

# Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 2018

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David Johnston, Nadia Urbinati, and Camila Vergara, *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017, vi + 423 pp., \$50 (hardcover).

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This is an era of sixteenth-century quincennial. This past year has marked the five-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, or at least the anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*; the date was marked with celebrations in Germany, academic conferences around the world, and even a commemorative stamp, featuring Luther and Philip Melanchthon, by none other than the Vatican Post Office. As this philatelic commemoration shows, the extent to which a sixteenth-century text is interpreted for today can be very far from the historical context of its origin.

The year 2013 marked the quincennial of the completion of Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*, but this text and this anniversary contrast with Luther's. Unlike the *Ninety-Five Theses*, for which we can give the precise date of publication (in a letter of October 31 to the archbishop of Mainz), *The Prince* was not published until five years after Machiavelli's death in 1527, and the precise date and details of its 1532 completion have left few clues for posterity. Luther's theses were very quickly reprinted and caused immediate disputes that led to schism. Controversies inspired by *The Prince* lay largely dormant until the mid-sixteenth century. The *Ninety-Five Theses* are easily related to the evolution of Luther's theology of *sola fides* and what would soon emerge as his biblical hermeneutic of "Law and Gospel." In contrast, even the precise relationship between Machiavelli's *The Prince* and his *Discourses on Livy*, his two chief political works, is enigmatic; each text claims to contain all he knew and had learned. The text ostensibly on princes contained key

teachings on republics; the other text supposedly on republics contained key teachings on princes.

No wonder then that an edited collection of the essays of some of the world's best Machiavelli scholars would show such range of interpretation and arguments. *Machiavelli on Liberty and Conflict* is the outcome of a conference at Columbia University's Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in December 2013, the quincentennial year of *The Prince*. This book exhibits the startling diversity of ideas in the scholarship on the sixteenth-century Florentine. In the first page of the introduction, the editors aptly quote the late great early modern historian Felix Gilbert: "Machiavelli's teachings are so rich that in them each succeeding century can find answers for the political issues which are its main concern, and the myth of Machiavelli can grow and vary without losing contact with the personality which inspired it." This volume attests to the veracity of Gilbert's claim: there is an undeniable richness to the source that demands contraries in its interpretation.

Within the introductory essay, the editors also claim that the book is in the "celebratory" tradition, which, as they outline, began in Italy in the mid-nineteenth century, when nationalist movements had led to state unity. In 1869, the quarter-century of Machiavelli's birth, the focus had been on the famous conclusion to *The Prince*, in which he exhorted the Medicis to seize Italy and free her from the barbarians. Machiavelli's writings appeared particularly relevant to an age with new foundings taking place within old political settings. For the editors, this period marked the rebirth of Machiavelli scholarship. Their introductory essay traces that scholarship from the *Risorgimento* into the twenty-first century. This in itself is a notable feature of the book; there have been few such detailed studies of the history of that scholarship, especially since it involved academic and political movements on both sides of the Atlantic and in multiple European languages over the past century and a half. In the end, the purpose of the opening essay is to demonstrate the contentious reception of *The Prince* through all of these contexts, and thus continued timely political relevance of this seemingly simple book on effective princely rule. The anniversary conference invited presenters to reflect on one of four themes, which in turn became the basis for the book's fourfold sectional division.

The first section, "Between Antiquity and Modernity," focuses upon Machiavelli's place in the history of political thought. Was he the last of the ancients or the initiator of a new and modern conception of politics? To what degree did Machiavelli appropriate or repudiate the classical and Christian

traditions? It is fitting that the first essay offered in this section is by Harvey C. Mansfield, whose contribution gives the usual high level of insight and provocation that political theorists have long come to expect from him. In this essay, Mansfield argues that Machiavelli invents a new standard of necessity based on a consequentialist “effectual truth” that is considered good not in a classical sense, but only in a new sense of the desired political effects. For Mansfield, Machiavelli’s standard of necessity demands a perennial return to political foundations in order to maintain the regime. Next, Giovanni Giorgini presents a different perspective on the moral problem of necessity and the prince with “dirty hands”: instead of a new morality or moral code, Machiavelli’s statesman, according to Giorgini, must act badly under exceptional duty without himself becoming corrupt. The challenge for the statesman is one of education: to know when his hands must get dirty for the sake of the common good and the preservation of the state. In the third essay, Gabriele Pedullà challenges the argument made by Gennaro Sasso—that Machiavelli wrote against opponents who championed the contemporary Venetian aristocracy against ancient Roman republicanism. Instead, Pedullà writes, there was no opposition between proponents of Venice and Rome, and Machiavelli’s defense of the Roman republic in *Discourses* I.6 was the basis for opposition to the Roman model that started with Francesco Guicciardini. Miguel Vatter concludes the opening section with an essay on the contentious interpretation of statesmanship and civil religion. In Vatter’s account, Machiavelli’s republicanism is founded on a combination of “ancient theology” and “prophetology.”

