

Critical Dialogue

Machiavelli's Florentine Republic. By Michelle T. Clarke. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 202p. \$99.99 cloth.
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— Yves Winter, *McGill University*

In 1525, Niccolò Machiavelli presented the eight books of his *Florentine Histories* to Pope Clement VIII (Giulio de' Medici), on whose insistence he had been commissioned to write a history of Florence five years earlier. Though admired by the likes of Hume, Tocqueville, and Marx, the *Florentine Histories* has been largely sidelined in the English-language scholarship on Machiavelli's political thought. Michelle Clarke's new book is part of a series of recent books that reverses this trend. Among the many refreshing effects of this new wave are a shift away from the stale debates about the tension between *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* and a more serious focus on Machiavelli as a Florentine (rather than neo-Roman) political thinker.

One of the interpretive difficulties posed by the *Florentine Histories* is its despondent narrative of the lost opportunities of this "great and wretched city" (bk. 2, ch. 25). Many readers regard the work's disenchanting timbre and its overt veneration of the Medici as evidence for Machiavelli's disillusionment with broad-based republican arrangements. By contrast, Clarke reads the *Histories*—appropriately, in my view—against its pro-Medicean grain and positions it in direct continuity with the more avowedly republican *Discourses on Livy*. She argues persuasively that once readers account for the "literary strategies" that allow Machiavelli to criticize the Medici without appearing to do so (p. 18), the *Histories* reveals itself to deliver a "true education in republican citizenship" (p. 11).

For Clarke, the *Florentine Histories* examines how the Medici were able to subvert republican institutions to establish themselves as princes in Florence while appearing as principal benefactors of the republic. Unlike previous magnates who were widely regarded as self-serving tyrants, the Medici managed to construct a philanthropic public profile, such that the very "accusation that they were tyrants [became] literally *unintelligible*" (p. 127). This profile was a result of their shrewd use of conventional virtues, such as liberality, mercy, and fidelity, to build a form of clientelist social power that was widely regarded as legitimate.

From this angle, Clarke interprets the *Histories* as a subtle exposition of how Florence's first family harnessed virtues to build a nearly unassailable position of preeminence. Machiavelli, she writes, seeks to "educate" republicans about the peril posed by wealthy elites who have figured out how to translate virtue into tyrannical power (p. 94). Connecting the Medici language of virtue and friendship to its Roman sources, she opens up new perspectives on the well-tilled soil of Machiavelli's critique of virtue and puts forward a provocative reassessment of Machiavelli as a critic of friendship and civic trust.

As Clarke perceptively notes, humanism played a significant ideological role in normalizing elite power (p. 12). It is not by coincidence that the Medici surrounded themselves with humanists and became patrons of arts and letters. Humanist ideas "were deliberately fashioned . . . as ideological armaments for legitimating [the Medici] regime as a species of republican government" (p. 29). By comparing Machiavelli's historical narrative to that of his humanist predecessors, especially Leonardo Bruni, Clarke shows how it offers a critique of the humanist infatuation with oligarchy.

A case in point are the divergent portrayals of how Florence became a republic. In the thirteenth century, the Florentine *popolo* broke the dominance of the feudal nobility and established a republican regime. Yet the story is told very differently by Machiavelli and his humanist predecessors. Whereas Bruni represents the city's liberty as *political independence* that Florentines received as a gift from the emperor, Machiavelli conceptualizes liberty as *freedom from oppression* that the *popolo* obtained through *collective struggle* against the elites (p. 31). Similarly, Bruni depicts the guild-government as a Guelf bulwark against Ghibelline influence, while Machiavelli portrays it as a class-based institution set up to defend guildsmen against elite violence (pp. 32–33). In short, whereas Bruni regards the oligarchic trend in Florentine republicanism as "a sign of progress, maturation, and self-fulfillment . . . for Machiavelli, it is a symptom of failure and defeat" (p. 47).

Clarke channels this antihumanist reading of Machiavelli into a substantive and methodological critique of Quentin Skinner, whom she accuses of rehearsing the exact humanist narrative about the emergence of Florentine liberty that Machiavelli denounces (p. 54). In the

final chapter, she develops this argument into a critique of Skinnerian contextualism.

