either a highest good for man or an ideal form of the state. Indeed, it is precisely the absence of such a normative grand narrative that raises the question of whether there is indeed a Machiavellian theory. Many moralistic surveys of western political thinking see the question of political obligation ('Why should an individual obey the state or political ruler?') as the first question of political theory. As we see later with Hobbes, this is a peculiarly modern political question, although it is one that was immanent in Thomistic natural law in the Middle Ages. For Machiavelli, this first question of modern political theory simply does not arise, any more than the question of why one should refrain from taking another's property. For Machiavelli, there is no prior moral obligation here: obedience is commanded by force and violence from the successful incumbent prince or ruling faction amongst the populace. Failure to obey, whilst pondering the reasons for obedience, risks getting hurt and that is the end of the matter.

The very originality of Machiavelli is that he challenges the place of normativity (in the form of law or morality) in thinking about political action. This stance is significant enough, but it is important to see it not as just a sceptical challenge to the philosophy of classical natural law but rather as an assertion of the autonomy of political agency and its priority. What that autonomous activity is, and how it is represented and manifested in the world, is the key to Machiavelli's view. It explains the continuing relevance of his striking and uncompromising view of the demands of politics to contemporary followers. Whilst all of

his works do not form parts of a single, grand Machiavellian theory, elements from the major works can be woven into an account of the way Machiavellianism has appeared as an approach to making sense of political action.

Florence, Italy and the wider world

Before interpreting Machiavelli's works in detail, it is worth outlining the peculiar context of his writings. This is not to provide a causal account of his ideas and therefore the elements for understanding his logic and purposes. I follow many scholars, including Skinner (1969; 1984), in rejecting this causal interpretive strategy. Similarly, I do not want to make a strong claim about the Italian cities as the only suitable environment wherein Machiavelli's views make sense (Coleman 2000), although, given his style of theorising, understanding the politics of 15th- and 16th-century Italy does illuminate what is going on in his books. Constant reference is made to contemporary politics in *The Prince* and the *Florentine Histories*, whereas the underlying narrative of the *Discourses* is a contrast between the fortunes of ancient Rome and of the Florentine Republic. The major link between the text of *The Prince* and the context, however, is the book's curious final Chapter 26, 'Exhortation to Liberate Italy from the Barbarian Yoke'. This changes the work into a manifesto and exhortation to a leader (Lorenzo de Medici) to unite Italy against its persecutors, by which he means the Spanish, French and Imperial forces of the Holy Roman Empire. He writes:

> This opportunity to provide Italy with a liberator, then, after such a long time, must not be missed. I have no doubt at all that he would be received with great affection in all those regions that have been inundated by the foreign invasions, as well as with a great thirst for revenge, with resolute fidelity, with devotion and with tears of gratitude. What gate would be closed to him? What people would fail to obey him? What envious hostility would work against him? What Italian would deny him homage? This foreign domination stinks in the nostrils of everyone. Let your illustrious family, then, take up this mission, with the spirit and courage and the faith that inspires all just causes, so that under your standard our country may be ennobled. (Machiavelli 1988, pp. 90–91)

Whatever else is happening in *The Prince*, the argument ends up as a manifesto for change and national unification and liberation, an agenda that inspired later 20th-century thinkers including some perhaps surprising names, such as Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser (see below, Revolutionary Machiavellians).

Besides Florence, the important and rivalrous Italian city states of the divided Italian peninsula included Venice, Milan, Naples and Rome. Most of these city states' histories stretched back into the late Roman Empire. Milan was an imperial

capital to which Augustine went to learn from St Ambrose. Venice was the gate-
way to the Eastern Empire in Byzantium and to the civilisation of the eastern
Mediterranean. Although it was the original imperial capital of the empire,
from the 4th century onwards Rome was also the centre of the Christian
world as the seat of the Holy See. The particular histories and rivalries of each
city played a significant role in the unsettled politics of the Italian peninsula,
whether because of their cultural power (Rome), strategic position (Naples and
Venice) or economic wealth (Florence and Milan). This partly explains why
Italy was not a single political entity until the 19th century, and even today is
an unstable state with strong and deep regional divisions. The cities' rivalries
characterise the world in which Machiavelli engaged as a diplomat and politi-
cian, as emissary either to Milan or Rome or to the large external powers such
as France, which exploited this instability in order to secure their own political
ends. Wealth, civilisational power and influence were not just the cause of the
unstable geopolitical environment; they also had a significant bearing on
the organisation of political authority and power within these cities.

Whereas France and Spain were in the process of consolidating into major
unified monarchical states, Italian city states were self-governing communes
with republican constitutions and powerful local elites and factions vying to
control those institutions. The sources of those elites and factions, especially
in Machiavelli's Florence, drew on commercial wealth and the protection and
control of trade and manufacture. The great Cosimo de Medici (1389–1464)
was a leading banker. The subsequent accumulations of wealth created com-
mercial oligarchies of families, such as the Medicis in Florence and the Sfor-
zas in Milan. Through their economic and military power these families built
powerful networks encompassing smaller regional cities (or factions within
those cities) that dominated their republican institutions, alongside powerful
guilds of organised producers. Families like the Medicis and Sforzas, or the
Catalan Borgias in Rome and the Romagna, were not hereditarily legitimated
royal families in the sense of France, Spain or England – and it is important to
remember that when reading *The Prince*. However, they managed to function
as hereditary powers all the same. Cosimo de Medici ruled like a king, but was
actually the 'first amongst equals' as head of the Great Council of Florence.

Whilst much of the practical politics of the time has more in common with
Puzo's novel *The Godfather*, these cities were also the site of a considerable
growth in the development of constitutional and legal attempts to constrain
and discipline power, force and violence, especially in the late medieval period.
Jurists such as Baldus de Ubaldus (1327–1400) taught Roman or civil law in
Florence, amongst other cities. He was a major source of the development of
law as a vehicle through which power is exercised and constrained, in a context
where the regulation of economic power, property and personal right was more
important than in the essentially clerical/feudal societies of northern Europe.
This is illustrated in de Ubaldus's distinction between political agency as a con-
sequence of incorporation into a *regnum* (associated with kingly rule) or *civitas*

(the republic or community of citizens). For legalists these are different ways in which political authority can be constituted and both feature in Machiavelli's understanding of political action. But he differs from the medieval legalists and the natural lawyers by focusing on the power or force that underlies these moral and legal discourses, on the grounds that these are merely epiphenomena of real political life.

The struggle for dominance and advantage amongst the regional powers of Italy and the interfering great powers of western Europe – France, Spain and then the Holy Roman Empire – followed the breakdown of a previous local balance of powers. That had been achieved by Cosimo de Medici and Francesco Sforza and it underlay the Peace of Lodi in 1454 between Milan, Florence, Venice, the Papal States and Naples. One of the major destabilising features for such 'balance of power' politics was the position of the papacy. The Pope was not only the ruler of the Church but also a significant Italian prince. However, the choice of Pope lay with the College of Cardinals, reflecting the international character of the Church, so that it became a place where national dynastic interests were played out on the international stage. Following the election of Roderigo de Borgia as Pope Alexander VI and his alliance with Naples (backed by Spain), the King of Naples asserted a claim of right to Milan. Ludovico Sforza formed an alliance with the French King Charles VIII, who was invited into Italy to attack Naples, thus opening Italy to a struggle between France, Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. With France now threatening Florence from the north, Piero de Medici attempted to placate the French by offering them domination of the nearby city of Pisa. But this move only destabilised his rule in Florence and he was overthrown in a popular rebellion by the radical preacher Savonarola. When the French retreated, Florence was placed under a papal interdict (denying the sacraments of the Church – a hugely significant penalty at that time) and Savonarola fell from power and was executed as a heretic. With the establishment of a new Council in Florence, Machiavelli entered political and diplomatic service. Florence then allied with Pope Alexander VI and Venice against Milan, and Alexander's son Cesare Borgia (who features as a hero in *The Prince*) began a campaign consolidating Borgia rule in the Romagna region. At this stage Machiavelli was at the heart of events. As Florence sought to maintain an alliance with France, Machiavelli was dispatched on an embassy to the French King Louis XII in Lyon, followed by a mission to Cesare Borgia. These were the high points of his diplomatic experience and informed his major works.

In 1503 Pope Alexander VI died, and, after a brief succession by Pius III (who was Pope for only 26 days), the papacy went to Cardinal della Rovere as Julius II, an implacable foe of the Borgias. Cesare Borgia had originally hoped to placate Julius, but he failed miserably and was stripped of all offices and imprisoned; fortune had turned against his family. Although Machiavelli was later sent on another embassy to France, the outcome became redundant as

Italy was divided into spheres of influence between France in the north and Spain in the south. Julius took this opportunity to improve his own position and reconquer the Papal States following the fall of Cesare Borgia. However, although the threat from Spain had receded, the position of Florence was not secure because the intervention of the Holy Roman Empire under Maximilian I created further threats in the north of Italy.

The position of Florence and of Machiavelli was rarely secure. In 1508 Pope Julius II brought together France, Spain and Emperor Maximilian in the League of Cambrai to conduct hostilities against Venice, forcing it from the Romagna (the region that was Cesare Borgia's power base). During this period Machiavelli was sent by Florence to Pisa to oversee a siege that resulted in Pisa's capitulation in 1509. Yet, no sooner had Venice been defeated in the wider conflict than Pope Julius broke the League of Cambrai and made peace with Venice, allying Venice with Spain and the Holy Roman Empire against France, which was Florence's protector. Maximilian brought Swiss troops into Lombardy in northern Italy and France withdrew. Florence was now exposed so Pope Julius demanded the removal of Soderini as the head of the Florentine government. Soderini fled and Machiavelli fell from office following the Medicis' return to power. He was subsequently implicated in an uprising, arrested, tortured and only survived and was exiled because Julius II died and was replaced by Pope Leo X (Giovanni de Medici), who decreed a celebratory general amnesty. Despite Machiavelli's efforts until his death, the new Medici Pope distrusted him and imposed unassailable barriers to his return to diplomatic office or a political career.

