

## The Many and the Few: On Machiavelli's “Democratic Moment”

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**Abstract:** Through an extended critical engagement with John P. McCormick's *Machiavellian Democracy*, this paper aims to shed light on Machiavelli's account of relations among the many and the few in the *Discourses on Livy*. While we agree with McCormick that Machiavelli should not be too quickly subsumed within the republican tradition, as interpreted by the “Cambridge School,” we reject the idea that Machiavelli's central thrust is prodemocratic. By focusing on the structure and logic of Machiavelli's arguments, we show that Machiavelli was critical of the capacities of ordinary citizens to govern themselves. As a result, Machiavelli emphasized and endorsed continuous elite intervention in the political life of the mixed regime, even as he paid due attention to the people's participation in a political regime with appropriate laws and institutions. Machiavelli's political theory, as embodied in the *Discourses on Livy*, challenges the transparency and equality that contemporary egalitarians and democrats embrace.

In his recent book *Machiavellian Democracy*, John P. McCormick argues that Machiavelli's political thought has “fundamentally populist” foundations, that Machiavelli should be interpreted as a democrat and not as a “republican.”<sup>1</sup> McCormick's primary foil is the “Cambridge School” interpretation of Machiavelli, which draws upon Machiavelli's reflections on liberty, civic

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The authors would like to thank the journal's anonymous referees and especially the editor for helpful corrections and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup>John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), viii. McCormick's book represents the culmination of his long-standing effort to represent Machiavelli as a democrat. It is based on earlier articles: John P. McCormick, “Machiavellian Democracy: Controlling Elites with Ferocious Populism,” *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 2 (2001): 297–314; John P. McCormick, “Machiavelli against Republicanism: On the Cambridge School's ‘Guicciardinian Moments,’” *Political Theory* 31, no. 5 (2003): 615–43; and John P.

life, and virtue in order to place his works within the tradition of Roman citizenship theory and republicanism.<sup>2</sup> McCormick's "Machiavellian Democracy," as he says, "is characterized by class-specific, popularly empowering, and elite-constraining institutions that accomplish two tasks: they raise the class consciousness of common citizens and formally enable them to patrol more exalted citizens with a vigor that electoral politics in and of itself does not provide."<sup>3</sup> In order to elaborate on this point, McCormick writes that "Machiavelli clearly lauds institutional arrangements in which the people directly participate in rule, that is, where the people formally assembled deliberate over and decide laws themselves; but he also endorses indirect forms of rule, such as electoral procedures through which the people choose the chief magistrates who govern them for intermittent periods of time."<sup>4</sup> In McCormick's view, the Cambridge School historians mischaracterize the republican tradition as egalitarian, and they locate Machiavelli's political theory within that republican tradition—misguidedly, in that they ignore Machiavelli's criticisms of elite social and political domination and his persistent efforts to encourage popular participation and agency. For McCormick, Machiavelli's writings, particularly the *Discourses on Livy*, are "closer to a more egalitarian democratic than to a traditional republican theory."<sup>5</sup> McCormick presents a picture of Machiavelli in which the Florentine thinker deeply "resents, despises, and distrusts" elites.<sup>6</sup>

McCormick's new reading of Machiavelli exemplifies larger trends within the discipline. For several decades now, historians of political thought have tended to reinterpret canonical figures as exponents of democracy. This interpretative strategy runs contrary, of course, to the traditional view that virtually all canonical figures express deep reservations about, if not thoroughgoing contempt for, democratic self-government. S. Sara Monoson and Peter Euben, for example, emphasize the democratic elements of Platonic political thought,<sup>7</sup> while Jill Frank has found democratic resources

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McCormick, "Machiavelli's Political Trials and the 'Free Way of Life,'" *Political Theory* 35, no. 4 (2007): 385–411.

<sup>2</sup>J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) emphasized the Aristotelian roots of the republican tradition; the Roman or Ciceronian origins of that tradition have been stressed by Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup>McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 16.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>McCormick, "Machiavelli against Republicanism," 617.

<sup>6</sup>McCormick, "Machiavellian Democracy," 298.

<sup>7</sup>S. Sara Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); J. P. Euben, "Reading Democracy: Socratic Dialogues and the Political Education of Democratic Citizens,"

within Aristotle's *Politics*.<sup>8</sup> Richard Flathman argues that Hobbes is a liberal democrat, or even a libertarian.<sup>9</sup> With the publication of McCormick's book, this trend has by now gathered surprising momentum, as Machiavelli too has his own democratic moment.<sup>10</sup>

We have misgivings about the potential for anachronism in many of these revisionist accounts. Instead of helping us confront the untimely challenges of past thinkers, such accounts often reinforce our prevailing sensibilities or dominant prejudices. Each case must of course be investigated on its own merits. In general, however, we can educate ourselves most deeply by reconsidering these thinkers in all of their complexity, ambiguity, and disturbing lack of familiarity. We focus here on McCormick's book, because McCormick has offered a spirited, imaginative, and well-informed explanation of Machiavelli's populist tendencies—tendencies that other scholars have largely ignored or failed adequately to appreciate. We agree, in fact, with McCormick's characterization of the antidemocratic elements of both ancient and modern republican traditions, and thus with his objections to the affirmation of republican theory as a normatively attractive model for us today. We also agree that the neorepublican interpretations of Machiavelli offer a radically foreshortened and incomplete account of the *Discourses on Livy*, not to mention the relationship between that work and *The Prince*. Yet our concern is that McCormick significantly overstates the egalitarian, democratic thrust of the *Discourses*. Equally, McCormick also systematically underestimates Machiavelli's own belief that Rome's flourishing depended on continual, and often extraordinary, elite intervention.

In order to evaluate Machiavelli's political vision, McCormick works with a wide-ranging and robustly populist conception of democracy—one that

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in *Dēmokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 327–59.

<sup>8</sup>Jill Frank, *A Democracy of Distinction: Aristotle and the Work of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup>Richard Flathman, *Thomas Hobbes: Skepticism, Individuality, and Chastened Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

<sup>10</sup>See also Miguel E. Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000). Vatter's reading of Machiavelli, like McCormick's, radically prioritizes the role of the people in the *Discourses*. However, whereas McCormick emphasizes the specific institutions that empower the people to engage in civic affairs, Vatter stresses the negative, contestatory role of the people against all institutionalized forms of rule. According to Vatter, the republic is for Machiavelli neither political form nor political substance. Rather, it represents a historical *event* grounded in the people's demand for an-arche or "no-rule" (127). Vatter insists that for Machiavelli "a free political life happens only because of the resistance of the people, as bearers of the desire for freedom, to the heteronomous imposition of the law and order of the state" (109).

emphasizes political institutions, popular culture, and a positive appraisal of the citizens' capacity for self-determination. McCormick finds evidence for Machiavellian democracy, in this sense, in the Florentine's discussion of public trials (1.7–8), in his advocacy of elite accountability (1.5, 1.7, 1.37), in his narratives of tribunician activity (1.3, 1.39, 1.50, 3.8, 3.11), and in his normatively positive assessment of the citizens' deliberations and judgments (1.18, 1.47, 1.58, 3.34).<sup>11</sup> We agree that Machiavelli draws attention to Rome's public courts, its practices of elite accountability, and the office of tribune.<sup>12</sup> But we will have to investigate whether Machiavelli's presentation of these features of Roman political life leads straightforwardly to the democratic interpretation that McCormick proposes.<sup>13</sup> For, unlike McCormick, we find that Machiavelli's account of these popular institutions is transformed by his emphasis on civil religion and the particular uses to which these institutions were put in Roman political life.