I find Clarke's reading of the *Florentine Histories* as a critique of Medici power and of humanist complicity compelling, and am partly convinced by her critique of Skinner. Yet beginning in Chapter 3, she weaves a further thread into her argument that I consider much less plausible. Against the overworked Straussian thesis, according to which Machiavelli blames Christianity for the evils of the modern world, Clarke proposes a new culprit: the Roman Empire. For Clarke's Machiavelli, imperial Rome is the source of many of the political woes that weighed on Renaissance Florence (p. 65). This idiosyncratic claim draws on Machiavelli's scathing portrayal of the Roman Empire in the *Discourses* and on his theory of the continuing importance of a city's founding moments. Because Florence was founded by imperial Rome, it was endowed with the empire's corrupt political culture, which continues to hobble it, fifteen hundred years later (p. 86).

In an odd twist, Clarke even renders the Roman Empire the source of "modernity," by which she means the moment when the relation between nature and history is reorganized, such that politics ceases to be part of the natural cosmos and nature becomes a pliable object of human action. Clarke's Machiavelli represents Roman imperial power in such a way that not even nature escapes from it: "According to this story, modernity is the greatest and most lasting product of Roman virtue. In advancing its own imperial ambitions, Rome transformed the West, and especially Italy, into a region incapable of anything but servitude and slavery, and the world largely continues to be what Rome made it even today" (p. 90).

Interpretively, the claim that Machiavelli traces the political conditions of modern Italy back to imperial Rome ignores the key role he ascribes to the Germanic tribes in remaking Italy in Late Antiquity. In the first book of the *Florentine Histories*, he observes that the Franks, the Burgundians, the Vandals, and the Visigoths fashioned new political institutions and political cultures, that they changed "government and princes . . . the laws, the customs, the mode of life, the religion, the language, the dress" and substituted names like "Piero, Giovanni, and Matteo" for the "Caesars and Pompeys" (bk. 1, ch. 5). These transformations, Machiavelli writes, led to the ruin of some polities and the birth of others. It is difficult to see how the thesis that the Germanic tribes forged a wholly new set of norms, customs, and institutions can be squared with the claim that the political culture of Renaissance Italy remains shackled by the legacies of imperial Rome that date from a millennium and a half earlier.

Equally dubious, in my view, is the notion of modernity that underpins this line of argument. The

claim that modernity is a Roman legacy is predicated on a metaphysical and dehistoricized conception of modernity. When modernity is understood as human *techne* unfettered from nature, or as the moment when human freedom registers itself as a radically unconditioned creative agency (p. 91 n. 84), then it is abstracted from concrete historical forces and the forms of social, economic, and political power with which it is usually associated. This stylized view of modernity is a staple of Heideggerian and Straussian accounts of intellectual history deeply invested in idealist metahistorical narratives that marginalize social conflict. Yet it is oddly out of sync with Clarke's insistence on reckoning with the ideological and political dimensions of ideas.

One of the oddities of the book is that the republic that governed Florence between 1494 and 1512 is not mentioned once throughout the text. For a book entitled *Machiavelli's Florentine Republic*, this is perplexing. After all, this was Soderini's republic, the republic which Machiavelli served as secretary to the Second Chancery from 1498 to 1512, the republic which entrusted him with its diplomatic missions to France, to Cesare Borgia, to Rome, and to Emperor Maximilian; it was the regime that marked his life and thought most distinctly. Moreover, this was the most democratic and inclusive regime that had governed Florence since the Ciompi revolt of 1378, extending the franchise to approximately 3,000 citizens who were called upon to participate in the deliberations of the Great Council. Why then, does Clarke omit any mention of this republic? And why does she insist that "[a]ccording to Machiavelli, Florence's republican regime had amounted to little more than a fantasy, as imaginary as anything found in the books of Plato" (p. 9), when in fact, Machiavelli was a major participant and senior official in this republic?