The struggle for power in Italy continued, albeit complicated by events unfolding to the north of Italy that were to shape the future of European history. This is most obvious in the development of the contest between France, Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. With the accession of the Spanish Charles I to the position of Holy Roman Emperor (as Charles V), in 1519 he consolidated the two powers against the French. Pope Leo X concluded a treaty with Charles to expel the French from Milan and Italy. Subsequent papal reigns were short and so the dynastic implications complicated the politics of the peninsula. In 1523 the new Medici Pope Clement VII allied with France and recaptured Milan, but a year later the French King Francis I was defeated and imprisoned by Imperial forces, though he was released two years later following the Treaty of Madrid. This placed Milan under Spanish influence and confirmed its authority over Naples. Francis quickly repudiated this settlement, however, and allied himself with Clement VII and Venice to drive the Imperial forces out of Italy.

Charles V returned to Italy with German troops, many of whom were now followers of the Reformation leader Martin Luther and not well disposed to any popes. Clement signed a treaty with the Empire but then quickly repudiated it. So the Imperial forces marched on Rome and sacked it in 1527. This attack on the papacy also led to the fall of the Medicis in Florence and a return of

republican rule. Yet, Machiavelli was unable to benefit from the change because he died in 1527. The German attack on Rome marked a significant change in the politics of Europe. It became the first part of a civilisational war that was to divide Catholic southern Europe from Protestant northern Europe and to shift the military focus of that struggle from Italy to Germany, a geographical switch that was to have a profound impact on political ideas.

'Teacher of wickedness' – Machiavelli's new science of politics

Given Machiavelli's style of writing, he is both an easy and a very difficult writer to understand. Superficially, a book such as *The Prince* is easy to read and has some simple and clear illustrations. Although longer, the *Discourses* has similar virtues. Yet, the point of these apparently straightforward discussions is a much more complex matter and has led to wildly divergent interpretations and morals. Three dominant contemporary approaches – those of Strauss, Berlin and Skinner – illustrate the problem. Leo Strauss argues that Machiavelli is a 'teacher of wickedness' and a revolutionary thinker breaking with the tradition of classical natural law (1957). Isaiah Berlin (1998) agrees, but claims this change occurs because Machiavelli replaces classical natural law with a different model of political morality, derived from the classical Roman world. Hence, he is not an 'immoralist' – he just advocates a different conception of morality. Quentin Skinner (1978; 2000) identifies a further moral scheme (different to that seen by Berlin), with Machiavelli as a defender of republican liberty. Whilst obscured by the later liberal Hobbesian discourse of negative and positive liberty, Machiavelli's stance nevertheless offers a different way of conceiving of political authority and society. What all three of these perspectives recognise as beyond doubt is that Machiavelli's writings depart significantly from the dominant way of theorising politics in his time; namely, the synthesis of Christianity, neo-Aristotelianism and natural law. Where they differ is whether Machiavelli repudiates Christian natural law, displaces it for a pagan Roman public morality, or rejects the moralisation of politics altogether. The next section explores the ways in which Machiavelli departs from the perspective of Christian natural law.

The 'mirror of princes' and the repudiation of natural law

In our more secular age, Machiavelli's teachings about the status and authority of morality might seem familiar and almost conventional. Yet, such a view risks failing to appreciate just how radical his position was in his own time. The way in which he conceives of the point of politics opens him to the charge of being a teacher of wickedness. The 'mirror of princes' refers to a style of political literature designed to educate and advise the political ruler in the exercise of

virtue. Perhaps the most famous classical version is Cicero's *De Officiis* (*On Duties*), which sets out moral guidance for whomsoever would exercise political office. Once political office becomes associated with kingly power, this book serves as a handbook for the good prince. Cicero's example is reflected in many later examples such as Thomas Aquinas's *On Kingship*, Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) or Thomas Elyot's *The Book Named the Governor* (1531), addressed to the English King Henry VIII. This form of literature is vast and by no means confined to the European intellectual tradition. But what all of it contains is an attempt to distil out the virtues of a successful political leader from a wider and more basic moral or ethical perspective on life. In some cases, these works are simply a handbook of the virtues (for anyone), as these might be found in classical Greek thought (emphasising prudence, temperance, courage and justice), or in the primary Christian virtues (such as faith, hope and charity). Alternatively, these works might acknowledge that politics involves difficult choices (including about war and violence) but nevertheless seek to link the demands of political action with the overarching claims of morality.

The situation of political agency or executive power within a hierarchical moral order is best exemplified in Aquinas's *On Kingship*. Thomas Aquinas (later made a Catholic saint) was one of the most important Christian natural law thinkers of the high Middle Ages. His thought (Thomism) brings together Christian revelation with the theology of Augustine and the natural and moral philosophy of Aristotle. For Aquinas, the role of the prince was located within a hierarchical moral order shaped by natural and divine law. The law of nature was discoverable by reason, but it needed supplementation with revealed divine law to give a complete account of the good or goal for humanity. Within that order was the requirement to translate natural law into civil law, or the law of political communities. This in turn left open the requirement to ensure obedience to that law through the exercise of political or executive power. Aquinas is important because he emphasises the prevalence of a rational, law-governed universe that leaves scope for political action exercised by princes. Even a law-governed world will require a person who exercises executive power to secure it, and that is Aquinas's justification for the role of the prince. Yet, equally, the role of the prince and therefore of political executive power is explained in terms of its function within a natural moral order.

Whilst Aquinas's book is the most systematic statement that politics is subordinated to morality, the same stance is a defining feature of all such works. Indeed, Aquinas is in many respects only a more systematic exposition of what is implicit in Cicero, but with the addition of Christian virtues. What the whole 'mirror of princes' literature adds to this formal natural law theory is a stress on how the personal virtue of the prince forms a vital basis for the justification of political rule. The prince exercises executive power within the normative system of natural law, but the moral nature of this argument cannot simply be that it is functional (i.e. the system works) without undermining itself. It is

for that reason that the prince should aspire to virtue and nobility and not just rely on the monopoly exercise of force. Nobility, exemplified in the princely virtues, is crucial to the normative justification and legitimation of princely rule. It forms the basis of the consent of the ruled. In this respect, the literature draws on ideas that had been important since Aristotle, and which became increasingly important with the rediscovery of his work in the late medieval period. Machiavelli's humanist contemporaries might have been more comfortable returning to classical historical examples than relying on Aquinas's austere abstract theology. But they would all have accepted the subordination of politics to morality as the premise of this literature.

What is most striking (and shocking for his contemporaries) about Machiavelli's *The Prince* is that his book seemingly conforms with this literature – he is, after all, advising a 'prince', Lorenzo de Medici – whilst completely repudiating its premises. The book's stance is very different to an Aristotelian or Ciceronian account of the virtues. The first 12 chapters discuss the types of principality and how they are acquired, followed by three chapters on military matters comparing the relative merits of mercenaries and citizen armies. Chapters 15 to 19 cover what one might expect from an account of princely virtue, but in fact turn the traditional idea of virtue on its head. The final chapters (20 to 25) provide practical advice to the prince on issues such as the benefits of fortresses and selecting ministers, and the final chapter is the famous exhortation to liberate Italy. What is so striking about *The Prince*'s repudiation of the classical natural law tradition is that it downgrades and marginalises the place of morality in politics, denies that the common good is a top ideal, and transforms the concept of virtue into something like efficacy.

Machiavelli's book begins with a very practical account of the nature of different types of principalities current in the Italy of his day, and how to acquire or retain power in each of them. He does not offer an ideal model of the principality, nor does he attempt a comparative study of European regime types. Instead, he sets out the basis of an answer to Lenin's famous question: 'What is to be done?' The principalities at hand include the papacy and rival city states, such as Venice or Sforza's Milan. And the mixed principalities that he refers to are those allied to larger powers, such France or Spain. By launching straight into a discussion of contemporary Italian politics, he clearly signals a departure from accounts of princely virtue focusing on its moral context. He makes no acknowledgement of the prevailing religious or moral contexts in which the ideal of princely rule would normally be situated. Whilst modern political science presupposes a clear division of labour between the descriptive and empirical science of states and the ideas of political morality and virtue – political science versus political philosophy – Machiavelli does not recognise the distinction.

Many commentators acknowledge the originality of his thought in founding a new science of politics. However, his striking originality is not simply in a

focus on the real as opposed to the ideal, since Aristotelian political thought already acknowledges that distinction. What Machiavelli does is *deny* the place of ideal or moral perspectives in addressing the virtues of the prince. It is quite clear that he is not directing attention from the ethical to the practical: complete silence about the claims of natural law as the context for politics signals a denial of it. It is this wilful denial that underlies the claim that he is a teacher of 'wickedness' as opposed to a new type of theorist who shifts attention from the morality of politics to the practical demands of princely action.

He also rejects and denies that the idea of the common good is the key to politics, the second important moral of *The Prince*. The idea of the common good in political philosophy has been central in explaining the point of political action, and therefore its justification. Even when previous theorists had to explain and justify actions that looked 'Machiavellian' (in terms of their duplicity and forcefulness), they excused them in terms of a conception of the common good – which ultimately justified apparent departures from conventionally accepted moral norms as achieving a higher good. For classical thinkers of the Roman era such as Cicero, the common good explains and justifies a lot: it privileges the claims of rulers to obedience even when they require coercive actions such as commanding military service, or the payment of taxes, that may not be in the immediate interests of subjects. The argument is that there is a good that we share through membership of a political society or commonwealth, what Cicero calls the '*res publica*', which it is the task of the prince or ruler to protect and secure. But once again this idea is completely missing from *The Prince*.