In particular, we discern in Machiavelli's *Discourses* several reasons to doubt the self-sufficiency of any apparently democratic institutions or

<sup>11</sup> Parenthetical references may be assumed to be to the *Discourses*, unless otherwise indicated. Translations are from Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>12</sup> We do not address the issue of imperialism fully in the present paper; our focus will remain on the question of Rome's internal politics, and specifically on the relationship between leaders and people as Machiavelli presents it. On the links between empire and liberty, McCormick argues that Machiavelli is trying to "entice" his "young patrician addressees" "with a republican model that entails empire so as to encourage them to accept more egalitarian and participatory politics at home. With the carrot of glory and the stick of necessity, Machiavelli compels his dedicatees to pursue empire, and in the process leverages a more populist domestic politics, a Machiavellian democracy, out of them" (*Machiavellian Democracy*, 59). Our view, by contrast, is that Machiavelli's interest in popular participation was instrumental, in that popular engagement proved useful for making Rome's citizen-soldiers feel that they had a stake in the city's successful imperialism. If this is correct, then Machiavelli's motivation for wanting to involve the citizenry in politics could not be said to grow out of any democratic enthusiasms or commitments. For the idea that Machiavelli prized liberty as a means to empire, greatness, and glory, rather than as an end in itself, see also J. Patrick Coby, *Machiavelli's Romans: Liberty and Greatness in the "Discourses on Livy"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 261–68, citing especially II.pref.–II.2; and cf. William J. Connell, "Machiavelli on Growth as an End," in *Historians and Ideologues: Essays in Honor of Donald R. Kelley*, ed. A. T. Grafton and J. Salmon (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 259–77. This subject, however, goes beyond the scope of our present paper.

<sup>13</sup> McCormick's attention to the tribunate is novel and important, for example, but even this anti-elite institution was susceptible of control by members of the nobility: in discussing the Agrarian laws, for example, Machiavelli shows that the nobles resisted the law by temporizing with it, "either by leading an army out, or by having the tribune who proposed it opposed by another tribune" (1.37).

practices. First, Machiavelli frequently criticizes the demos's capacity to govern itself without guidance from the elite—often even what Machiavelli presents as the “extraordinary” interventions of the elite. The people must both be advised by outstanding leaders and be governed by laws initiated and articulated by the elite. As we will see, even Machiavelli's occasional praise of the people is qualified by his harsh verdicts on the uselessness and folly of the multitude “without a head.” Second, and as the obverse to the first point, Machiavelli both says and shows that the Roman elite played a fundamental role in shaping the people's opinions, judgments, and decisions, through ideology, civil religion, displays of violence, and the engineering of particular electoral results.<sup>14</sup> These features of Machiavellian politics are pervasive enough to raise serious questions about other elements that would, if taken by themselves, provide resources for democratic theory. Finally, as we illustrate in discussing Titus Manlius “Torquatus” and other stories related to public trials, Machiavelli's specific examples of the elite manipulation of civil religion, and of the elite subversion of judicial processes, raise questions about Machiavelli's belief in and commitment to judicial fairness and transparency.

Machiavelli's doubts and criticisms are problematic for those, like us and McCormick, who adhere to robustly democratic politics. For, as Andreas Kalyvas has argued, democratic politics in its most complete form is a politics in which “citizens are jointly called to be the authors of their destiny and to decide about the central rules and higher normative significations that will shape and determine their political and social life.”<sup>15</sup> To make the point differently, democracy in its most robust form, such as one finds in classical Athens or in Tocqueville's New England township, or in the work of many contemporary theorists, is “people power.” Democracy is self-government by citizens who collectively work to understand and confront the hazards, uncertainties, and contingencies of political life. To the extent that democracy requires leaders as executives or spokesmen, those leaders cannot, consistently with democratic ideals, usurp the deliberative or legislative authority of the people. Machiavelli's teachings constitute a challenge to, rather than an inspiration for, these democratic principles.

It behooves us, therefore, to explore a number of key passages in the *Discourses on Livy* more carefully. Our goal is to provide what is in our view a more accurate and appreciative, and less one-sided, reading of

<sup>14</sup>In raising these concerns, and throughout the following essay, we have been influenced by the work of Leo Strauss: see especially his *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 44–45, 126–31, 259–61, 263–65, 287–88. But we do not wholeheartedly or uncritically endorse Strauss's reading of Machiavelli. Most importantly, we do not find that any appeal to esotericism is necessary to defend the views we advance in this paper.

<sup>15</sup>Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8.

Machiavelli's text—and, in particular, one that engages more seriously with Machiavelli's challenges to democratic politics. Above all, this will require us to examine the structure and logic of Machiavelli's arguments more completely than McCormick has done. Machiavelli's own ideas and judgments must be carefully elicited from the texts where they come to sight; his initial presentations and even his apparently explicit "verdicts" on diverse political subjects must be read and reread sequentially as elements of surprisingly complex chains of reasoning.

### The Demos's Capacities for Judgment and Self-Determination

Since the heyday of the classical Athenian democracy, arguments for democracy have always centered on the prudence of ordinary citizens as a deliberative body. Aristotle codified this view in his "summation argument"—which said that the arguments and perceptions of "the many" promised superior results to the judgment of the elite, because of the multiplicity of perspectives, judgments, and debates that arise within popular assemblies (*Politics* III.11). McCormick reads a central passage of the *Discourses* (1.58) in this light and explicitly aligns Machiavelli with the prodemocratic elements of Aristotle, Locke, and Condorcet, all of whom emphasize, at different times, the superiority of majoritarian decision-making. As McCormick writes, referring to both 1.58 and 1.18, "On Machiavelli's reading, the egalitarianism and reciprocity characteristic of Roman legislative practices contributed to the objectively beneficial results that they achieved; if all citizens were entitled to propose laws, especially those concerned with the 'public good,' and any citizen could speak out for or against such laws, then Roman legislative practice enlisted a more diverse array of views than could be generated by the mind of a single prince or even by the deliberation of a prudent but almost invariably homogeneous small group of elites."<sup>16</sup>

*Discourse* 1.58 is undoubtedly one of the turning points in Machiavelli's text, because it is there that he explicitly breaks with the preceding tradition of historians and political thinkers: "I wish to defend a thing that, as I said, has been accused by all the writers" (1.58.1). The chapter in question is entitled "The Multitude is Wiser and More Constant than a Prince." Machiavelli urges, explicitly against Livy, that the multitude is not as vain, inconstant, or unstable as a prince: "as to prudence and stability, I say that a people is more prudent, more stable, and of better judgment than a prince" (1.58). As McCormick rightly points out, Machiavelli corrects the prevailing, pro-aristocratic opinion of traditional writers by comparing law-abiding peoples with law-abiding princes, and unshackled multitudes with lawless tyrants, and concluding in favor of law-abiding peoples (76). This would

<sup>16</sup>McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 77; on Aristotle, Locke, and Condorcet, see *ibid.*, 89–90.

seem to vindicate McCormick's central claim that Machiavelli favors popular self-government and presents himself as explicitly democratic by contrast with most other previous writers on the subject.