This may just be an oversight, or it may indicate a deeper conceptual and political disagreement between Clarke and me about the nature of republicanism. At one point, Clarke characterizes Machiavelli's republicanism as "a sense of oneself as free, a belief in the necessity and rewards of political work, a feeling of pride and dignity in political struggle, and a contempt for the sometimes seductive strategies of oppression" (p. 12). Elsewhere, she writes that "for Machiavelli, republican politics is concerned above all with limiting power" (p. 134). There is no mention of equality (political and economic), of participation, or of shared power, which suggests that despite claims to the contrary, the version of republicanism Clarke attributes to Machiavelli is rather minimalist, and perhaps no more equipped to withstand the oligarchic onslaught than the humanist variety so eloquently chastised in these pages.

In spite of these shortcomings, Clarke's book offers an important interpretation of the *Florentine Histories* as

a critique of Medici power and of the humanist complicity in legitimating oligarchic republicanism.

**Response to Yves Winter's review of Machiavelli's
*Florentine Republic***

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— Michelle T. Clarke

Thank you to Yves Winter for his very thoughtful and fair evaluation of my book. As Winter says, *Machiavelli's Florentine Republic* is a book about Machiavelli's effort to take the measure of Florentine republicanism in the *Florentine Histories*. Winter is persuaded by the foundational argument of the book, which is that Machiavelli wrote the *Histories* to provide his readers with a corrected account of what Florentine republicanism actually *was*—a more faithful rendering of its defining principles and achievements, intended to supplant the faulty and tendentious storytelling of humanist historiographers like Leonardo Bruni. Moreover, Winter is convinced that with this account in hand, Machiavelli develops a subtle but uncompromising analysis of Medici power, dissipating the pseudo-republican fog that had once surrounded figures like Cosimo Medici and shielded their tyrannical designs against intelligible republican critique.

Winter is skeptical, however, of my further claim that Machiavelli identifies the Roman Empire as being Florence's deepest and most long-standing source of civic disability, pointing out that Machiavelli describes the West as having been utterly transformed by the waves of Germanic tribes that eventually overran it. Yet a careful review of the relevant passage demonstrates that Machiavelli believes certain facets of antiquity became "mixed" through contact with Eastern peoples (e.g., the Latin language).

Moreover, textual evidence from *Discourses* 1.49 suggests that Machiavelli sees Florentine political orders as being of this "mixed" variety: "As one sees in what happened to the city of Florence: having had its beginning subordinate to the Roman Empire, and having always lived under the government of another, it remained abject for a time, without thinking for itself. Then when the opportunity came for taking a breath, it began to make its own orders, which could not have been good, since they were mixed with the ancient that were bad. So it was gone on managing itself, for the two hundred years of true memory that it has without ever having had a state for which it could truly be called a republic." This passage, which I quote in full on page 64, forms the centerpiece of my argument about Machiavelli's ambivalence concerning his city's Roman inheritance, which finds additional reinforcement in D 2.2, P 26, and FH 5.1.

Winter also expresses dissatisfaction with the concept of modernity developed in this chapter. I confess that I do

not have any special attachment to Machiavelli's idea that modernity is marked by the loosening of nature's grasp on humanity; perhaps Winter is right that it is a flawed one. My claim is simply that Machiavelli conceives of modernity in this way, as shown by the evidence marshaled in Chapter 3. As for the possibility that it marginalizes social conflict, I discuss how Machiavelli traces this concept of modernity to the conflict between Rome's insatiable desire to dominate and its neighbors' implacable resistance to subjugation, as well as how Machiavelli utilizes this concept of modernity to explain the barrenness of social conflict in his own time. For these reasons, I would not describe the place accorded to social conflict in my interpretation of Machiavelli as marginal.

Finally, Winter finds it odd that I downplay Florence's brief return to republican political forms between 1494 and 1512. In part, this reflects my decision to focus on Machiavelli's portrayal of Florentine republicanism in the *Florentine Histories*, which ends with Lorenzo Medici's death in 1492. But it also conforms to Machiavelli's own refusal to make any hard distinctions between early Florentine republicanism and the so-called republican regimes of 1494–1512. As the earlier quote from D 1.49 attests, and as I stress throughout the book (pp. 9, 52, 64, 89–91, 93), Machiavelli sees in "the two hundred years of true memory that [Florence] has" the same hard fact: that it has never "had a state for which it could truly be called a republic."

Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence. By Yves Winter. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 238p. \$99.99 cloth, \$29.99 paper.

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— Michelle T. Clarke, *Dartmouth College*

The liberal democratic state has a problem with violence, according to Yves Winter. Even as it rejects violence out of hand as an unappealing and politically unproductive way of negotiating conflict, it relies nevertheless on the "capacity and periodic deployment of overwhelming forms of repressive violence" (p. 1). Moreover, this contradiction between what liberal democracies say and what they do has been absorbed into contemporary political theory, which has vacillated uneasily between normative theorizing about violence, generally in support of state violence, and indulging its own fantasies about the triviality and eradicability of violence. The result is a literature that is politically and theoretically warped: politically, in its complicity with the ongoing exploitation and subjugation of the poor; theoretically, in its blindness to the possibility that violence is an appropriate, educative, and even pleasurable response by the poor to their oppression.

In this provocative and immensely rewarding new book, Winter proposes to repair these defects through

a close study of Niccolò Machiavelli. Violence is a recurrent theme in the existing scholarship on Machiavelli, and in this regard *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* is treading on familiar ground. But instead of focusing narrowly on a single permutation of the theme—empire, civil conflict, the citizen-soldier, or executions—Winter aims to produce the first systematic treatment of political violence across Machiavelli's corpus (p. 9). For Winter, this means two things: first, identifying the basic conceptual categories into which Machiavelli's innumerable references to violence in the *Prince*, *Discourses*, and *Florentine Histories* can be sorted and analyzed; and second, using these groupings to refine our understanding of the relevant concepts. The author's proposed "taxonomy of violent modes" (p. 31) is tripartite—spectacle, force, and cruelty—with each of these types explored separately in the first three chapters. The next three address "formations [of violence] that exemplify these modes" (p. 31), namely, beginnings, institutions, and tumults.

The title of the book derives from Machiavelli's frequent use of the term *ordini*, which Winter leverages to talk about the dual character of violence, as something that is both "constitutive" of political order and itself "organized, sequenced, and coordinated" (pp. 1–2). These are the primary dimensions along which Winter analyzes the six aforementioned "modes" and "formations" of violence. Although keen to stress that violence can take many shapes and that "attempts to theorize violence by subsuming its forms under a single conceptual umbrella are likely to disappoint" (p. 2), Winter finds Machiavelli's treatment of violence to be unified by several key characteristics: Whatever its discrete mode or formation, violence is always theorized by Machiavelli in an embodied, materialist, conflictual, historicist, strategic, and "demoralize[d]" way (p. 2).

While the book opens with an extended discussion of four ways in which contemporary political theory has "depoliticized" violence (pp. 3–7), it finds considerable intellectual nourishment in the writings of political theorists like Étienne Balibar, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Bonnie Honig, Jacques Derrida, Jeffrey Green, and Frantz Fanon. For this reason, it is perhaps fairer to say that Winter is dissatisfied with the way that violence has been theorized within a particular *style* of philosophy—specifically the analytic tradition, epitomized in the book's conclusion by Robert Nozick. It is here especially that Winter sees violence being evaporated from discussions of power and conceptual substitutions (i.e., "coercion") being made that not only distort our understanding of how violence operates, but also distract us from a range of important questions that might otherwise be asked about it.

Winter is surely onto something here. But it would be useful to hear more about why these problems are concentrated on the analytic side of things, given the

book's own framing as an exercise in conceptual analysis. Is the "mystification" (p. 193) afoot in the analytic tradition the product of unforced errors, and so correctable from within the very same theoretical apparatus? Or is mystification the inevitable precipitate of attempting to comprehend violence analytically, given the underlying assumptions of that enterprise? At times the book leans in the first direction, suggesting through its many references to concepts, typologies, taxonomies, systematicity, and analysis that it intends to make common cause with analytic philosophy. And yet its critiques of Nozick and others cluster tightly around the idea that violence cannot be fully understood from within dominant paradigms of logic and rationality.