Similarly, for Aquinas the prince is often asked to do 'indifferent things' (acts beyond the specifics of the natural law), which may appear to be outside the formal dictates of the law but which are given a moral status by reference to a conception of the common good. In Machiavelli's discussion of examples, there is no attempt to either defend or to demonstrate any conception of the common good. Where interests or an idea of a good or end of action are presented, this is purely in terms of the prince's personal interest and goals. Success or failure is always judged relative to the interests and ambition of the prince, leader or character being discussed. Even in the final chapter's exhortation for a liberator of Italy, the benefits of an end to foreign domination and war are presented largely as opportunities for personal honour:

> I have no doubt at all that he [Italy's liberator] would be received with great affection in all those regions that have been inundated by the foreign invasions, as well as with a great thirst for revenge, with resolute fidelity, with devotion and with tears of gratitude. What gate would be closed to him? What people would fail to obey him? What envious hostility would work against him? What Italian would deny him homage? (Machiavelli 1988, pp. 90–91)

Although a rallying cry for Italy, this exhortation motivates the potential liberator by personal glory and an opportunity for distinction and leadership. Even the liberation from foreign domination is not a clear moral justification for action. The passage clearly indicates that this is also merely another opportunity for a prince to replace the domination of the French or Spanish with that of a home-grown national leader, presumably exercising dominance over the distinct local identities of the Italian city states. Machiavelli's subordination of any traditional conception of the common good to the interest and personal good of an individual prince should not be seen as just replacing a moralistic common good with a more empirical conception as the sum total of the individual interests of those subject to political rule. Such an empirical ideal of the people also plays a very limited role in Machiavelli's thought. Indeed, in most cases, where he refers to the people it is in highly disparaging terms. In the *Discourses* he famously says, '*all men are bad*' [*Discourses* 2008, p. 28], suggesting that an aggregation of individual interests would not have any moral, let alone political, value. In *The Prince* he expands on this, arguing:

> this may be said of men generally: that they are ungrateful, fickle, feigners and dissemblers, avoiders of danger, eager for gain. While you benefit them they are all devoted to you: they would shed their blood for you; they offer their possessions, their lives, and their sons, as I said before, when need to do so is far off. But when you are hard pressed, they turn away. (Machiavelli 1988, p. 59)

The clear implication here is that 'the people' do not offer any basis for formulating a concept of the common good. Instead, they are merely the material with which the successful prince or ruler must work to achieve their own ends and goals. Using a discourse of moral rules and ends may be functional for rulers, helping them to sustain their power. But the common good and other moral ends and rules are not otherwise important. This is a much more convincing ground for arguing that Machiavelli is a teacher of wickedness. He is not merely suggesting that the successful prince must step outside the normal rules of moral action for a greater good: there is no moral good, and this is reflected in the third moral of *The Prince* as a subversion of the mirror of princes, namely his replacement of virtue with *virtu*.

   Distinguishing between virtue and the Italian *virtu* is a curious convention of Machiavelli scholarship, but it is important because it draws attention to the idea of virtue as a moral concept connected to classical Greek ethics and to Christian natural law, whereas using the idea of *virtu* shows Machiavelli's self-conscious repudiation of morality. The subversion of traditional accounts of virtue is found in Chapters 15 to 19, where the timely use of cruelty and dishonesty are endorsed, amongst many other things. But the rejection of traditional virtue is illustrated much earlier, in Chapter 7, where Duke Valentino (Cesare

Borgia) is introduced as one of his exemplars of the *vir* or man of virtuous action. The chapter contains the famous discussion of Borgia's treatment of his henchman Remirro de Orco:

> Because he [Borgia] recognized that the severe measures that had been taken resulted in his becoming hated by some people, in order to dispel this ill-feeling and win everyone over to him, he wanted to show that if any cruel deeds had been committed they were attributable to the harshness of his governor, not to himself. And availing himself of an appropriate opportunity, one morning the Duke had Remirro placed in two pieces in the square at Cesana, with a block of wood and a blood-stained sword at his side. This terrible spectacle left the people both satisfied and amazed. (Machiavelli 1988, p. 26)

What is most striking about this passage is how central violence is here to Borgia's *virtu*. It is not just that violence is necessary to politics, for even Augustine acknowledged it as a regrettable necessity of a fallen world. Rather, Machiavelli leaves aside any implication of regret or discomfort and instead celebrates the technology of violence – how it is carried out and used to the greatest effect. Also, that effect is not some higher good (such as restricting the violence of criminals or aggressors by creating a fearsome punishment). Instead, the prince's goal is just deflecting blame and feeding the satisfaction and amazement of the people. What is creditable in Borgia is his willingness to act in such an amazing way and be a showman of violence and force to awe his subjects.

Similarly, in the later '*virtu* chapters' what is praiseworthy is how well the successful prince manipulates traditional norms of action such as cruelty and dishonesty. Cruelty is not wrong, but it can backfire and so must be exercised judiciously to achieve the prince's goals in the long term. In this way, *virtu* is much more functional than virtue as a moral concept, and it is closely allied to what Machiavelli clearly suggests are very masculine traits of manly forcefulness and drive. Whilst it would be an oxymoron to speak of the virtue of a torturer, it is certainly feasible to speak of the Machiavellian *virtu* being exhibited by a successful torturer.

Nor is the technology of violence the only element of Machiavellian political science that takes him outside of the normal moral boundaries of action. Machiavelli is equally clear about the primacy of princely prudence (including lying and dissimulation) over honesty. Princes and rulers should not be swayed by the praise and goodwill of the people, who are, after all, also self-deceiving and untrustworthy. Machiavelli is very clear that fear, which lies in the control of the prince, is always a better basis for regime stability than love of the people, which is fleeting. The people are not to be trusted but to be manipulated using the *virtu* of the prince, who is best when he shows regard to how this can be done successfully, for example by killing one's immediate rivals but not

depriving their wider families of their wealth. The first can be done quickly and finished cleanly and effectively, whereas dispossessing one's enemy's whole family creates intergenerational resentment and long-term distrust and bitterness. Machiavelli's point is not simply to show that the true virtues of politics are different, because a utilitarian calculus of securing the common good sometimes requires actions that are contrary to normal moral norms. Whatever calculations take place in Machiavelli's economy of force and violence, there is no overarching common good providing any higher-level moral vindication of these types of action. The prince's actions are only vindicated for him by his success.

History, time and change in politics

All political thought is underpinned by a view of history, time and change. In the case of Plato, that is provided via a metaphysical doctrine, whereas for Thucydides it is through the self-conscious recording of the succession of events and their meaning. Whether it is foregrounded as part of a philosophical position or part of the background presuppositions of an account of the nature of political action, the issue of history time and change is ever present. For ancient Greek accounts of the ideal polis (*kallipolis*), there is a need to explain how we can move from where we are to the ideal, as in Aristotle. Alternatively, in Plato we have the corrupt forms of political society as departures from the ideal order, with democracy as the worst type. As we have seen with Augustine, too, the problem of history is central to the political implications of his theology. He explains the fundamental salvation history of humanity as revealed in the Christian Old and New Testaments. But he also addresses those Christians who have tried to read that salvation history onto late Roman imperial history and the triumph of Christianity in the conversion of Constantine. The position of classical natural law combines elements of classical political idealism, especially as exemplified in Aristotle and Augustine's account of theological time and redemption history.

Machiavelli is once again iconoclastic in abandoning the idea of progress implicit in theological time, or the idea of mere temporal succession in the secular world prior to the second coming. Firstly, as we have seen, he separates politics from any narrative of development and perfection. Politics is a morally neutral activity concerned with manipulating power by, or on behalf of, the prince. This might be thought to fit into an Augustinian account of the secular world, where there is no obvious pattern to political events, just a constant succession. But Machiavelli does not simply assert that the historical stage is empty and anything goes. He argues that history has a structure and, if we learn carefully from it, we can be more successful in achieving political ends. Yet, that structure is not teleological and progressive, and thus he clearly departs from

classical natural law and emphasises that he is a teacher of 'wickedness' or 'realism', at least against that standard.

Machiavelli's theory of history comes in two parts: a thesis about continuity and a thesis about change. We have already seen that the continuity thesis depends on the view that human nature is broadly constant over time. He asserts:

> that anyone wishing to see what is to be must consider what has been: all the things of this world in every era have their counterparts in ancient times. This occurs since these actions are carried out by men who have and have always had the same passions, which, of necessity, must give rise to the same results. (Machiavelli 2008, p. 351)

His science of politics is possible because the motives and springs of human action are constant, therefore the past will provide lessons to an attentive student. Because we can learn from the past, we can search for the best way of mastering circumstances or necessity, and secure the most effective outcomes. However, this possibility of learning from the past raises questions about the problem of historical change. If we can learn from the past by carefully accumulating the lessons of history and common human motives, then a successful education for rulers ought to allow them to apply that accumulated knowledge in ever more successful ways to make historical and political progress. One can raise here the problem of induction that obsessed later thinkers such as David Hume (1711–1776). Hume's point is nicely encapsulated in the example of European biologists inferring that all swans are white based on countless confirmatory observations – until they encountered a single black swan in Australia, thus disconfirming the generalisation.

Unlike Hume, Machiavelli is not looking for law-like generalisations in an explanatory science of politics that holds for all cases, but rather looking for precedents that can be a guide in similar sets of circumstances. If Hume's concerns are applied to Machiavelli, they impact on his fundamental claim that human nature is constant, which itself is a contentious empirical claim. For Machiavelli, this proposition is less a claim derived from experience than a presupposition of historical enquiry. The real challenge to a progressive history for Machiavelli is not the prospect of 'black swan' events challenging his historical generalisations but the more fundamental rejection of a linear and progressive history of the sort that characterises classical natural law, or the linear but non-progressive history of Augustine's secular order. Machiavelli sees the structure of history not as linear but as cyclical. Here he follows a classical Roman tradition going back to Polybius. He does not explain this philosophy of history in a single theoretical discussion, but nevertheless it is clearly manifest when he writes that 'human affairs are always in motion and are either on the rise or in decline' (Machiavelli 2008, p. 150). The presupposition of cyclical change, and the constant rise and fall of principalities and republics, underpins the second

major power in both *The Prince* and the *Discourses* operating alongside *virtu*, namely *fortuna* or fortune. Fortuna is the Roman goddess that needs to be both mastered and courted by the prince for success.