We would argue that, despite initial appearances, Machiavelli's praise for the "multitude," especially in the central *Discourse* 1.58, is heavily qualified by his emphasis on the necessity of "shackling" the multitude with laws originally proposed and appropriately enforced by their leaders. Even if the title of this *Discourse* seems to support the democratic interpretation of Machiavelli, it is crucial that Machiavelli does not, at least in this section, present the "multitude" as adequate to the task of self-government. Machiavelli's principal example of a lawful people is the Roman people, a people well ordered by laws and institutions established over many years by figures such as Romulus, Numa Pompilius, Brutus, and so on. As Strauss has pointed out,<sup>17</sup> Machiavelli does not praise the "multitude" as such; rather, he praises the "multitude" only in so far as multitudes are well ordered and governed by sound laws, as were (for example) the Roman people. This is why he concludes by saying, "In sum, to conclude this matter, I say that the states of princes have lasted very long, the states of republics have lasted very long, and both have had need of being regulated by the laws." We place significant weight on Machiavelli's emphatic assertion that this is his conclusion, because it is crucial to interpret the chapter in light of the conclusion to which its argument has explicitly been leading. Machiavelli's self-interpretation, as expressed in this conclusion, indicates that, in *Discourse* 1.58, he has been presenting an argument in favor of law-governed peoples, such as those of the Roman Republic or of Athens after the fall of Pisistratus, as opposed to well-run principalities. With such principalities, he has been contrasting "multitudes" that are shackled by laws within well-run republics, not necessarily democratically self-governing multitudes.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the question remains whether the Roman Republic is a democracy in McCormick's sense, because the precise character of the Roman Republic is still open to debate at this juncture.

Even so, in this *Discourse* itself, Machiavelli gives his readers a hint of the republican "mixture" that, in his view, helped to establish the Romans' sound and healthy regime: "If princes are superior to peoples in ordering laws, forming civil lives, and ordering new statutes and orders, peoples are

<sup>17</sup>Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 129.

<sup>18</sup>Compare the remarks of Coby: "The argument is less a brief for democracy than an encomium to the rule of law, for any regime is improved by having its rulers 'shackled' by law. Plus the comparison of people and princes obscures the fact that in a republic the people is joined and guided by the great" (*Machiavelli's Romans*, 256). Coby effectively undermines Machiavelli's comparison of the people's voice to the voice of God (1.58.3), by reminding readers that "forecasting the future is the business of airy intelligences—that is, of some ill-defined part of the spiritual hierarchy of popular religion" (256–57).

so much superior in maintaining things ordered that without doubt they attain the glory of those who order them" (1.58.3). In order to achieve greatness, Rome required both elite leaders who shaped the regime with laws and orders, and steadfast ordinary citizens who loved the common good and held on tenaciously to the same ideals and opinions for many centuries. It was conflict, tumult, and contest between these groups that enabled Rome to win military glory and to achieve political success (1.2–4). Even if ordinary citizens are said often to vote for the best candidate for political office (1.58.3; though this statement is heavily qualified later in the work: see 3.34, with our commentary below), Machiavelli held that these citizens could not understand, at a general level or in principle, why republican institutions and the republican way of life would be good for them, and so they were not well suited to order the republican system for themselves. To order a political system requires the act of a single founder (1.9.2).

On the other hand, as Machiavelli emphasizes, the elite are often selfish and malevolent, and thus the people must be roused to fight for their liberties (*Prince* 9; *Discourses* 1.4.1–2, 1.5.2, 1.5.4, 1.40.5, 1.46). Once founded, the republic requires the help and commitment of the people themselves, because of their tenacity in holding on to their free way of life: "For as many are not capable of ordering a thing because they do not know its good, which is because of the diverse opinions among them, so when they have come to know it, they do not agree to abandon it" (1.9.2).<sup>19</sup> The people were capable of fighting for concessions from the elite, either by "running tumultuously through the streets," or by leaving Rome altogether, or by refusing "to enroll their names to go to war, so that to placate them there was need to satisfy them in some part" (1.4.1); thus the people were good at checking the elite's excessive ambitions and greed (e.g., 1.4–5, 1.37.3, 1.58, 3.8.1). These were the means by which the people fought for their liberties and gained concessions from the Senate in the form of legislation, creation of offices (e.g., the tribune of the plebs; though cf. Machiavelli's qualifications at 1.44), and access to offices previously open only to the patricians.

Machiavelli advances his conception of the contestatory republican model of political life in the final paragraph of *Discourse* 1.58. He begins by stating, apparently unambiguously, that a law-shackled people will always have more *virtù* than a prince "obligated to the laws." But then he immediately adds that "a licentious and tumultuous people can be spoken to by a good man, and it can easily be returned to the good way" (1.58.4). In fact, it seems that even a "law-shackled" people will need to be brought to its senses frequently by a wise advisor: "If these opinions [of free peoples] are false, there is for them the remedy of assemblies, where some good man

<sup>19</sup>On this point, see Markus Fischer, "Prologue: Machiavelli's Rapacious Republicanism," in *Machiavelli's Liberal Republican Legacy*, ed. Paul Rahe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), lii.



gets up who in orating demonstrates to them how they deceive themselves; and though peoples, as Tully says, are ignorant, they are capable of truth and easily yield when the truth is told to them by a man worthy of faith" (1.4.1). The picture of Machiavelli's Rome that we can derive from *Discourse* 1.58 thus emphasizes elite leadership, popular tenacity within the framework of laws given by the elite, and the contestatory nature of the republic that Machiavelli describes elsewhere in the work. This section does not support the prodemocratic reading of Machiavelli advanced by McCormick. Instead, Machiavelli recognized, here and elsewhere, that both elite leadership and popular contestation were necessary for the success of Rome's republic.

In order to grapple more fully with the precise character of the elite and the ordinary citizens and their interrelations, we propose to move outward from *Discourse* 1.58. In keeping with the central thrust of 1.58, however, Machiavelli often disparages the multitude whenever it exercises agency without prudent leadership. This is the point of *Discourse* 1.44, entitled "A Multitude without a Head Is Useless." Notice that this chapter title ostensibly conflicts with the heading of *Discourse* 1.58; there is a puzzle here that we must work to clarify, without assuming that we already understand Machiavelli's opinion of the demos. In *Discourse* 1.44, Machiavelli retells the story of the so-called *secessio plebis*—the incident of the Roman plebeians' withdrawal to the Sacred Mount after the death of Virginia. So ineffectual and disordered did the plebeians prove to be, that they remained utterly mute when the Senate's ambassadors appeared in order to negotiate with them, precisely because "the plebs had no heads among them" (1.44.1). The plebs could find the resources to utter their (to Livy, legitimate) complaints only when Virginius, a leading Roman and Virginia's father, had appointed twenty military tribunes to give them voice. Machiavelli declares that the episode amply confirms the judgment embodied in his chapter title. When Valerius and Horatius arrived in order to listen to the plebeians' demands, they quite reasonably asked for the creation of the tribune of the plebs and for the right of appeal to the people from magistrates; but they also asked that the Ten be turned over to them, so that they could burn them alive (1.44.1). Machiavelli comments on the stupidity and imprudence of this request—not because it was "evil," but because one should not "ask for a thing and say first: I wish to do such and such an evil with it" (1.44.2).

Machiavelli expands his critique of multitudes in *Discourse* 1.47, which is entitled "However Deceived in Generalities, Men are Not Deceived in Particulars." Machiavelli explains that, because they "carried more danger in wars," the Roman people believed that the consulship should be opened to plebeians as well as the nobility. But when the people had to pass judgment on men of their own rank, they "judged that no one of them deserved that which the whole together appeared to it to deserve" (47.1). The people legitimately recognize that, as a whole, they deserve to have a certain degree of recognition and power in the city, but no one of them is capable of embodying

the appropriate political status in his own person; instead, the city will need members of the elite to constitute its leadership. On the other hand, this sentence appears to say that the people had at least enough wisdom to recognize their inability to rule themselves, that is, to recognize their need of prudent elite leadership. In the sequel, however, Machiavelli gives this point more precise definition, in a way that is less flattering to the ordinary citizens than we might have initially supposed.