The second section of the book, “*The Prince* and the Politics of Necessity,” focuses on Machiavelli’s “tragic” view of politics, which stressed conflict and consequences rather than ideals. Yet the contributors in this section challenge that prevailing interpretation. Who better than the authoritative Quentin Skinner to begin with his defense of Machiavelli as a thoroughly humanist political thinker? Skinner’s thesis asserts that liberality and faithfulness remain essential to the Machiavellian prince, especially that he may avoid hatred while preserving the state. For Skinner, *The Prince* does not advocate the abandonment of traditional princely virtues, but seeks to redefine what these virtues had been believed to prescribe. Erica Benner follows with a perceptive essay on the oscillation in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* between what she calls Machiavelli’s “two realisms.” On one hand, Machiavelli argues that human beings are untrustworthy and so political orders need unilateral, amoral, and immoral actions; on the other hand, he advocates for the political strength and safety of trust and collaboration. Stephen Holmes’s

essay concentrates on emergency preparedness and risk mitigation in *The Prince*. In Holmes's reading, popular loyalty becomes the best protection for Machiavelli, thus princes ought to be good to the people and exercise self-restraint, because otherwise princely virtue in adversity ultimately leads to undermining the popular foundation of the state. Paul A. Rahe concludes the section with a provocative examination of the often-neglected "Of Ecclesiastical Principalities" chapter of *The Prince*. For Rahe, this chapter speaks to Machiavelli's wider intentions: it shows the power of an army of believers. Princes ought to emulate the church in the control over minds; for Rahe, this is an example of Machiavelli's propensity towards totalitarianism.

The book's third section, "Class Struggle, Financial Power, and Extraordinary Authority in the Republic," contains an insightful essay by Benedetto Fontana that attempts to explain how Machiavelli could present the Gracchi reforms negatively while presenting Roman factional conflict positively. In Fontana's reading of Machiavelli, the Gracchi's faults were their failed methods, not their intentions. Next, Jérémie Barthas argues that in arming the people, Machiavelli sought to establish Florence's financial autonomy from the *grandi*. In turning from mercenary forces to mass conscription, Machiavelli favored public debt financing and weakened the power of oligarchs. Marco Geuna concludes the section with an analysis of Machiavelli's consideration of classical dictatorship. Geuna shows that he held the powers of the dictator to be essential for the preservation of republics in recurring emergency situations.

The last section, "Machiavellian Politics beyond Machiavelli," contains five essays on the legacy of Machiavelli within the republican tradition of political thought. Jean-Fabian Spitz leads off with a critique of Skinner's interpretation of Machiavelli's republicanism. For Spitz, Skinner's Machiavelli is problematic in that it takes freedom as the product of institutions, whereas institutionalization in Machiavelli should be seen as a threat to that freedom. John P. McCormick follows with a deeply textual analysis of the *Florentine Histories* to argue that that work does not signal a new sympathetic turn to the nobility. McCormick sees reinforcement of republican politics in a text that is sometimes thought to represent Machiavelli's "conservative" break from the *Discourses on Livy*. Luca Baccelli's essay criticizes the "realist" and "republican" interpretations in favor of a view that focuses on political innovation that preserves freedom. Baccelli's Machiavelli is much more radical in the history of political thought than either of these common interpretations would allow. Michele Battini returns to the subject of the citizen army,

but here to emphasize the need for social and patriotic unity. A coming together of interests, wherein the soldier sees that his own reasons and needs are sought in fighting for his city's interests, must accompany Machiavelli's mass conscription strategies. Finally, Marie Gaille's essay examines Louis Althusser's interpretation of Machiavelli to show the usefulness of the concept of "conjuncture." Althusser's Machiavelli helps discover a new method of "conjuncture embedded" political thought.

This impressive volume contains essays highly useful to political theorists and historians of political thought. Though generally aimed at an audience of experienced scholars rather than students or neophytes, most essays are nevertheless clearly written and persuasive. Some are so compelling that from one chapter to the next a reader may come to hold fast to contrary things about Machiavelli—that he is both a humanist republican and a totalitarian, for instance. This collection shows that "Old Nick" still has the power, like Cesare Borgia whose bisection of Remirro d'Orco is related in chapter 7 of *The Prince*, to leave us "satisfied and stupefied."