Machiavelli's gendered, even sexist, discussion of the struggle between *virtu* and *fortuna* can be disconcerting for modern readers:

> I certainly think that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because fortune is a woman, and if you want to control her, it is necessary to treat her roughly. And it is clear that she is more inclined to yield to men who are impetuous than to those who are calculating. Since fortune is a woman, she is always well disposed towards young men, because they are less cautious and more aggressive, and treat her more boldly. (Machiavelli 1988, p. 87)

Fortuna is often depicted with a wheel and the idea of the wheel of fortune is a familiar one to this day, although the wheel was also associated with a mode of execution, perhaps just as appropriate, since fortune is not always good. That image of the wheel suggests two important things for Machiavelli: the first is the idea of change being cyclical and the history of political societies being one of rise and subsequent decline and fall; the second is that all political careers potentially end in failure, or avoid that fate only by luck. This logic of movement in history is both inevitable and means that no perfect final state of political order can ever be established. The central message of Machiavelli's political theory is that the combination of *virtu* struggling with *fortuna* is about perpetual movement and change without a final direction or goal for that change – it is anti-teleological.

It is this idea that explains Machiavelli's indifference to the moralistic politics of classical natural law. The challenge of politics is about managing that temporal change in a permanently dynamic process of history. There is no ideal or perfect state free from the tyranny of fortune. As Machiavelli saw in his own experience of diplomacy, the realm of political action does not offer scope for the static exhibition of virtue because the challenge of political agency is constant change. No sooner has one challenge been addressed than another arises and pushes the prince in a different direction. Similarly, the lives of princes and rulers of republics is subject to time and fortune, as illustrated by the rise and fall of Machiavelli's hero Cesare Borgia. Whilst the logic is inexorable – in the struggle between the goddess *fortuna* and the impetuous male prince, fortune will always ultimately win – Machiavelli cautions against fatalism. That said, there is scope for freedom of action: 'I am disposed to hold that fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, but that it lets us control roughly the other half' (Machiavelli 1988, p. 85).

The challenge presented by history and fortune is understanding where one is in the process of rise or decline, and also understanding the tools or strategies

appropriate to slowing or accelerating the turn of the wheel of fortune in one's favour. To use another Machiavellian metaphor, how can one deploy dykes and dams to channel the 'dangerous river' of historical events? The study of ancient history is precisely designed to search out examples that might illuminate the present, not in terms of strict precedent for action but in locating the challenges in a judgement about where fortune is leading. The interplay of the two concepts of *virtu* and *fortuna* provide the key to successful political action but also to the choice of examples and the lessons that Machiavelli seeks to elicit in *The Prince*. This is indeed an advice book, or a realist mirror of princes, and not just a disengaged empirical study of political events or good government. As Machiavelli's political world is characterised by relentless temporal change, so the challenge of politics is one of recognising and managing change, and not denying it. The fundamental contrast between Machiavelli and conceptions of politics that follow from natural law, including contemporary moralistic theories such as international liberalism, is that his world ultimately has no place for the rigidities and order of law and morality. At best they could be temporary tools or devices for use by the prince, but in such a role they obviously change their meanings beyond those intended by moralists.

Christianity, religion and patriotism

If political experience is shaped by fortune and by audacity in roughly equal halves, there remains the final question of what place religion plays in Machiavelli's ideas, especially given that he was writing in a culture that was Roman Catholic – and often describing the actions of prominent Catholic Christians such as Popes Alexander VI and Julius II. Had he straightforwardly repudiated Christianity, this would clearly conform to his image as a teacher of wickedness, at least in the sight of many orthodox Christians. Of course, this would also have been a foolhardy stance to take. And Machiavelli does not say that Christianity or religion is false. But what does he have to say on spiritual matters? Does religion have a bearing on his thought, tempering the idea that he is a teacher of wickedness who repudiates classical natural law?

Throughout Machiavelli's life, all the Italian states were Catholic. Indeed, an alternative Protestant strand of Christianity did not develop until the end of his life, within the German principalities of the Holy Roman Empire. Machiavelli gives no clear evidence of atheism and speaks frequently of 'our religion' as a fact of Italian life. In fact, the evidence is to the contrary and by all accounts he was sufficiently observant and died within the Church. We have no evidence of religion forming part of his inner life or conscience, so how far his separation of political thinking from classical natural law illustrates a distance from orthodox belief is impossible to show. Yet, if we turn to his writings, we see a paradoxical view. The discussion of religion, and Christianity in particular, in *The Prince* is coloured by his experience as a diplomat and observer of Cesare Borgia.

Borgia was the son of Pope Alexander VI, and the victim of Alexander's successor but one, Pope Julius II. Alexander and Julius are both deeply political princes in the spirit of Machiavelli's argument, to the extent that one could almost forget that they are also priests and titular leaders of western Catholic Christianity. The analysis of their actions does not rely on analysis of Christian natural law, or even traditional medieval discussions of the relationship between papal spiritual authority and the temporal authority exercised by kings or emperors. As with so much else in classical natural law inherited from the medieval world, this element is notable by its absence in *The Prince*. Chapter 11 is devoted to 'Ecclesiastical Principalities' and concentrates on the problem that popes are weak princes because they are usually elderly when elected, hence they have a short claim on their office and cannot bequeath it to successors. Thus, their fortune tends to be short-lived and destabilising of other nearby principalities because of the ultimately personal nature of alliances and treaties. It is also clear that in interstate politics the papacy is only one prince amongst many, and not the centre of an international political order who can claim political authority on the basis of ecclesiastical office. Throughout this discussion in *The Prince*, Christian revelation or theology plays no part in the argument. When discussing the matter of Church teaching in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli's argument is also non-theological; instead, it is what we would now call sociological:

> ancient religion beautified only men fully possessed of worldly glory, such as the leaders of armies and the rulers of republics. Our religion has more often glorified humble and contemplative men rather than active ones. Moreover, our religion has defined the supreme good as humility, abjection, and contempt of worldly things; ancient religion located it in greatness of mind, strength of body, and in all the other things apt to make men the strongest. And if our religion requires that you have inner strength, it wants you to have the capacity to endure suffering more than to undertake brave deeds. This way of living seems, therefore, to have made the world weak and to have given it over to be plundered by wicked men, who are easily able to dominate it, since in order to go to paradise, most men think more about enduring their pains than about avenging them … it appears that the world has become soft and heaven has been disarmed. (Machiavelli 2008, p. 159)

In this passage Machiavelli's concern is with the sociological effectiveness of religion in sustaining the types of character that will be successful in the field of politics. His simple contrast between the civil religion of the pagans (meaning the ancient Romans) and of contemporary Christians criticises Christianity as creating feeble and weak characters, because of its celebration of humility and

its rejection of heroic and martial virtue. This contrast reinforces the subversion of classical moral and Christian virtues in favour of the martial virtue of the Romans. The characterisation of Christian virtues as effeminate is a further illustration of Machiavelli's gendering of moral language and his assertion of the masculine *virtu* as essential for the political success of princes and for stable and successful republics. Consequently, his attitude to the prevailing Catholic Christianity can be considered perfectly consistent with a rejection of moralism and natural law. That said, he is not dismissive of all religion: when outlining the basis of character, he suggests that an appropriate civil religion or patriotic culture is what is needed to sustain political community and, especially, to motivate princes to fight and citizens to serve in the military and so secure their republic.

The paradox of Machiavelli's discussion is that the Catholic culture of his time undermines the martial virtues of a successful prince or citizen and is partly responsible for Italy's weakness. Yet, his discussion of the two popes in 'Ecclesiastical Principalities' presents two martial and aggressive leaders, who, but for the limitations of their terms of office, are highly successful princes in both the political and the military spheres. When these two prelates are contrasted with another ecclesiastical leader, the unarmed Florentine friar–prophet Savonarola, who briefly led Florence between the fall of the Medici and the re-establishment of the republic, we can see that Machiavelli poses a stark choice, although he does not deny the truth of Christian revelation. The choice is between political success in this world, which requires one set of skills and motives, and another set of virtues appropriate to preparing for eternal life. These rival conceptions of character are ultimately incompatible, and one must choose between them. That one must choose is emphasised by the contrast between 'the licentiousness of the prelates and heads of the Church' and the examples of St Dominic and St Francis and their revival of Christianity (Machiavelli 2008, p. 249). As princes, prelates (bishops and popes) are forced to act like Machiavellian princes and therefore to cultivate the *virtu* of the successful prince. The fact that the Church in Italy is a political entity, with all the institutions of a principality, means the prelate becomes a political actor with attention focused on the challenges of history and necessity, as opposed to the life beyond the relentless world of fortune and political change.

What Machiavelli leaves unaddressed is what a prince or a republic should do about the Christian religion, given its effect on the character and virtue of a people. There are certainly passages that celebrate the renewal of Christianity under the militant St Dominic and the mendicant friar St Francis. The new monastic orders they founded were to play a significant role in the Church's expansion into the new worlds of the Americas and the Far East in the following century. And as such they would contribute enormously to the power of the Church and the imperial focus of Christian civilisation under the Spanish and Portuguese.

Apart from that, Machiavelli is largely uninterested in the truths of religion or the gifts of faith in his account of successful political action, precisely because he is focused on the temporally proximate as opposed to eternity. Thus, he leaves open the question of whether the successful prince or republic should shape public education more towards a paganised form of Christianity so as to serve the goals of politics, rather than allow religion to constrain or determine the shape of the prince's goals and ambitions. The overwhelming textual evidence is that religion is to be made subservient to political success, and for the present to triumph over the eternal. This might be the lesson that the modern world is happy to accept, yet it is clear that this is a significant departure from the dominant Christian natural law theory of the age, and a further illustration of how Machiavelli rejects the primacy of morality or religion.