“In confirmation” of this point, as he says, Machiavelli then relates that a certain Pacuvius reconciled the aristocrats and the people of Capua through a manipulative piece of political theater. With the senators’ permission, he locked all the senators in the palace and told the people that they could “tame the pride of the nobility and avenge themselves for the injuries received from it” (1.47.2). When Pacuvius drew the first name out of a bag, the people summarily condemned the chosen senator to death for cruelty and arrogance. But when they were forced to find a substitute among themselves, each plebeian candidate evoked laughter and ridicule, so that the people came to recognize that no one of their number was worthy to hold office. Pacuvius concluded this carefully fabricated civic ritual by teaching that the ordinary citizens had now learned that they needed the Senate, lest the city yield to anarchy.<sup>20</sup>

At first glance, Machiavelli is apparently suggesting that, although ordinary citizens frequently misunderstand general political principles, they form good judgments when confronted with particular choices, such as the choice of particular candidates for office. This is the point that McCormick invests with democratic significance. In his interpretation of this section, McCormick focuses entirely on the episode involving Pacuvius and remains silent about the title of the *Discourse* and the framing devices offered by Machiavelli. McCormick suggests that the Pacuvius episode confirms the prudence of popular judgment, since the people did, after all, eventually come to acknowledge the superiority of senatorial governance. “While critics might scoff at the people’s general opinions, Machiavelli makes it very difficult to dismiss the judgments that they render when they are disciplined by the demands of a concrete, legally binding decision.”<sup>21</sup> The implication is that, in his particular shaping of this narrative, Machiavelli (like any other pro-democratic thinker) teaches that we should respect the people’s judgments in concrete situations. As McCormick says, “An angry mob may, without

<sup>20</sup>This “teachable moment” closely resembles what anthropologists have long called a “ritual of reversal.” Ordinary norms and practices are suspended for a time, and a topsy-turvy world is established. When instability or disintegration ensues, conventional norms are thereby reinforced and made to appear natural and inevitable. See, for example, Joan Bamberger, “The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society,” in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 263–80.

<sup>21</sup>McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 77.

reflection, proceed to destroy the senators en masse, as did the Corcyran demos (D II.2). But citizens empowered to consider the fate of the nobles through formal decision procedures—‘shackled by law,’ as Machiavelli writes (D I.58)—may come to altogether different conclusions.”<sup>22</sup> When Pacuvius “establishes the people as the ultimate political judge within the republic,” as McCormick writes,<sup>23</sup> the people arrive at sound and sensible conclusions; and so, McCormick proposes, Machiavelli should be interpreted as approving the people’s judgments.

However, this interpretation fails to take into account the careful design of *Discourses* 1.47–48, taken as a unit. Failure to pay adequate attention to the structure of Machiavelli’s argument leads, as we will now see, to a tendentious interpretation. Machiavelli begins 1.47 by narrating a “notable case,” in which the Roman people desired to obtain consular authority “in any mode,” because “to the plebs its desire appeared reasonable” (1.47.1). Machiavelli does not say that the plebs’ desire was, in fact, reasonable; he stresses that this ambition seemed reasonable “to the plebs.” Given the chapter heading of *Discourse* 1.47, Machiavelli’s alert readers will be at least suspicious of this statement and wonder whether the plebs’ desire is (in fact, in Machiavelli’s view) unreasonable. The citizenry feels “ashamed” of its own members when confronted with candidates of plebeian origin (1.47.1). The plebeians’ shame embodies a recognition of their own mistake and motivates them to grasp the situation more clearly. Shame is, indeed, a more important theme of these two chapters than previous interpreters have recognized.

At first blush, the plebeians recognize their mistake without any active senatorial intervention, and this is why Livy praises them for their “modesty, equity, and elevation of spirit” (1.47.1). But when Machiavelli concludes the chapter, he says, differently and in a pointedly conclusive way, “Thus, considering all that has been discoursed of, one sees how, seeing that a generality deceives them, one can soon open the eyes of peoples by finding a mode by which they have to descend to particulars, as did Pacuvius in Capua and the Senate in Rome” (1.47.3). Earlier, in 1.47.1, the Senate was not an active agent in opening the people’s eyes to the truth about their own candidates’ unworthiness; but in 1.47.3, the Senate has become, like Pacuvius, actively involved in educating, if not manipulating, the populace through making them ashamed of plebeian candidates. The apparent discrepancy is resolved only if we examine the final sentences of 1.47 together with 1.48.

In these final sentences, Machiavelli says that a prudent man should “never flee the popular judgment in particular things concerning distributions of ranks and dignities” (1.47.3). Then, almost paradoxically, he says that it is

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 70.

not “superfluous” for him to show “in the following chapter” “the order that the Senate held to so as to deceive the people in its distributions” (1.47.3). So, is the Senate deceptive or not, and why isn’t it “superfluous” for Machiavelli to illustrate, once again, this particular senatorial “order”? Is the reason that Machiavelli wants to teach democratic founders to be wary of crafty senatorial leaders who might deceive the people in its distributions?<sup>24</sup> No. The reason is given in the title of *Discourse* 1.48: “He Who Wishes That a Magistracy Not Be Given to Someone Vile or Someone Wicked Should Have It Asked for Either by Someone Too Vile and Too Wicked or by Someone Too Noble and Too Good.”

This is precisely the advice that the Roman Senate puts into practice in *Discourse* 1.48. The “order” to which Machiavelli refers at 1.47.3 now comes to light as follows: the Senate manipulated formal procedures for judgment, as Machiavelli explains, so as to preempt the people’s initial and unreflective wishes. The Senate did so precisely in order to give the people and the city what was good for them. Fearing that the offices of “tribune with consular power” would be filled with plebeian men, the members of the Senate had recourse to two strategies: either they had the offices pursued by the best Romans, or they corrupted a vile and ignoble plebeian and mixed him in with those who were asking for office. Through employing the latter tactic, Machiavelli says, the Senate made the people ashamed to give the office to any plebeians altogether; through employing the former tactic, the Senate made all plebeians ashamed to take the office (48.1). Once again, the Senate’s skillful, even manipulative deployment of shame leads to the outcome that “a magistracy not be given to someone vile or someone wicked.” Interestingly, the same story is mentioned in Livy, but, according to Livy, it was an ugly rumor that the patricians had “rigged the election” (Livy 4.56).<sup>25</sup> It is important to see that Machiavelli has transformed this ugly rumor into a piece of advice useful for leaders of a healthy imperial republic, such as Rome—not a democracy.

<sup>24</sup>This is what McCormick seems to suggest at *Machiavellian Democracy*, 59: “The grandi might be heartened by the elite manipulation of the plebeians as both citizens and soldiers that Machiavelli describes throughout the *Discourses*, but peoples might learn how to resist such manipulation precisely on the basis of Machiavelli’s descriptions.” We would make two points about this idea. First, it is true that peoples might learn about the mechanics of manipulation based on Machiavelli’s descriptions. But this sort of education of the people is not Machiavelli’s goal, as we argue in the text. Second, McCormick acknowledges in this sentence that Machiavelli pays attention to elite manipulation throughout the *Discourses*; but his particular interpretations of key passages do not correspond to this acknowledgment, and it is with these particular interpretations that we mean to engage.

<sup>25</sup>The translation is from Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Séincourt (London: Penguin, 1971).

