Machiavelli and Contemporary Politics
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Niccolò Machiavelli has acquired a prominent position in the history of political thought. Machiavelli is probably most notorious as a teacher of evil, a political realist advising tyrants and a proud proponent of Machiavellism, a devilish politics that astoundingly bears his name. This image, however, is far from being the only one. Sorting through the history of political thought, Machiavelli suddenly appears ubiquitous and dressed in various disguises. Historical interpretations of Machiavelli’s writings range from a predecessor of totalitarianism to a proponent of subversive republicanism or even radical democracy, from the first political scientist to have discovered the ideal of value-free political analysis, to a liberal, a fascist, or a communist avant-la-lettre to name just a few.

While this diversity of interpretations can be partially explained by the intricacies of Machiavelli’s writings, especially the putative incommensurability between the republican Discourses on Livy and the monarchical The Prince, we believe that the main reason for these various interpretations consists in the fact that each historical period reads Machiavelli to find in his teaching answers to its specific questions and problems. We also believe that the existence of specific historical readings of Machiavelli justifies the goal of this edited volume, which is to examine the significance of Machiavelli’s ideas for our present political situation. In other words, we suggest that how we read Machiavelli today reveals much about us, our political predicament and our concerns.

How do we read Machiavelli today? Is there any theme or interest in Machiavelli’s writings shared by (nearly) all his contemporary interpreters, even though the latter are often in stark disagreement with one another? We suggest that Machiavelli offered
some guidance for different interpretative approaches to his work in the *Discourses on Livy* (1996: 31), when, after listing various kinds of founders (of religion, republics and kingdoms), he added to the list also men of letters writing about politics – that is, himself. This unusual typology establishes a continuity between political and literary activity, or, to put it differently, it recognises that political change also involves a linguistic or ideological change. If there is a continuity between politics and literature, what applies to political action may also apply to political theory.

Furthermore, if, as Machiavelli explained in *The Prince* (2005: 60), there are three modalities of political action (man, fox, or lion), we can attribute these three characteristics to Machiavelli’s literary works and their perception. Thus, there are three possible images of Machiavelli’s political theory: Machiavelli-Man emphasising the importance of the rule of law, Machiavelli-Lion aware that politics is essentially tied to power and the use of force, and, finally, Machiavelli-Fox, which is not only a cunning deceiver but also someone aware of the power of ideas or ideology in politics. Of course, these images of Machiavelli constantly interact with and permeate each other and only rarely, if ever, appear in their pure, uncontaminated form.

The Cambridge School historians and neo-Roman republicans recently revived the first image of Machiavelli as emphasising the human side of political action. These scholars find a lost treasure of Machiavelli’s republicanism in the concept of freedom as non-domination. They also claim that neo-Roman republicanism upholds central values and principles of modern democracy, such as the rule of law, equality before the law, freedom of speech, and free access to offices and positions. Consequently, they also suggest a return to some of Machiavelli’s thoughts as a panacea for the malaises of contemporary liberal democracies (see, e.g., Pettit 1999; Skinner 1998). Nevertheless, this reading of Machiavelli has been criticised for at least two reasons. First, the critics point out that neo-republicans overlook the oligarchic and elitist nature of classical republicanism. And second, they claim that the neo-republican reading of Machiavelli leaves out both the most original and disturbing aspects of his thought.

This brings us to Machiavelli’s Lion image. For centuries, this image associated Machiavelli with corrupt politics based on violence or with the idea of the autonomy of politics from morality
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(see, e.g., Croce 2019). However, it was in the first place Claude Lefort (2012) who realised the connection between power and conflict in Machiavelli’s thought. According to Lefort, the primary purpose of the references to the use of power and force in Machiavelli is to make clear that politics cannot be understood without reference to the foundational conflict that constitutes it. This founding conflict is between the umori of the greats and the people. While the greats desire to dominate and oppress, the people seek to avoid dominance and oppression. Appreciation of this conflict and the fact that Machiavelli takes the side of the people has opened the way for a whole range of interpretations that find in Machiavelli inspiration for theories of popular or populist republicanism or plebeianism. These theoretical approaches point to Machiavelli as a source of inspiration in curbing the oligarchy’s power via the re-established institutional design of ancient and early modern republics and via non-deliberative forms of citizenship that allow people ‘not to be good’ towards the elites (see, e.g., Green 2016; Hamilton 2014; McCormick 2011).

The last – that is the Fox – image was historically used to accuse Machiavelli of hypocrisy because of his claim that the princes do not need to have virtues, for it is enough to pretend to have them. However, the foxiness in Machiavelli’s writings has recently been interpreted in connection with Machiavelli’s concept of the civil prince. The civil prince does not gain power through violence but through ‘fortunate astuteness’ and ‘the favour of his fellow citizens’ (2005: 34). Antonio Gramsci used the concept of the civil prince in his theory of hegemony and reinterpreted the civil prince as the modern prince in the form of a collective body of political party, which, like the civil prince, shapes hegemony not only through violence but, above all, through ideological work and the formation of coalitions (1971: 123–205). Ernesto Laclau (2005) recently radicalised these Gramscian insights by overcoming the vestiges of economic determinism in Gramsci’s thought. For Laclau, the paradigmatic example of civil prince is not a political party but a populist leader or, better still, the name of a leader around which a new collective identity of the people precipitates. In this sense, the problem of the civil prince has left the milieu of class struggle and Machiavelli’s writings have been transformed into textbooks of populist politics.
While this brief overview cannot be exhaustive, it does show that contemporary discussions of Machiavelli reciprocate several specific themes revolving around the twin intertwined topics of the people and the conflictual nature of politics. These themes are also central, in various forms, to all the articles in this volume.