Violence, war and reason of state

Machiavelli clearly does not offer a formal theory of the boundaries and limits of authority, or set out the nature of law within and between political communities. All of this is quite deliberate because his goal is to challenge the idea of a formal model of political relationships from which normative claims can be derived. In this respect he could not be more unlike Aquinas and earlier natural law predecessors, or more different from Hobbes and the state-based theories of international order that were to follow in the next century. Yet, he remains for many subsequent readers one of the most important theorists of international politics, statecraft and diplomacy. Machiavelli gives no analysis or justification of political structures, but when it comes to statecraft and the exercise of political power he is rarely matched. It is precisely this conception of the craft of politics that I consider next. But, given the discussion above, there is no need to worry whether he is moral or immoral, and instead I focus on the most distinctive features of his conception of political practice, namely the deployment of violence in the foundation and maintenance of political institutions.

For Machiavelli, all politics involves the deployment of force because the goal of political action is getting people to do what they otherwise may not want to do. This is almost a formal definition of the idea of power. Yet, Machiavelli is not simply a theorist of power or of the technology of coercion; he is a theorist of the deployment of violence as essential to the technology or instruments of coercing others to do what is willed, either by the prince or by a republic. Violence is not just a sad necessity, as it was for Augustine, or a consequence of war making it the default condition of states, as it was for Thucydides. Violence, and its purposing reason and deployment, is the key to the heart of successful politics, whether of the prince or in a republic. Like other, lesser forms of power or coercion (such as threats or offers), violence is a form of reason-giving. Unlike them, it works indirectly on the will or reason via working on the human body. It can seem the most irrational and primitive of actions. But, for those like

Machiavelli who are attentive to power, it is the most complex and nuanced of reasons, and the way it is deployed has a significant impact on political power and reason-giving, as opposed to other assertions of power that are not central to politics. Later thinkers were to argue that there are other types of violence, whether these be structural or linguistic, that are equally dangerous and coercive. However, Machiavelli subordinates all forms of coercion to physical or bodily violence, which in his view is fundamental and foundational (Frazer and Hutchings 2020).

Violence in *The Prince* *and the republic*

Machiavelli's most important political works are about how political power is acquired (*The Prince*), how it is maintained (*Discourses* and *Florentine Histories*) and how it is projected externally (*The Art of War*). The answers to each of these questions involve violence. It is from the relationship between his answers to these questions that Machiavelli's central political insights and his implications for thinking about international politics arise.

   A misleading way of understanding the works would be to see some as focused on domestic or what becomes known as state politics and others as about international politics. *The Prince*, with its focus on advising a ruler, might seem to have this domestic focus, but that would be to miss the point entirely. The first 12 chapters of *The Prince* are devoted to how principalities are acquired, so we begin from the perspective of the uncertainty and instability of the international political order. The Prince's key task is one of establishing an order or a political entity. Indeed, this is precisely what Cesare Borgia sought to do in bringing order across the Romagna region by binding together a series of small cities and townships into a stable principality with a single unchallengeable source of authority – as opposed to a series of mini principalities ruled by prince bishops, who were not particularly interested in them or able to dominate them. So, the fundamental question at the beginning of *The Prince* is the question of the foundation of a political order.

   The question of founding is an ancient subject of political and mythological reflection. Tribes, nations, states and empires have their own foundation myths, examples being the struggle between brothers Cain and Abel following Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis, and in the case of the Rome that between Romulus and Remus. As with Cain and Abel, the founding of Rome also involves the killing of Remus by his brother. Violence and murder are integral to the founding of political authority in these two cases. But both place the founding act in the distant historical past, where it acquires a mythological power, in a way similar to ancient conquests in other foundation myths such as the English realm narrative of William the Conqueror's defeat of King Harold (who died with an arrow in his eye) at the Battle of Hastings (1066). The founding act, whether a murder or a conquest, establishes

a constitutive political claim that creates a new political entity – whether of a city, a realm or a kingdom, or indeed what we would now call a state. Any founding story presupposes that the state or political entity did not previously exist. Conquests (as opposed to mythological founding acts) also suggest that there was something prior to the new political entity, whether that is the original Saxon kingdom prior to the Norman Conquest or some other entity.

In the opening of *The Prince*, Machiavelli indicates that this process of founding is not simply primordial and historically rare but something that is frequent and familiar. His opening chapters list the different ways in which principalities can be established drawing on relatively recent historical examples, as opposed to just ancient or mythological cases. The details of this process of founding are also important because they challenge the idea that behind new principalities are relatively stable political bodies with working or challengeable governments. As with his scepticism about the idea of a common good, Machiavelli is similarly sceptical about the idea of a people as a relatively stable body underpinning the possibility of a political community. Machiavelli does not hold the people in high regard as embodying anything of political importance prior to the founding acts of the new prince. Indeed, they merely form a multitude of bodies with contingent connections rather than an actual body politic or a quasi-natural entity, in the way that Aristotle speaks of the polis as a natural community. Peoples are constituted from a multitude by the founding acts of the prince, and therefore the boundaries of political communities (as multitudes of individual people) are constantly open to transformation and change.

Creating a political entity such as a principality involves taking and binding a portion of the multitude together as a new political community – often, at this time, in Italy, Germany and elsewhere, people who share a common language and religion and so might relatively easily transfer from one set-up for political rule to another. This assertion of the absence of any international order that determines the boundaries of political communities, whether as territorial entities or as peoples, is one of the obvious reasons why Machiavelli is characterised as a theorist of realism. Yet, if he is indeed a realist, then his challenge is more radical than simply the claim that there is a society of political communities (states) without hierarchical order, or that there is a state of anarchy between those states. Machiavelli denies that any political entity or people is ultimately stable and permanent because of his theory of history as the cyclical rise and fall of principalities, peoples or ruling powers. This cyclical process means that apparent stability is never firmly established, and order is always temporally contingent, depending upon where one is located on fortune's wheel, whether rising or declining. All systems of international and political order allow for the challenge of change. Yet they also seek to mitigate negative or harmful consequences through mechanisms such as the balance of power and alliances, if not the imposition of a conception of international law. Yet, Machiavelli's account of founding acts, allied with history as cyclical and

not progressive, makes that order more uncertain and more deeply contingent or temporary. Underlying his conception of politics, state creation and maintenance, there is not even a regulative ideal of order that political communities or people might work towards. Instead, there is just the relentlessness of change, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. That process is ineradicable, a fact of the world within which state creation constantly occurs. At any stage of history, there will always be those, such as Cesare Borgia, attempting to take the opportunity to build a new principality and dynasty from the disorder of the Romagna, or a Pope Julius II trying to dominate Italy by playing off the great powers.

The first lesson of *The Prince*, then, is that political 'founding' is a ubiquitous act, as opposed to a very special and historically remote act. But that does not make the founding act any more peculiar than the mythological examples. Establishing a new principality is not simply disposing of a predecessor and replacing them on the throne so as to enjoy their wealth and authority. For Machiavelli there is a process of new creation even if this involves just the reassertion of an existing principality amongst the kingdoms of the world. This new creation involves making a people out of a multitude under a ruler with authority, that is, creating a body politic where it did not previously exist. And central to this creative act is the place of violence.

Just as an act of violence imprints force on a human body by destructively marking it, so the founding act of a political order is designed to imprint or mark the body politic in a way that distinguishes it, and gives it its particularity, and for the source of that marking to be the political authority. For Machiavelli, the power to make that mark that stays within memory is central to the claim of a political power to authority over a people. In an act of conquest, the prince might exercise this power directly by crushing and destroying a foe on the battlefield, but this capacity can also be exercised in other ways that are often more spectacular. A good example of this is treatment of Remirro de Orco in the square at Cesana. Borgia's right-hand man and enforcer de Orco was used in pacifying the Romagna, deploying violence against its ruling families to build Borgia's new principality. A forceful and brutal figure in his own right, de Orco was nevertheless brought low by being butchered in the public square. Perhaps the most striking parable in *The Prince*, Machiavelli's message here is nonetheless subtle. A number of elements in the story can be brought out to illustrate the way in which violence, or force against bodies, is used to create political authority.

Firstly, although the act is clearly an expression of Borgia's power against one of his most trusted lieutenants, it is left unclear whether this act was carried out by Borgia himself, who was by all accounts a violent figure when he needed to be. The distance and ambiguity here is important because it clearly links the act to Borgia, but also leaves a certain distance – in the same way that the act of an executioner is that of the prince but not done by the prince. Yet, this is

no simple execution, although it has many of the same trappings. There is the sword and the block, and the type of killing has the sort of ritualistic element that was so important to executions of the time. The display of ritualistic power over bodies was an element of the aesthetics of punishment in the early modern world. The infliction of death or pain was an essential part of punishment as an expression of the legal and political power of the prince, but it was only one part of the ritual. The curious lengths to which people in medieval and Renaissance times went in terms of destroying and mutilating bodies was almost as important as the consequence in terms of death and pain. Death and pain were for the victim, but the humiliation and mutilation of the body was for the audience and the crowd – and it was this which demonstrated the peculiar power of the prince in a world in which regular or routine violence was familiar. The need to satisfy and to create awe was essential to assert power and claim authority from those who are left in awe as opposed to just fear.

The ritualistic mutilation of bodies also reflected the religious idea of sacrifice to propitiate a greater power and to restore an order that had been threatened by crime or sin. In the case of Remirro de Orco he had wronged those who stood in the way of Borgia's quest for power, but that wrong was to be partly atoned for by Borgia's ritual sacrifice of his henchman in the public square. But, whilst the death is ritualistic and like an execution, it is also not an execution or a ritual in other important respects. Borgia is able to stand apart from the violence because, although the question of his authorship remains, he is not seen to do the deed. Indeed, unlike an execution or ritual killing, no one is reported as having seen the act itself, but only the choreographed consequence. There is no executioner either, so the act is not simply an extreme example of a capital punishment. It is precisely that ambiguity that creates the necessary awe of the power of Borgia and which elevates him from another local thug into the special class of the prince with charismatic authority.