However one may piece together these structural elements of Machiavelli's argument, it is clear that McCormick's account fails to do justice to the complexity of Machiavelli's presentation. It is only in light of this context that we can now appreciate the full significance of Machiavelli's account of the Capuan Pacuvius and the ordinary Capuan citizens. Like the Roman people of 1.47–48, the Capuans were unaware of their dependence upon the city's senatorial elite. Barring the extraordinary and theatrical intervention of Pacuvius, the city's highest magistrate, they would have acted contrary to their own interests, by slaughtering their meritorious leaders and elevating unworthy men to positions of power and authority. But, just before giving way to their undisciplined passions, they were brought to their senses by the manipulative activities of Pacuvius, who plotted with the Senate to secure the Senate's own acquittal and reinstatement. To suggest, with McCormick, that the Capuan citizens are simply "empowered" to render judgment in this case overlooks the skillful machinations of Pacuvius himself, who stage-managed the situation in order to produce a particular result. Even if McCormick believes this decision-making procedure to be "rife with indeterminacy,"<sup>26</sup> Pacuvius himself, like the Roman senators of 1.47–48, understood the character of the people well enough to feel confident in the desired outcome.

Hence, by locating this account within the framework of *Discourses* 1.47–48 altogether, we come to see that, according to Machiavelli, both the Roman and the Capuan people lack self-knowledge, or an understanding of their own limitations with regard to political generalities. The people's confidence in their grasp of generalities is ill-founded and harmful. Earlier, Machiavelli had appeared to say that the people had at least enough wisdom to recognize their inability to rule themselves, but even this piece of quasi-Socratic wisdom eluded the people, in Machiavelli's final verdict on the case. Moreover, even the multitude's knowledge of particulars is limited in that they cannot transfer this knowledge to other situations where it may or may not apply, since the application of particular forms of knowledge can be evaluated correctly only by a person with knowledge of generalities.<sup>27</sup> This is why, left to their own devices, the people cannot create the conditions in which they will arrive at prudent judgments. Thus, Machiavelli's own teaching—the generality that discerning readers are supposed to understand—is that the people's "prudent" judgments (such as they are) depend on the active, far-sighted, and continuous guidance provided by a senatorial elite or by an individual magistrate. His emphasis on the people's limitations is complemented by his attention to the energetic role that leading individuals necessarily play in the success of a healthy republic.

<sup>26</sup>McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 72.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 128–31.

## Leaders and the People

Both factors come into sharper view in Machiavelli's analysis of leaders and the people in 1.53–54. *Discourse* 1.53 has the title "Many Times the People Desires Its Own Ruin, Deceived by a False Appearance of Good; and That Great Hopes and Mighty Promises Easily Move It." Machiavelli recounts that after capturing the city of Veii, the Roman people desired to send half the populace to inhabit the newly acquired city. The Senate, as well as the "wisest Romans," declared such a course of action dangerous and useless, presumably because it would divide Rome and establish a powerful rival as its neighbor. This announcement in turn aroused passionate anger among the populace. In fact, the plebs soon became so enraged that "it would have come to arms and blood" had not the Senate "checked the plebs" and its "insolence," by establishing a "shield of some old and respected citizens" (1.53.1). For Machiavelli, the story illustrates, on the one hand, that the people often desires its own ruin, which appears superficially in the guise of a positive benefit, and, on the other hand, that the people need a wise individual to show it precisely what is good and what is bad (1.53.1). Without such a wise adviser, "infinite dangers and harms are brought into republics" (1.53.1). This is especially true when questions of material gain or loss, or questions of courage and cowardice, are involved (1.53.2), because these powerful and emotionally fraught stimuli tend to cloud the people's clear perception of what is genuinely good or beneficial, which often lies beneath appearances (cf. 2.22.1, 2.25.1).

Machiavelli declares that his thesis is confirmed by "infinite examples," both Roman and foreign, and ancient and modern, of leaders struggling without success to correct their peoples' misguided understandings of what is good. As one case in point, Machiavelli cites Fabius Maximus's failed attempt to convince the Roman people of the necessity of proceeding slowly in the war against Hannibal. Blinded by their anxieties about their own cowardice, the people "did not see inside it [Fabius's proposal] the hidden utility that was there, nor did Fabius have reasons enough to demonstrate it to them" (1.53). Fabius's subsequent prudence averted disaster; however, the people, enchanted by Varro's promises to crush Hannibal, gave Varro consular authority, which in turn led to the Romans' defeat at Cannae and "nearly the ruin of Rome" (1.53). Deceived by a false appearance of the good, it was the people's failure to recognize, through reason alone, the advantage concealed in apparent weakness that led to the republic's near undoing. Instead of being guided by a clear-sighted appreciation of their particular situations, the people were vulnerable to their own powerful emotional responses—in this case, to the emotions of pride, courage, and honor, and in the cases discussed in 1.47–48, to the emotions of shame, ugliness, and dishonor. In the cases of Veii and the Hannibalic War, the people clearly deceived themselves about particular decisions, not only about "generalities."

According to McCormick, however, these cases of popular misjudgment are aberrations; a preponderance of evidence shows that the people will usually make sounder judgments than “similarly empowered princely or oligarchic elites.”<sup>28</sup> But this interpretation is difficult to square with Machiavelli’s claim that his analysis can be demonstrated by “infinite examples” drawn from both ancient and modern history (1.53.2), and by his statement that “infinite dangers and harms are brought into republics,” if the people are “not made aware that that [sc. a decision that will cause its ruin] is bad and what the good is, by someone in whom it has faith” (1.53.1). As Machiavelli’s accounts imply, the reason that such examples abound is that the people are excessively driven by emotions such as greed, anger, ambition, and fear. By contrast, as Machiavelli suggests by way of a Virgilian reference (1.54.1), leading individuals remain unperturbed by the hazards of chance and necessity and therefore see clearly what is good and beneficial for the city. Even the wisest leaders, however, must don the garb of magisterial authority in order to gain from the people the respect that their wisdom in truth merits (1.54.1). The implication is that even in justly showing reverence for such figures, the people are moved more by superficial regalia and spectacles than by actual political understanding; we recall the theatricality of the Capuan Pacuvius in *Discourse* 1.47.

This criticism of popular judgment is complemented by Machiavelli’s additional inference that the people have trouble learning from their errors. Although McCormick argues that Machiavelli often illustrates the people’s willingness to change its mind and learn from previous mistakes (84), Machiavelli himself, in this section, makes precisely the opposite point. After misguidedly giving authority to Fabius’s master of the horse and arriving at the brink of defeat, the people still chose Varro as their consul simply because he promised, without any convincing plan or credentials, to defeat Hannibal—which led to the Romans’ disastrous loss at Cannae (1.53.2). Because of their spiritedness, the people could not appreciate Fabius’s approach to the Hannibalic threat, which was based, Machiavelli says, on Fabius’s natural inclination to proceed cautiously (3.9.1). As Machiavelli later shows, in *Discourse* 3.9, peoples and leaders have to change with the times in order to enjoy lasting success. But both people and, sometimes, leaders (such as Fabius Maximus) have difficulty in changing from their usual modes or habits. By contrast, Machiavelli praises the Senate for never being “ashamed to decide a thing that was contrary to its mode of life or to other decisions it had made when necessity commanded them to” (1.38). In this passage, at least, Machiavelli praised the Senate—not, let it be noted, the Roman people as a whole, much less the “multitude”—for being sufficiently free from anxiety about reputation or appearance to adjust its policies

<sup>28</sup>McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 83–84.

wisely in order to show due appreciation for the demands of particular (and especially unforeseen) circumstances.