The first three articles examine the nature of the people and its role in the democratic struggle in terms of debates about the possibility of republicanism’s radicalisation, while being critical of a particular populist interpretation of Machiavelli that emphasises the moral and political superiority of the people in comparison to oligarchic elites (see, e.g., McCormick 2011). The ‘Ten Theses on Machiavelli’ by Jeffrey Edward Green (2016) pursue an avowedly unhistorical reading of Machiavelli, aiming to unpack the implication of Machiavelli’s advice to princes ‘to learn how not to be good’ for contemporary plebeian democrats. According to Green, they should admit the morally ambiguous nature of plebeian institutions and avoid framing their demands in terms of justice. Likewise, they should realistically acknowledge that, while contemporary liberal democracies can be improved by limiting the power of the elites, they can never become perfect because the division between the few and the many is permanent and unavoidable.

Max Morris in his article ‘The Wisdom of the People and the Elite: Leo Strauss and John McCormick on Machiavelli’ confronts John McCormick’s and Leo Strauss’s interpretations of Machiavelli’s thought, arguing that Strauss’s interpretation both supports and complicates McCormick’s unambiguous reading of Machiavelli as an anti-elitist democrat. On the one hand, Strauss’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s understanding of human nature provides an anthropological basis for Machiavelli’s belief in the superiority of moral and political wisdom of the people over that of the elites and princes alike. On the other hand, Strauss’s reading implies that McCormick’s understanding of Machiavelli’s democratic and anti-elitist leaning is exaggerated both because Machiavelli, according to Strauss, provides political advice not only to the people but also to the princes and, more importantly, because his work contains an esoteric teaching addressed to potential philosophers – that is, to the members of an intellectual as opposed to a political elite.

Christopher Holman in his paper ‘Machiavelli, Epicureanism, and the Ethics Of Democracy’ turns our attention to the ethical and
theoretical foundations of Machiavelli’s democratic republicanism, which, as he claims, is ultimately grounded in the affirmation of a fundamental human difference. While his arguments focus mainly on Machiavelli’s understanding of human psychology and his affirmation of the radically contingent and indeterminate nature of history and all ‘human things’, Holman also outlines some political implications of such radically pluralistic and anti-essentialist reading of Machiavelli. In particular, he rejects the prevalent interpretation of Machiavelli’s understanding of the different humours of the great and the people as natural psychological tendencies. On the contrary, the ‘humours are expressions of historically constituted social groups’. Holman also radicalises the democratically republican reading of Machiavelli, when he reads his endorsement of plebeian institutions not only as a way of providing the people with the means of contesting or resisting the power of the greats, but also as a way of gradually increasing the scope of political participation of all citizens.

In his article ‘Reading Machiavelli and La Boëtie with Lefort’, Emmanuel Charreau examines the relationship between the people and the conflictual nature of politics from a different perspective. He reconstructs Claude Lefort’s interpretation of Machiavelli and La Boëtie and argues that their theories’ complementarity is the key to Lefort’s own conception of democracy. Charreau suggests that such a reading leads to a better understanding of Lefort’s conception of democracy as a ‘dissolution of the markers of uncertainty’ but also to the conclusion that Lefort, inspired simultaneously by Machiavelli and La Boëtie, was able to grasp, in addition to totalitarianism, the danger posed to democracy by the ‘invisible ideology’ of neoliberalism.

While the above-mentioned articles discuss Machiavellian themes with an eye to possible popular participation, the last article ‘On the Relevance of Niccolò Machiavelli’s Understanding of Time for Contemporary Politics’, written by Benjamin Schmid, scrutinises the very conditions for political action in Machiavelli’s thought. Schmid reflects mainly upon Machiavelli’s specific understanding of time and its relevance for both Machiavelli’s political theory and for contemporary politics. He argues that Machiavelli, as an empathically secular thinker, eschews the linear conception of time divided between the past, present, and future. Nonetheless, his
conception of time cannot be characterised as cyclical. Instead, it can be best described as ‘punctual’. Indeed, Machiavelli’s thought appears to be singularly preoccupied with the present moment as the only tangible or given reality in the flow of time. This understanding of time influences his political thought with its emphasis on decisiveness instead of hesitation or deliberation. At the same time, it makes his thought especially relevant for today’s politics, which faces the impacts of social acceleration. Schmid concludes that, for the same reasons, Machiavelli should be regarded as a distorted reflection of the challenges of contemporary politics rather than a source of inspiration for dealing with them.

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**References**