That assertion of authority, and the command over the people to respect that authority, is prior to the claim to punish breaches of the law and to give justice. And the power to awe the people is part of what binds the multitude into a people with a prince and is the source of the ruler's charismatic power. Throughout this theatrical incident there is no claim to legitimacy based on transferring power from the people to the prince, or the prince deriving power from some other higher authority. The type of action deployed does not just create a strong prudential reason to submit to a dangerous force; it awes the will and the body. Through this physical story it demonstrates how political authority is brought into the world without recourse to moral arguments about the law, or nature, or the common good of the people. The curious violence of foundational political acts binds bodies and stays within the memory of those who are in awe for as long as a prince can maintain that sense of awe. However, as we have seen, that awe is never permanent, hence the possibility of instability. Political authority can often be as short-lived as the natural life of the prince, especially if the

princely family is eventually unable to maintain a dynasty, as was the case with Alexander VI and Cesare Borgia.

A similar story about founding violence is also present in the *Discourses*. Machiavelli discusses biblical examples such as Moses, King David and the classical Roman example of Romulus. Rome also periodically reran the founding violence, as with the executions of Brutus' sons following the replacement of the last Tarquin kings after the rape of Lucretia and the founding of the republic. Lucius Junius Brutus led the revolt against the Tarquin monarchy, but he is most famous for sacrificing his own sons to the good of the republic. In the first year of Brutus' term as consul, his sons, along with many aristocrats, become involved in a conspiracy against the republic, whose laws were effectively limiting their freedom. The conspiracy was overheard by a slave and the conspirators were convicted of treason. According to Livy, the punishment involved binding to a stake, stripping for humiliation, flogging and then beheading. It fell to Brutus himself to inflict this vicious and humiliating punishment on his own sons, which he did. This series of executions constitutes the completion of the founding of the republic, or its ritual refounding. This almost religious sacrifice of family blood to the claim of the republic is a key sign of this new political institution, with its authority that transcends even that of Brutus as consul, because it commanded him to exercise the deed. As the original defeat of the Tarquins was a punishment for the rape of Lucretia, so the ritual execution of Brutus' sons involved the new republican body politic ritually purging its old aristocratic authority and power.

Making political communities, whether they be principalities or republics, involves the same ritual purging of what went before to create people as a political body. So physical ideas such as cutting away what is dead or dying, drastically purging and marking the new body, are essential features of creating political authority and distinguishing it from other types of violence. In many respects, Machiavelli's arguments reflect the place of violence and sacrifice that is essential to religion, and especially to the central act of Christianity. Again, because he transposes so much of this feature of popular late Roman religion into his thinking about politics, we should not be surprised at the lack of any explicit discussion of Christianity in his writings.

Founding violence is central to Machiavelli's thought and to his conception of political power, but, as the discussion of Brutus in the *Discourses* makes clear, Machiavelli does not confine the matter to just a single primordial act. Turning to *The Prince*, the issue of founding a refounding is ever present in the context of a world containing weak and declining states. Even in the republic, where he is more concerned with fostering the stability of a political community over time, violence retains a place in refounding, renewing and stabilising authority.

As with the rest of Machiavelli's political theory, the arguments of the *Discourses* arise from reflections on the experience of the Roman Republic and key figures and social forces of Roman history, as discussed by Livy. The examples

are the theory, because Machiavelli forcefully asserted that we can learn from them about the stable and permanent passions of men. Of course, examples need to be analysed and questioned, yet they do have a lesson for politics and that is why history is the handmaid of political statecraft. The obvious implication of the *Discourses* is for the domestic stability of a republic devoid of one central ruler, such as Florence. But even here the arguments necessarily have an implication for the shape and conduct of international politics, thus bringing together his domestic experience of being a functionary with the Florentine government and his experience as a diplomat pursuing Florence's overall interests in the context of complex great power politics.

Whereas the international realm provides the stage for an audacious prince to carve out a realm and constitute their own state, the republican sphere involves managing the challenges of domestic politics.

The republican model of a political community – not yet a modern state but neither simply the estate or affairs of a dominant prince – is well suited to exhibiting the forces that drive politics, and that need to be addressed in sustaining a stable political community. Central to Machiavelli's idea of a republic is that of a pluralistic model of the people. A people is not a stable and coherent entity that just needs strong government; it is something that needs to be constantly created and sustained, given the fragmenting forces that are irreducibly present. Just as the prince can make a people, so when this entity is made it will be found to be stratified into distinct classes who are ruled and involved in the process of ruling in different ways. The Roman Republic illustrates the class element of the body politic and the struggles between those forces within the structure of the republican constitution. Similar class interests underpin the Florentine republic and constitution. And much of Machiavelli's republican theory involves comparisons and contrasts between the two, an issue that Machiavelli returns to in his later *Florentine Histories*, which are sometimes said to embody a departure or 'conservative turn' away from his views in the *Discourses* (McCormick 2018, pp. 69–105).

The core problem that underpins the *Discourses* is that of stability and managing change through avoiding corruption. As we have seen, the cycle of time destabilises all things, and corruption is an ever-present challenge to a principality or a republic. Whereas the prince must cultivate personal *virtu* to seize the moment when necessity requires action, the republic seeks to slow the revolution of the wheel of fortune through creating a constitution. For Machiavelli, the constitution is not a founding legal document specifying the distribution of rights and powers but rather a codification of the practical way that those political powers are structured to strike a balance between opposing forces. The forces in a republic are social classes, most importantly the rich and the poor. In the Roman case there were the rival claims of the plebians (the ordinary people) and those of the nobility. In the structure of the Roman constitution these were represented in the political offices of tribunes, senators and consuls.

Machiavelli clearly favoured republican rule over monarchical or other types of rule, but we should be careful not to misunderstand his claim. He does not have a normative ideal state nor a normative view of politics. A successful republic is successful by virtue of one particular good, namely non-domination or republican freedom. Even here the ideal of freedom as non-domination is a functional good that minimises or slows the inevitable challenge of corruption and decline. Unlike later modern conceptions of freedom, which link it to individual agency and human flourishing, for Machiavelli, freedom as non-domination arises when a group of people is not dominated by another group and therefore can be independent (Berlin 1998; Skinner 1997). Domination occurs when whatever rights and liberties a group enjoys are at the discretion of a higher power. This could be a slave under the direction of a master, a principality under the direction of an imperial power, or a class subordinated by another dominant class. On such a view, freedom is not the absence of restrictions on action, as even a Roman slave might have considerable discretion and resources to act on behalf of a master's household. Indeed, many slaves might have been better off than poor freemen in terms of their resources and real opportunities. Nevertheless, the crucial difference is that these 'freedoms' are always at the discretion of a master. Similar issues of status and domination arise in relation to dominant imperial powers and the client relationships that they impose upon small cities or weak principalities.

Within a republic, this issue of domination arises in the struggle between the constituent classes who make up a people within a constitution. The *Discourses* describe the struggle between the ordinary people and the nobility in various republics. The rebellion of the sons of Brutus at the founding of the Roman Republic is an example of the aristocratic elite or nobility trying to overthrow the constraints of the ordinary people's claim to distinction and status. The nobles' appetite for distinction and status is a class manifestation of the *virtu* that Machiavelli seeks in a successful prince. Yet, this kind of *virtu* is manifested in terms of factional self-assertion and domination over others that are precisely the sources of corruption of regimes, through exploitation and disorder within a republic, or the search for militaristic glory and honour in the struggle between republics. Throughout the *Discourses* Machiavelli explores lessons for successful republics and especially the success of Rome as one of the longest-lasting republics – although this too is a republic that eventually collapsed into an empire.

Balance between the powers of the social classes that make up the republic is achieved in a number of ways. The most important condition of a successful republic is an armed citizenry. Since the ancient world, the ability to defend the republic has been a prerequisite of citizenship. The ability to defend the republic, to fight with one's fellows and to be prepared to die for the republic were essential signs of citizenship. This is only possible if the citizenry is armed because it is only in that way that they alone control the destiny of the republic.

As we shall see, Machiavelli is fearful of standing armies and of mercenary troops, because such people can be bought and they tend to prey upon those who rely on them. The Roman Republic went to great lengths to disperse its armies when they were not involved in defence or conquest, as they otherwise could pose significant threats to the city. An armed citizenry is also less likely to be reckless and adventurous as the costs of conflict and war will fall on the citizens and are not just borne by somebody else or external agents. Most crucially for Machiavelli, an armed citizenry can pursue where necessary, and contain when essential, inter-class violence within the republic. This limits the possibility of the nobles employing mercenary forces to tyrannise over the population, since they cannot enjoy the monopoly of violence and force simply through their wealth.

Wealth is also a source of corruption, so Machiavelli is keen that gross inequality does not establish itself within the republic. If inequality is too great, the classes cease to share a common destiny and thus common interests. Ancient history is full of examples of the wealthiest being the object of envy and resentment from the ordinary people, because they can free themselves from the cost of citizenship and assert privacy over public responsibility. For Machiavelli, corruption is largely the result of inequality and the resentments or fears that follow from it. A curious consequence of great wealth is often rich people's strong fear of envy and resentment by the poor majority, which entrenches social division and instability. Whilst the poor fear the wealthy nobles because of their ability to separate themselves and dominate them, so the nobility fears that the poor's envy will in turn threaten them and their wealth, property and advantage. This class tension is ever present in the structure of the Roman Republic and Machiavelli's Florence, and occasionally the tension between social classes does erupt into class violence. The complex lessons of the *Discourses* and of the *Florentine Histories* provide a constant reminder of how close to the surface violence and the resentments that sustain it are in republican politics. But the most interesting and complex issue is not that the eruption of class violence leads to a breakdown of that republic, although it is a temporary breakdown of social balance. Instead, the eruption of class violence is often depicted by Machiavelli as a necessary part of maintaining the stability of a republican order, by challenging the growth of inequality and the subsequent domination and lack of class freedom that follow from it.