The sense that Winter is using Machiavelli to develop an encompassing critique of analytic philosophy is further strengthened by the fact that, as it turns out, there is nothing particularly methodical about his approach to the Florentine: The book does not offer a comprehensive survey of Machiavelli's references to violence, for example, or justify organizing his thinking about violence into the above six categories instead of others. Instead, it undertakes the more creative, and arguably more challenging, task of using Machiavelli to effect the philosophical recovery of what analytic treatments of violence have trouble processing: bodily experience, irreducible plurality, logical indeterminacy, and poetic meaning.

Winter's sensitivity to the layered and often uncertain meanings attached to violence in Machiavelli's work breathes life back into its characters and events. For all the rigidity suggested by talk about the "mechanisms" and "protocols" that discipline violence, the author uncovers in familiar episodes like Cesare Borgia's execution of Remirro a play between actor and audience that cannot be entirely routinized, instrumentalized, or mastered. Highlighting the theatricality of the scene, he draws out the way in which Machiavelli—following Borgia himself—uses ambiguity to convert the spectacle into a "detective story" (p. 32) in which readers must "piece together the rationale behind Remirro's execution" (p. 46). In this way, Winter contends, Machiavelli turns Remirro's execution into a "pedagogical moment" similar to others from the era, whereby Florentines were taught "how to read and interpret public practices of violence" and thus helped "to become better readers of the political world" more generally (p. 51).

This seems right to me, but I was left wondering about the forms of knowledge and judgment that Machiavelli hoped these stories would teach. For Winter, the primary interpretive questions raised by Borgia's performance concern its uncertain status as an act of revenge, sacrifice, and/or justice (pp. 47–50, 53–57). But why would Machiavelli think it essential that people have the ability to make *these* determinations—as opposed to others, like whether the action (or actor) in question promotes

freedom or oppression? Being able to read events accurately as either freeing or oppressing would seem on its face to be critical to popular politics as Machiavelli understands it, and a skill that Borgia put to the test in his interactions with the Romagnols. Moreover, Winter's own willingness to read Borgia as an authentic "champion of the people" (p. 45) despite the enormous wealth and family privilege that underwrote his power, and the indisputably princely ambitions that his actions were meant to serve (both of which Machiavelli stresses throughout Chapter 7), only underscores how tricky these distinctions can be. And yet Winter only briefly connects Machiavelli's popular pedagogy with liberty, even as he defines "political literacy" with being able to judge political situations accurately and respond to them appropriately (pp. 25–26, 197). As Machiavelli himself stresses in *Discourses* 1.53, competency in the art of distinguishing between true and false species of the good is no easy thing; all too often, superficial gains are enough to reconcile the people with their own disempowerment. So how does Machiavelli use scenes like Remirro's execution to develop these skills, whereby even "satisfying" forms of violence by figures like Borgia can be recognized as inaugurating new and more stable forms of domination?

The violence associated with Cesare Borgia casts a long shadow in *Orders*, and Winter's willingness to describe him as advancing a kind of popular politics anticipates what is possibly his most controversial argument: that Machiavelli believes republican liberty to be compatible with, and even invigorated by, violent forms of class conflict. Traditionally, Machiavelli's defense of tumult has been regarded as highly qualified—not an endorsement of conflict in all its forms, but only conflict akin to the explosive but relatively bloodless confrontations between patricians and plebeians in the early Roman Republic (see especially D 1.4). And yet Winter discerns in Machiavelli an approving view of violence when it is used by the people to deprive *grandi* of excessive wealth and privilege. What counts as "too much" inequality is left somewhat murky, and I was puzzled by some of the evidence offered in support of this interpretation.