The narratives Machiavelli relates in 1.53–54 are all cases in which the people are formally empowered to make legally binding and particular decisions of great moment in the city's history. They were, as McCormick says, confronted by the discipline of having to address life-and-death questions; they were "shackled by law"; and they were invited to discuss the issues freely and to arrive at reasoned conclusions. Yet, as Machiavelli's narratives illustrate, and as "infinite" other examples confirm, according to Machiavelli, the people usually prove incapable of rising to the challenge of making sound deliberative judgments. As Machiavelli writes, "Considering what is easy and what is difficult to persuade a people of, this distinction can be made: what you have to persuade represents first on its face either gain or loss, or truly it appears to be a spirited or cowardly policy. And when gain is seen in the things that are put before the people, even though there is loss concealed underneath, and when it appears spirited, even though there is the ruin of the republic concealed underneath, it will always be easy to persuade the multitude of it" (1.53.2).

This is why Machiavelli often recommends that members of the elite use fear and other forms of manipulation in order to produce public benefits when the people's prudence fails them. But what is, in Machiavelli's presentation, the most effective strategy through which the elite could realize the city's public good despite the people's frequent lack of foresight? The answer is "civil religion," a subject surprisingly neglected by McCormick, but one that other recent scholars, notably Ronald Beiner, have come to regard as central to the interpretation of early modern and modern political thought.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). With Beiner's fine interpretation, one might compare Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 45: "Roman religious belief was unique in being self-consciously constructed by the elite for popular consumption, and is possibly the greatest single tribute to the creative powers of leadership." For other careful examinations of civil religion in Machiavelli, see Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli's Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996); Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 69–79. For other views more favorable to a Christian-friendly Machiavelli, see Marcia L. Colish, "Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli's Savonarolan Moment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 597–616, with extensive bibliography; and Cary J. Nederman, "Grace, Fortune, God, and Free Will in Machiavelli's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 617–38, which emphasizes "divine ordination" and Machiavelli's dependence on medieval theological ideas. For a view that, on the contrary, stresses the modernity of Machiavellian *virtù*, an ontology of disorder, and the promotion of desire



## Civil Religion

Does Machiavelli offer an account of civil religion that somehow supports the democratic interpretation favored by McCormick? Perhaps an example of such an account could be discerned in Spinoza's *Political Treatise* or his *Theological-Political Treatise*, but Machiavelli's *Discourses* give evidence to the contrary. Machiavelli is emphatic that "princes of a republic or of a kingdom" (figures that McCormick tends to neglect) should "favor and magnify" all things related to religion, even though "they judge them false" (1.12.1). Without religious fear, Machiavelli says, republics and kingdoms are doomed to fail (1.11.4). The reason is that religious fear enables prudent individuals to enact sound policies that would otherwise come to nothing because of the short-sightedness of the people.

Consider Machiavelli's general analysis of this point: "And truly there was never any orderer of extraordinary laws for a people who did not have recourse to God, because otherwise they would not have been accepted. For a prudent individual knows many goods that do not have in themselves evident reasons with which one can persuade others" (1.11.3). Machiavelli's specific vocabulary in this passage evokes Fabius's inability to persuade the assembled people with "evident reasons" to forgo confronting Hannibal in a pitched battle (1.53.2). Far from supporting a consent-based democratic regime, Machiavellian civil religion motivates the people to act prudently even when their own judgment is defective. The people's "goodness" (1.58.3) does not, in the end, involve sound judgment or foresight; instead, "wise men" must "have recourse to God" in order to shackle the people with appropriate laws and customs (1.11.3).

Although McCormick takes little account of religion, Machiavelli emphasizes the importance of examining the political possibilities of religion: the chapter title of *Discourse* 1.12 is "Of How Much Importance It Is to Take Account of Religion and How Italy, for Lacking It by Means of the Roman Church, Has Been Ruined." It could be, theoretically, that Machiavelli's response to the question, Of how much importance is it to take account of religion?, is that it is not important at all; but his ensuing arguments show that, to the contrary, it is of very great importance to take religion into account, in the right way. Renaissance Italy's loss of religious devotion, according to Machiavelli, had brought "with it infinite inconveniences and infinite disorders" (1.12.2). By contrast, "Camillus" and "the other princes of the city," seeing their soldiers' credulous beliefs in oracles and the gods' willingness to communicate with human beings, "altogether favored and magnified" those tendencies (1.12.1). In keeping with his democratic interpretation,

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satisfaction, see W. R. Newell, "How Original Is Machiavelli? A Consideration of Skinner's Interpretation of Virtue and Fortune," *Political Theory* 15, no. 4 (1987): 612–34.

however, McCormick is suspicious of the Senate's uses of civil religion: as he writes, "The senate persistently used religion and unnecessary wars to divert the people from demands for domestic reform (1.13)." He also writes, "The people started to associate, not entirely without reason, the military functions and religious trappings of the consulship with oppression itself."<sup>30</sup> This sounds potentially damaging to the Senate's reputation. But does this denunciation of the Senate square with Machiavelli's own emphasis on the Senate's and particular princes' prudent leadership of the city through cultivating religious beliefs?

No, it does not. It is necessary to interpret the relevant passages in their precise contexts within the work. *Discourse* 1.13 is designed to explain "how the Romans made religion serve to reorder the city and to carry out their enterprises and to stop tumult" (chapter title). For example, Camillus used religion to keep the Roman army disciplined enough to carry out the siege of Veii successfully, despite the soldiers' desire to return home (1.13.1); Papirius manipulated the "chicken-men" and their auspices so as to carry out the requirements of reason while still showing great respect for the religious beliefs to which his soldiers subscribed (1.14.1–2). On other occasions, too, Machiavelli praises individuals for exacting oaths by force in order to keep Rome safe (e.g., Scipio, 1.11.1; Publius Ruberius, 1.13.2). Finally, Machiavelli shows that "the Romans made religion serve to reorder the city and to carry out their enterprises," not only in foreign wars, but also when the "nobles" regained possession of the tribunate for their own purposes through religious manipulation: "After the Roman people had created tribunes with consular power and they were all plebeians except for one, and when plague and famine occurred that year and certain prodigies came, the nobles used the opportunity in the next creation of tribunes to say that the gods were angry because Rome had used the majesty of its empire badly, and that there was no remedy for placating the gods other than to return the election of the tribunes to its place" (1.13.1). Despite McCormick's stress on the tribunate as a democratic political force, we see here that Machiavelli noted with approval the nobles' use of religion to coopt the tribunate in order to achieve their own purposes.<sup>31</sup>

Machiavelli's emphasis on the elite manipulation of religion raises an important challenge to McCormick's picture of democratic power, deliberation, and judgment in Machiavelli's Rome. McCormick finds that the Roman people saw through the nobles' use of religious manipulation and either preserved or extended their own power.<sup>32</sup> Machiavelli's own

<sup>30</sup>McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 85.

<sup>31</sup>On the tribunes' mistaken appropriation of consular power, see 1.39.2 with our discussion below; on the distinction between religion used domestically and abroad in 1.13, see Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders*, 75.