Contrary to some idealistic views of republicanism that channel conflict into the deliberative practices of republican government, Machiavelli does not see deliberation as an epistemic process for arriving at the common good, the concept one might find in modern deliberative democrats (Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). Machiavelli is not interested in finding the truth or in constituting the common good through information sharing and deliberation. Instead, his model of deliberation is as a form of conflict and contestation, but one that does not resort to violence. That said, debate can have positive benefits in testing

foreign policy and arguments for war (in this he clearly departs from Thucy-
dides) or other policy matters. Yet, throughout his writings, the deliberative
side of republican politics, and the struggle of speech and ideas, is mirrored by
the threat and the reality of violence as a means of securing the republic and
restoring balance. As with founding violence in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*,
the underlying presence of a threat of violence in the republic is a constant fea-
ture of politics. It is not simply a problem that needs to be or can be overcome
by republican and deliberative politics. It is something that is integral to repub-
lican political life, because disruptive violence is a perfectly sound response to
the cyclical problem of domination and corruption that all republican regimes
necessarily face.

War and reason of state

The one major work on politics published during Machiavelli's lifetime is the
work most obviously related to what we now call international relations and
political theory. Yet, *The Art of War* (1519–1520) is a curiously bloodless work
from an author who seems adept at handling the issues of violence, force
and power, although Clausewitz thought highly of it. The book demonstrates
Machiavelli's practical interest in the organisation of military force and its suc-
cessful deployment, especially given that he was responsible for the defence of
Pisa against siege. The work is much less radical than his political works, and
it conveys much of the conventional thinking of a medieval military manual.
There are long disquisitions on the ranks, order, organisation and deployment
of infantry forces, and discussions of the relative strengths of infantry versus
cavalry. There is also some discussion of artillery, but Machiavelli shows little
appreciation of what was to become one of the most important developments
in military science, namely the deployment of gunpower and the development
of handheld firearms. These were starting to be used and were a rapidly devel-
oping technology during his lifetime, and they played an important role in the
early wars of the Reformation only three decades later.

   Central to Machiavelli's work are the various ways of organising the infan-
try line in battle so that it can respond to attack, defence and change of cir-
cumstances and weaponry, thereby accommodating *fortuna*. Also important
are signalling commands to troops and identifying command in the context of
battle, such as via the placement of flags and other forms of signalling. All these
issues are complicated by later technology, but in different guises remained
essential issues of military science that would be familiar to Clausewitz or 20th-
century military tacticians. The book has little to say about strategy and there-
fore little directly about the place of war in international affairs. In *The Prince*,
war provides the opportunity for honour and *virtu* and is almost celebrated as
a duty of the prince. And in the republicanism of the *Discourses* war is either a
tool helpful for the protection and unification of the republic, or a risk created

by overambitious nobles. By contrast, in *The Art of War* the activity of war is seen as a relatively brief series of engagements that test a prince's power or a city's resolve. The model of a duel dominates Machiavelli's military thinking; the rest is about the most prompt and efficient delivery of military force to that political end. War does not dominate that end, as we see from the republican preoccupation with making the war the task of a citizen body as a way of preventing needless wars of personal aggrandisement. Machiavelli is clearly aware of who carries the burden of war, both as soldiers and potential victims.

The one element of *The Art of War* that is repeated in both *The Prince* and the *Discourses* is the discussion of standing armies as dangerous, and the relative merits of citizen armies over mercenaries. Whether in Roman times or in the France of his day, for Machiavelli standing armies were a constant invitation to war and instability, because they have little else to do other than fight and seek rewards from pillaging the people. Both for soldiers in standing armies and for mercenaries, war is their day job. By contrast, citizen armies are more reluctant to fight and bear the costs and inconveniences on their ordinary lives, which are not solely devoted to military affairs. Citizens' livelihoods are based on their land or their trades, and campaigning is a distraction from these, as well as being physically dangerous. Mercenaries are also a problem for republics and princes in that their loyalty is easily bought. They have no shared interest with the republic or the prince, and thus can be as easily paid not to fight, or to change sides, as they are paid to fight and die for their client.

In the struggle for power and founding political acts, the skill of a prince is inspiring followers (and discouraging betrayal) in order to secure their own goals. In this context, the arts of war are important, but in terms of formal military science Machiavelli's concern is much more with the skill of the political agent or of the government of a republic. This fact is important because he does not distinguish the sciences appropriate to domestic politics and those devoted to the international realm. Consequently, he does not develop a formal distinction between the claims of authority governing domestic rule and the needs for effective action amongst states (Meineke [1924] 1957). Meineke and others who see Machiavelli as a founding theorist of reason of state (*raison d'état*) have overplayed the distinction between private or domestic morality and the conduct expected of political leaders. Indeed, whilst it is interesting, Meineke's reading of Machiavelli has more to do with the 'Prussianism' of Meineke's milieu – which spanned the pre-1914 German Reich, the post-war Weimar Republic and the Nazi regime, rather than capturing the reality of Machiavelli's doctrines.

Machiavelli is undoubtedly drawn to quasi-utilitarian discussions of reason of state because of his involvement in, and writings on, the diplomatic challenges facing Cesare Borgia or his own Florence. Yet, a careful reading of Machiavelli's histories, or his large correspondence on diplomatic matters, shows these works are chiefly descriptive and reflective rather than prescriptive

or theoretical (Cesa 2014). A reordering of priorities, I suggest, by his radical departure from the superficial niceties of Christian natural law – but in practice the late medieval world was hardly unfamiliar with political and international violence and war. These are best understood not in terms of a two-level or hierarchical discussion of ethics and politics but as the displacement of ethics when thinking about politics and power, and a denial that it can simply be institutionalised in the respective claims of the individual and of the state. Machiavelli does not have a conception of the modern state; his concept *lo stato* is much more ambiguous between politics as an activity, an institutional structure, and different ways of conceiving agency in politics (such as that of the prince, the people and the citizen body). Indeed, given the fundamental lesson of *The Prince*, it is unlikely that Machiavelli would have found Meineke's argument a congenial way of representing his fundamental insights and lessons. His genius, and what made him quite so interesting and important, is that he is not easily disciplined into a philosophical or theoretical straightjacket. This is what makes his legacy so complex and so pervasive in modern international affairs and political thinking.

The long shadow of Machiavelli

Machiavelli wrote at a time of significant transformation in European politics and history in which the idea of the modern state had begun to appear. There was also an important shift in the geographical and ideological context, from the wars of princes to the wars of religion that followed the Reformation in 1517 and are foreshadowed in the Imperial sack of Rome in 1527. Yet, this context can also confuse and obscure the specificity of Machiavelli's legacy in politics and international affairs. It is easy to see him, as does Meineke, as one of the sources of the modern state, in particular the separation of morality from politics in the new science of reason of state that accompanied the possibility of realising autonomous sovereign power. This approach absorbs Machiavelli's ideas into the theory of the modern state, and in contemporary international relations into the state system – with its assertion of autonomy and sovereignty and the absence of any hierarchical authority regulating states. Reason of state, and Machiavelli's role in its emergence, secures his position in philosophical histories of modern politics and its theoretical categories, although it should be noticed that reason of state has other significant original thinkers such as Jean Bodin, whose ideas and politics are different from Machiavelli's (Skinner 1978; Poole 2015). His rejection of classical and Christian natural law is the basis for including Machiavelli amongst the sources of realist theories in international relations, and especially his denial of a higher law or normative order that creates obligations on the prince. Consequently, when early 20th-century thinkers were searching for the foundational theorists of international relations, he was an obvious candidate (Wight 1991; Doyle 1997). The realism versus idealism

debate is an important one and certainly has shaped contemporary political and international affairs echoing some Machiavellian themes. However, there are other ways in which Machiavelli has shaped contemporary thinking that are both subtler and more significant than simply lining him up on the side of the 'IR' realists against the 'IR' idealists.

Revolutionary Machiavellians – Gramsci, Althusser and Burnham

The post-war debate between realism and idealism has tended to fit into a broad acceptance of the modern liberal state and the system in which it operates. In the early part of the 20th century, however, there was a curious interest in Machiavellianism amongst those who were seeking the revolutionary overthrow of the state via a communist revolution. This linkage is perhaps not too surprising in the case of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who theorised the revolutionary class regime as the 'New Machiavelli' (Gramsci 1971). Gramsci drew inspiration from Machiavelli's account of the founding politics of *The Prince* as a model for the similar founding politics of a new class-state based on the unification of the Italian proletariat and peasantry.

In contrast to classical Leninism, with its top-down direction by the Communist Party, Gramsci is concerned with building a hegemony through the unification of distinct struggles to make the ideas and direction of Marxist Communism culturally dominant. Whilst Gramsci is often credited with a less violent version of revolutionary struggle to that advocated by Lenin, he retained a recognition of the need for foundational violence in building the new order. In this way, he also challenges the non-revolutionary paths to Communism advanced by other socialist and reformist groups. For him, the lesson of Machiavelli is clear – a socialist strategy must do away with the remaining elements of the old regime to secure political stability, in the same way that the prince is counselled to seek security from opponents from the old order, as executing de Orco did for Cesare Borgia. Gramsci also praises the way that Machiavelli, unlike other pre-Marxist thinkers, was not just a writer but was engaged with the politics of creating a people where it did not previously exist. For Gramsci, the leadership role of the Communist Party is that of the 'New Machiavelli' because it also does not inherit a pre-existing people with fixed preferences. Rather, it creates the people by establishing a new social and cultural hegemony, in a way that is analogous to how a people is created through a founding act, and is not a pre-existing constant of politics.