For example, Winter argues that Machiavelli "clarifies the limits of virtuous and nonviolent conflicts" (p. 149) in *Discourses* 1.37 by implicitly critiquing Tiberius Gracchus for not being "prepared for violent altercations" or "calling on armed support" during his ill-fated push for a new Agrarian Law in 133 BCE. But surely Machiavelli knew that Tiberius did both (Appian, *B Civ.* 1.12, 1.15; Plutarch, *Ti. Gracch.* 16, 19). Likewise, Winter's analysis of the Ciompi Rebellion, intended to show that Machiavelli supports a kind of "plebeian politics" whereby freedom is claimed by politically and economically marginalized classes through the violent "overthrow of their oppressors" (p. 191), sidelines Machiavelli's extraordinary praise for Michele de Lando, the "sagacious and prudent" popular

leader who finally checked the "arrogance" of the plebs (who, Machiavelli says, attached themselves to the rebellion only after it was first set in motion by upper guildsmen frustrated with elite partisan wrangling over laws concerning eligibility for public office). If Michele had not forced the plebs to abandon their political demands and put an end to their violent provocations, Machiavelli states, "the republic would have lost its freedom altogether and fallen under a greater tyranny than that of the duke of Athens" (FH 3.17).

As with any truly original work, *Orders of Violence* accomplishes far more than a single review can hope to capture. For me, the most exciting dimension of *Orders* is the challenge it issues to those of us who have yet to fully reckon with Machiavelli's egalitarianism. If freedom requires some kind of equality, as Machiavelli avers (D 1.17, 1.37, 1.55), does it follow that all forms of equality-promoting violence are good for liberty? Winter reads him as being closer to a "yes" than I do, but I do not feel as easy in my "no" as I did before reading this book.

Response to Michelle T. Clarke's review of *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence*

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— Yves Winter

I thank Michelle Clarke for her thoughtful review, which offers both generous praise and important criticism. I will leave aside our interpretive disagreements about historical efforts to advance equality (by the Gracchi in second-century BC Rome and the Ciompi in fourteenth-century Florence) and focus instead on two questions raised by the review: 1) Are the flaws in contemporary theories of violence particular to analytic political philosophy? 2) Does the populist interpretation of Machiavelli as endorsing not just bloodless but also violent forms of class conflict unduly privilege equality over liberty?

Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence challenges the depoliticization prevalent in many contemporary theoretical approaches to violence. But Clarke suggests that my critique has a more specific focus, namely, analytic political philosophy and that I am "using Machiavelli to develop an encompassing critique of analytic philosophy." This response took me by surprise, and I would like to take the opportunity to clarify my argument.

Clarke correctly notes that I defend a historical and political approach to violence that is at odds with the abstract moral theorizing prevalent in analytical political philosophy; yet my critique is not restricted to the analytic tradition. Robert Nozick's theory of coercion, which I criticize in the Conclusion, is a particularly glaring example of a tendency to depoliticization that goes far beyond analytic philosophy. Throughout the book, I argue—drawing on Machiavelli—that political violence

does not have a dyadic but a triadic structure. Most political violence produces effects not because it physically compels another agent but by appealing to a third party: an audience. This is Machiavelli's principal insight about the structure of violence, and that insight has a number of implications: most importantly, that violent acts are not self-evident but require interpretation. The thesis that violence is a form of communication contests two tacit premises shared by theories of violence from divergent philosophical traditions (including, for example, social contract and natural law theories, Weberian sociology, and political realism): namely, that violence is a primordial form of social action (a residual instrument of nature), and that when deployed politically it takes the form of a duel between two independent wills.

Clarke's second question concerns the object of Machiavelli's political pedagogy. If he seeks to teach readers how to read violence, what is the purpose of these lessons? Clarke contends that my version of Machiavelli as a champion of the plebs overstates the importance of equality and thereby neglects liberty.

I agree that freedom is his paramount political value, but Clarke and I diverge 1) in our understanding of the relation between freedom and equality and 2) in our assessment as to whether oligarchy or tyranny poses the greater danger to freedom.

On my reading, equality is not only freedom's necessary condition but also its form. For Machiavelli, freedom involves a constant struggle for political and economic equality. Inequality by contrast, is synonymous with corruption. Hence, liberty and equality are not opposed and there is no *prima facie* trade-off between the two.

As for the principal threat to freedom, Machiavelli's answer is unambiguous: the *grandi*. While the danger of tyranny is certainly also on his radar, he regards inequality rather than tumultuous and contested politics as the breeding ground for both types of unfreedom. Whether a particular instance or formation of political violence advances or thwarts freedom and equality is a question that can only be answered by investigating the *qualità de tempi*, that is to say, the particular relations of forces at work in a given historical situation.