<sup>32</sup>McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 85, 90, 96, citing 1.39, 1.60.

statements are in fact more complicated than this. Machiavelli relates, for example, that the people were dissatisfied with constantly being required to make war, and they blamed the Senate for its ambition (1.39.2). McCormick endorses the populace's dissatisfaction at 1.39.2 and maintains that Machiavelli himself was sympathetic to the popular critique of the senate: "Besides noting the avarice, discussed previously, that motivated the senate to send troops farther from Rome, Machiavelli emphasizes its desire to oppress the people directly in their persons while away from the city on the field of battle."<sup>33</sup> But Machiavelli himself says that the people "should have thought that it [the constant war-making] arose from the ambition of neighbors who wished to crush them," not from the nobles' own ambitions or the nobles' desire to punish the people freely outside Rome, where they could not be defended by the tribunes (1.39.2). The people's mistake in this matter led them to support the tribunes in replacing the consuls with tribunes with consular power (1.39.2)—which was itself a grave "error" that was eventually corrected through the re-creation of consuls. As Mansfield puts the point, "The mistake in both examples [the Florentine and the Roman] was to blame war on the government, not on one's neighbors or on necessity, but while in the Roman case the people were put off by changing the name of a magistracy, the Florentines had to taste their mistake."<sup>34</sup> The Roman populace may indeed have associated military functions with religious trappings,<sup>35</sup> but Machiavelli himself consistently endorses the elite use of religious manipulation both as a part of ordinary political life and as an essential tool in managing the city's foreign wars (cf. 1.13–1.15).

### The Question of Public Trials

The elite manipulation of religion also affected other domains of civic activity, including the Romans' apparently substantial commitment to just, transparent trials. In the same section of the work, for example, Machiavelli approvingly notes that Titus Manlius (later called "Torquatus") subverted the process of public accusation and accountability by compelling the tribune Marcus Pomponius to swear to drop the accusation against his notoriously harsh father, Lucius Manlius (1.11.1). This use of religion is especially interesting because it is connected to two of the key elements of McCormick's case for Machiavellian democracy—the tribunate and the role of the courts. Machiavelli shows Titus Manlius Torquatus acting violently against a tribune of the plebs, whose accusations against Lucius Manlius were, as Livy shows, seemingly quite well-founded. According to Livy, the people hated Lucius Manlius, the dictator, because he had fined them, beaten

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 96, citing 1.39; cf. 90.

<sup>34</sup>Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders*, 126.

<sup>35</sup>McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 85.

them, and imposed a severe levy on them. Most importantly, Livy says, “they hated the man’s cruel disposition and his surname (*cognomen*), Imperiosus, which offended a free state and had been assumed in ostentation of the truculence which he used as freely with his nearest friends and his own family as with strangers” (Livy 7.4.1–3).<sup>36</sup> Marcus Pomponius’s accusations, then, seemingly constitute a classic use of tribunician power in order to support the claims of the people against an oppressive member of the elite. Even Livy remarks that Titus Manlius Torquatus’s behavior, albeit “praiseworthy for its filial piety,” “set no pattern of civic conduct” (Livy 7.5.2, trans. Foster). But Torquatus’s act showed not only a violent disregard for tribunician power, but also a use of religion in order to subvert the judicial process that Marcus Pomponius intended to pursue against Lucius Manlius Imperiosus. If Machiavelli were democratic in spirit, then he should at least point out that this use of civil religion was bad for the Romans’ rule of law, judicial transparency, and popular authority. After giving this example, however, Machiavelli goes on to say, “Whoever considers well the Roman histories sees how much religion served to command armies, to animate the plebs, to keep men good, to bring shame to the wicked” (1.11.2). In this case, though, the tribune Marcus Pomponius “put aside ... his own honor” in order to obey the oath exacted by force, while the “wicked” obtained not shame but rather freedom from a fair trial and, apparently, from the well-deserved punishment likely to ensue.

Toward the end of the work, in fact, Machiavelli says that Titus Manlius was chosen in “second place” in a later popular election for “tribunes of the legions” (3.34.1). Despite his “somewhat violent and extraordinary” mode of saving his father, the Roman people did not reprove Titus Manlius for his violent act against a tribune of the people working to uphold justice through a fair trial, but rather rewarded him for his filial piety (3.34.1). Machiavelli himself says thereafter that Titus Manlius had “defended his father so virtuously and extraordinarily” that he first got an outstanding reputation among the people, which he strengthened later in life by famously killing a Gaul and taking his golden collar, and then by killing his own son for engaging in combat “without license” (3.34.2; cf. 3.22.1). Embedded in Machiavelli’s treatment of civil religion we find unqualified praise for Torquatus’s use of manipulative religious tactics in order to attack two “democratic” institutions: the tribunate and the courts (cf. 3.34.4). In light of this example, it is possible to see in Machiavelli’s treatment of the courts a more complex institution than McCormick presents.

In fact, Machiavelli’s treatment of public accusation, in general, suggests that accusations have a deterrent effect and that through them “an outlet is given by which to vent, in some mode against some citizen, those humors

<sup>36</sup>Livy, *History of Rome*, trans. B. O. Foster, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919).

that grow up in cities; and when these humors do not have an outlet by which they may be vented ordinarily, they have recourse to extraordinary modes that bring a whole republic to ruin" (1.7.1). The case of Coriolanus (1.7.1–2) first illustrates the usefulness of such "venting," but while the trial is said to be useful for maintaining the republic's order and its laws, it may have been unjust to the individual, who was tried *in absentia* while he was in exile among the Volsci (cf. 1.29.3, with Livy 2.35.6). Although Machiavelli insists that Rome's public accusations helped the city avoid confrontations with foreign armies led by disgruntled citizens (1.7.5), the fact is that Coriolanus himself led an army of the Volsci against Rome and was persuaded to withdraw only by the tears and entreaties of his mother and other Roman women (Livy 2.40).<sup>37</sup>

In other episodes, judicial procedures are neglected because the people are too overcome by compassion to enforce the law even in obvious cases of disobedience. In the case of Papirius Cursor and his master of the horse, Fabius, for example, the tribunes and the Roman people (not to mention Fabius's own father, a former dictator) entreated the dictator with such energy that he eventually dismissed the punishment due to Fabius for disobeying his explicit orders during the Samnite Wars (1.31.2, 3.1.3, 3.36.2, 3.47, with Livy 8.31–36). With Horatius, on the other hand, Machiavelli is critical of the Romans for freeing the young man "more because of his father's prayers than for his own merits" (1.22.1). After defeating the Alban Curiatii, Horatius killed his own sister, because she had wept for the death of her betrothed, one of the Curiatii. Machiavelli argues, however, that "in a well-ordered city, faults are never paid for with merits" (1.22.1), and thus he goes on to "blame that people [sc. the Romans] rather for having absolved him than for having wished to condemn him" (1.24.1). Even in the early Roman Republic, trials often failed to achieve their purpose, whether through the manipulations of the elite or because of the excessive compassion and weakness of the people.