This reading of Machiavelli, as a resource for those who are attempting to make sense of revolutionary politics, is further developed by the great French structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser in his *Machiavelli and Us* (Althusser 1999). Althusser's fascination here is not easily summarised. But much turns on the paradoxical nature of Machiavelli's works, such as the apparent contradiction between the monarchical *The Prince* and the republican *Discourses*, and

the radicalism of his method with its unequivocal repudiation of the Renaissance and classical natural law tradition. The things that have shocked many readers are precisely those elements of Machiavelli's thought that make him such a significant figure amongst past thinkers, and such an example for those wishing to defend the brutal reality of Marxist revolution from those who seek to humanise or liberalise his work as a moralistic approach to politics. Machiavelli's repudiation of that pathway opens up a respectable intellectual and practical political tradition, within which contemporary radical revolutionary politics could locate itself.

Machiavelli's preoccupation with force, violence and the act of political founding continued to obsess even former Marxist theorists such as James Burnham, the American Trotskyite, who lost his Marxist faith, worked for the predecessor of the CIA during World War II, and speculated about a new order based on the competition of technocratic elites that had little interest in democracy as anything other than a cover for elite selection and renewal. Burnham's *The Machiavellians* (Burnham 1943) followed his earlier book *The Managerial Revolution*, in which he shifted his allegiance from a Marxist class politics to a new elite politics of technocrats that would lead the new civilisation that was being brought into effect by Leninism in the USSR, fascism and Nazism in Europe and technocratic managerial capitalism in the USA. This theory is satirised in George Orwell's *1984*, where the party has become an end in itself and independent of any ideological substance. Having lost his initial faith in Marxism, Burnham flirted with Nazism as the new order for Europe in the late 1930s. But he was never a true believer and was more interested in the style of politics of technocratic elites as they challenged and deposed the old orders of imperial powers, like Great Britain. *The Machiavellians* links the Renaissance author's thought to a new perspective that Burnham constructed from the work of early 20th-century Italian political economists. Key figures here were Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels and Vilfredo Pareto (all of whom influenced or were fathers of Italian fascism), with the addition of Georges Sorel's theory of mythical violence. Burnham's book is a curious synthesis of his own intellectual prejudices, rather than a serious historical analysis of Machiavelli or of an historical tradition that can be attributed to him. Yet, like Gramsci and Althusser, he celebrates Machiavelli as a political original who repudiates ethical politics and understands the reality and attraction of power and the necessity of war.

As the Cold War developed and the USSR began to develop nuclear weapons, Burnham changed his views about war, and even proposed a pre-emptive nuclear war with the USSR whilst the USA still had a monopoly of weapons. Burnham's peculiar but influential thought in the 1940s helped shape the realist world view in post-war international relations theory, by addressing approaches to power and war that moved beyond the 'reason of state' realism of the old order (represented by Meineke) or the revolutionary realism that was still tied to official Marxism–Leninism. As new forms of political agency emerged in states that had been transformed by military mobilisation,

such as the USA, Burnham's ideas informed those who began to think about America as a capitalist imperial power, especially those who became known as neo-conservatives, who embraced an expansionist view of the USA's destiny, as opposed to the cautious realists, who drew self-limiting conclusions from their political heroes.

Domesticating Machiavelli in contemporary international political theory

The paradigm of realism in modern international theory is obviously shaped by Machiavellian themes and the explanation of reason of state and two-level theories that distinguish diplomatic and political morality from normal eveyday morality. But what is also often interesting is the way in which those debates play out in reflections on international politics. Recent books by John Mearsheimer (2011) and Joseph Nye (2020) directly address questions such as why leaders must lie and how to do it effectively, and how leaders cannot simply depart from morality, both of which are deeply Machiavellian issues. Mearsheimer is a tough-minded realist, but in *Why Leaders Lie* he addresses the strategic complexities of not telling the truth and why that is sometimes compelled by circumstance. A particularly interesting example is the case of Saddam Hussein and the non-existent weapons of mass destruction prior to the second Gulf War in 2003. Hussein could not convince the international community that he had fully complied with external sanctions, despite largely having done so, without rendering his regime unstable. Similarly, Hussein's U.S. opponents could not believe him even if he had been telling the truth, nor could they simply confirm that they had been misled by spurious intelligence into a war that cost U.S. lives and money (and thousands of Iraqi lives). The circumstances of effective lying are necessary and ubiquitous in international politics, but they are not purely domestic (as with hiding casualty rates and projections in the Vietnam War to avoid alarming public opinion). Instead, managing deception requires control of events that are actually never in the hands of single agents.

Although less interested in the issue of practical Machiavellianism, Nye is also concerned with assessing the significance of 'morality' for the effectiveness of political leaders, by which he means U.S. presidents since Franklin Roosevelt. His careful and informed study links the categorically different issues of being a good (i.e. effective) president and that of being a good man. For example, by all accounts President Carter was a good man, however one judges his presidency in terms of its effectiveness. Whilst Nye's study appears to challenge the interpretation of Machiavellianism given here, it does follow his thought in emphasising the primacy of the political art of weaving together different policy drivers and interests. Despite all that has been said about the importance of immorality (by conventional standards) in Machiavelli and his celebration

of violence and deception, his works are absolutely clear that no ruler should just be a lying brute – that way lies certain instability, chaos and failure, perhaps the key lesson to be drawn from the career of Saddam Hussein.

The most interesting contemporary political theorist who writes in the shadow of Machiavelli but who would not see himself as a simple 'Machiavellian' is Michael Walzer (1973; 1977). He has done so much to re-energise 'just war' theory and is well known for his related discussion of the problem of 'dirty hands'. Walzer's theory of war does not proceed from abstract natural law doctrines, as in Aquinas and followers, but from the practice of war itself. His 'war convention' draws on the way that real-life military conflict throws up dilemmas that shape how we can theorise and regulate war in ways that are understood and considered normative by those who may engage in it. This situated and engaged thinking already echoes Machiavelli's own thought about politics as an irreducibly practical activity. Walzer is also preoccupied with cases where the prosecution of war, or the exercise of political power, necessarily requires departing from otherwise binding moral norms covering the deployment of violence, deception and the imposition of harm. These actions require political leaders to dirty their hands by doing genuinely immoral things.

For Walzer, the political leader has obligations to protect his political community and responsibility for the deploying harm and violence to that end that ordinary individuals do not. These features put the political leader in circumstances where they must act in ways that would otherwise be wrong. Good examples are:

– waterboarding or torturing suspects to foil major terrorist attacks;
– engaging in military actions necessary for state survival that will result in the deaths of innocent non-combatants; or
– requiring soldiers to fight on in such circumstances while planning the state's extrication from a situation – for example, sending soldiers to die in countries like Afghanistan whilst organising a withdrawal.

All these examples are contestable, but each raises the issue of requiring death and harm that would otherwise be considered illegitimate. A hard-headed realist might argue that this is just war and 'people get hurt and die', but Walzer resists the simple realist view, just as he resists the high-minded moralist view that argues that we should never directly do wrong. Key to his thinking about war and international politics is recognising the argument that if they must kill innocents in the pursuit of their objectives, political leaders and their military commands are doing wrong. The interesting question is how we deal with that fact, especially in modern liberal democracies where we want soldiers, officials and politicians who can return to ordinary life without having their characters destroyed by the requirement to deploy violence and inflict wrong. We need people to 'dirty their hands' but we also need them to do it only in ways that do not destroy the integrity of key institutions, political communities or individual citizens.

Two aspects of Walzer's thinking are interesting. Firstly, unlike the abstract and formalist thinking of new 'just war theorists' such as McMahan or Fabre (2009; 2012), he endeavours to structure his thinking within the reality of modern war, as represented in history, autobiography and journalism. So his accounts of dilemmas are real and not simply abstract logical problems. Secondly, he prescribes responses designed to mitigate the evil being done but without dispensing with the evil. An example is provided by the apparent unfairness in the treatment of RAF Bomber Command following the end of World War II. At great personal cost and sacrifice, in 1940–1945 these airmen were required to do things that they considered wrong but necessary during the UK's campaign of terror-bombing against German cities. Pursuing targets that inevitably killed tens of thousands of civilians, many non-combatants and many who are innocent by any standard (such as infants and the old and infirm), the airmen engaged in acts that were wrong and in breach of normal conventions of war. Yet, in the specific circumstances of the time, when Britain was facing the threat of defeat by a terrible enemy, these emergency actions were nevertheless justified. That said, the actions of killing innocents remained wrong, so at the end of the war it was appropriate not to celebrate these actions with campaign medals or the highest honours for leaders like Sir Arthur Harris, who unlike all other major British commanders was not ennobled. Many questions and challenges can be raised against Walzer's specific arguments, but what remains interesting about his way of thinking, and what I think is most Machiavellian about it, is that he offers a complex middle position between the idealism of never doing wrong and the simple realism of having a state-based exemption of reason of state that does not follow the simplistic idea of reason of state.

The most striking feature of Machiavelli's complex writings is not the new concepts and structures that he gives to modern politics, or even the psychological insights that foreshadow later views about leaders and leadership in politics and international affairs, but rather his singular ability to constantly unsettle easy conceptual and theoretical distinctions. This is true whether one sees his writings as lifting the veil from contemporary politics or views them instead as the first shove down the slippery slope to the totalitarianism and brutality of the 20th century, as Leo Strauss did. Whether we see in his work the emerging politics of the modern state or (as some still claim) a noble morality of republicanism and political prudence, he never fails to unsettle. My own view is that this unsettling is partly the consequence of his acknowledgement of the flux of politics and the instability of order. As the turn to the modern sovereign state began in the decades following Machiavelli's death, we see an attempt to secure order in the face of wars of religion and social, political and religious upheaval, through concepts such as the modern sovereign state and the state system based upon it. Yet, what Machiavelli reminds us of is that order is precarious and temporary, and that perhaps the lesson of history in its cyclical form is that a quest for permanent stability is a mistake. In the 21st century, as we see significant challenges to the order that had been constructed

since World War II, and perhaps even signs of its abandonment and collapse, it is hard not to regard Machiavelli as a most prescient if troubling guide to thinking about politics and international affairs.

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Suggestion for finding open access versions of Machiavelli's texts

Online Library of Liberty, maintained by the Liberty Fund
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