## Two Possible Objections

In response to the foregoing arguments, McCormick might point out that at 1.18 Machiavelli makes a statement that, at least initially, seems to endorse

<sup>37</sup>To McCormick, Coriolanus's story indicates that "Machiavelli's ... ultimate objective concerning political trials may not be, first and foremost, the preservation of patrician lives, but, in certain instances, quite the contrary": reading this episode with that of Cosimo de' Medici (1.33), McCormick suggests that, according to Machiavelli, offenders should perhaps be executed rather than "exiled or permitted to flee" (*Machiavellian Democracy*, 126). Our point is not that Machiavelli views trials as a way to save patrician lives, but only that trials may not be just to individuals or, in their consequences, as helpful to republics as Coriolanus's story initially seems to imply.

the practices of democratic or quasi-democratic deliberation. Here is the passage in question:

A tribune, or any other citizen whatever, could propose a law to the people, on which every citizen was able to speak, either in favor or against, before it was decided. This was a good order when the citizens were good, because it was always good that each one who intended a good for the public could propose it; and it is good that each can speak his opinion on it so that the people can then choose the best after each one has been heard. (1.18.3)

In McCormick's interpretation, this passage illustrates the "egalitarianism" and "reciprocity" characteristic of Roman political deliberation, and it explains why the freedom to debate a diversity of views led to "beneficial results" for the republic.<sup>38</sup> But this interpretation does not take into account Machiavelli's important qualification: "This was a good order when the citizens were good." This qualification is important, because Machiavelli's general view of human beings is that they are not good: to the contrary, they are envious, selfish, fickle, unjust, and quick to resort to violence. Furthermore, when we examine the actual examples used by Machiavelli throughout the *Discourses on Livy*, as well as *The Prince*, we do not find clear examples of the Roman citizenry engaging in the sort of deliberation described here.<sup>39</sup> Even more importantly, Machiavelli is plainly indifferent to the procedures of Rome's legislative assemblies—even surprisingly so, compared (for example) to Rousseau in the *Social Contract*, which takes a more explicitly democratic approach. The reason is that Machiavelli was much more focused on executive power and the role of "princes of the republic."<sup>40</sup> Machiavelli was not interested in showing a deliberative democracy in action.

<sup>38</sup>McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 77.

<sup>39</sup>Perhaps the case of Manlius Capitolinus qualifies to some extent: the people changed from being a defender of Manlius to his judge and condemned him to death for his calumnies (3.8.1; cf. 1.24.2, 1.58.1–2, 3.1.3). However, it was the tribunes who brought Manlius forward for judgment (3.8.1); and the Senate had previously "created a dictator to inquire into the case and to check the impetuosity of Manlius" (1.8.1; cf. 1.24.2). We do not see the people standing forward in order to debate the case and to give reasons one way or another.

<sup>40</sup>By contrast, McCormick himself shows more interest in the workings of the Roman assemblies, in statements such as the following: "Machiavelli's suggestion that the people gathered in assemblies recognize the truth in public speeches and make correct decisions on that basis implies that they are capable of choosing the better arguments among proposals, whether submitted by the consuls in the noble-dominated *comitia centuriata*, or by the tribunes in the *concilium plebis* and the *comitia tributa*, and those proposed by either sets of magistrates in the *contiones*" (*Machiavellian Democracy*, 77).

McCormick argues that some type of “corruption” “progressively undermined this aspect of Roman legislative practice”; he suggests that for Machiavelli “the deleterious impact of empire” was “quite prominent” in contributing to corruption.<sup>41</sup> McCormick is correct that in 1.18 Machiavelli emphasizes that corruption set in particularly because the Romans lost the “fear of the enemy” (traditionally known as *metus hostilis*) after their conquest of Africa, Asia, and almost all Greece (1.18.3). But Machiavelli’s readers are not justified in concluding on this basis that, prior to roughly 201 BC (the date of Rome’s defeat of Carthage in the Second Punic War), Rome enjoyed a free and political way of life because of its deliberative democracy.

Machiavelli does not show his readers that or how this supposed early Roman deliberative democracy worked. Instead, Machiavelli directly contradicts this quasi-utopian history of early Rome at the beginning of book 3 of the *Discourses*. Machiavelli shows that from a very early date the Romans were inclined to corruption and therefore needed renewal through a “return to beginnings.” According to Machiavelli, “this return toward the beginning is done through either extrinsic accident or intrinsic prudence” (3.1.2). By “extrinsic accident,” Machiavelli means in the first instance Rome’s capture by the French, which he attributes to religious irreverence: the Romans led out their armies against the Gauls (386 BC) (Livy 5.38), and created tribunes with consular power (445 BC) (Livy 4.6), without any regard for proper religious ceremony (3.1.2). As for creating tribunes with consular power, we have just seen that Machiavelli considered this to be a grave political error on the people’s part (1.39.2). Rome’s capture by the French jolted the people into recognition of the good orders originally established “by Romulus and by the other prudent princes,” including the traditional orders of Roman religion (3.1.2). Hence, from the city’s beginning, not only from the late third century BC, the Romans required renewal either by virtue of their misfortunes or, as Machiavelli goes on to explain, through the prudence of “re-founders,” or even “through the simple virtue of one man” (3.1.3). There never was an early Roman deliberative democracy.

With respect to the distinction between extrinsic accident and internal prudence, Machiavelli persistently gives his readers to understand that reliable political success results not from fortune (or misfortune), but rather from prudence and *virtù*. This is why he proceeds, in the first *Discourse* of book 3, to emphasize the prudence of single princes or captains or re-founders. In fact, Machiavelli insists that republics must be brought back to their beginnings or their founding principles at least every ten years (3.1.1, 3.1.3); he concludes the work’s third book by insisting, even more emphatically, that a “republic has need of new acts of foresight every day if one wishes to maintain it free” (3.49). His history of early Rome, with all of its inclinations toward corruption and failure, clearly shows why. As he now says explicitly, the

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 78, 74.

reason is that, generally speaking, republics, like other “mixed bodies,” are subject to frequent corruption and must recover their original virtues and religious principles if they are to gain renewal (3.1.2). This type of recovery takes place not only through extrinsic accidents, but also, and more importantly, when extraordinary re-founders bring punishment back to the memory of the people and inspire fear in their spirits, often through spectacular and even “excessive” executions (3.1.3). Often, too, Machiavelli says, republics are drawn back to their beginnings by “the simple virtue of one man,” such as “Horatius Cocles, Scaevola, Fabricius, the two Decii, Regulus Attilius,” and so on. The memorably virtuous acts of these individuals challenge McCormick’s claim that the nobles are generally selfish and greedy.<sup>42</sup>

In the beginning of his work’s culminating book, to be more specific, Machiavelli wishes “to demonstrate to anyone how much the actions of particular men made Rome great and caused many good effects in that city,” and he emphasizes that he is speaking of leaders of the republic, not Rome’s kings (3.1.6). Hence, if corruption sets in so easily and quickly as Machiavelli suggests, and since, as Machiavelli often indicates, all political things are always in motion, we cannot straightforwardly accept Machiavelli’s quasi-utopian picture of good citizens speaking to other good citizens for the common good, before corruption set in (1.18.3). Along with everything else we have discussed, the opening of book 3 indicates that Machiavelli is pessimistic about the possibility of deliberative democratic politics. This is why book 3 as a whole emphasizes the activities of single, great, prudent individuals who guide and skillfully manipulate the people whenever they seem destined to make errors of judgment or to be overcome by their badly informed passions. This is Machiavelli’s way of developing his earlier point that in completely corrupt cities extraordinary individuals will have to act outside the laws and established institutions in order to set their peoples back onto a healthy and proper course (1.18.4).

But why can’t the people themselves, as a collective body, undertake their own reforms, without relying on the prudent judgment or exemplary behavior of single individuals? At 1.18.4, Machiavelli’s reasoning is as follows: Ordinary citizens may abstractly grasp that law must sometimes be reorganized for the sake of freedom and that such projects are good for the city, but they will be repulsed by and lack the effective power and ambition to assume the means to carry out such projects—that is, the fierce and often brutal confiscation of authority. Machiavelli’s call for the extraordinary individual to take action on a regular basis shows that the ferocity of ordinary citizens,

<sup>42</sup>See, for example, McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 4: “Generalizing from his own studies and experiences, Machiavelli argues that an unquenchable appetite for oppression drives the grandi’s efforts to accumulate wealth, monopolize offices, and gain renown within republics (D I.5; P 9),” with *ibid.*, 23–26, 44–47, 50, 60, 92, 96, 128, 181.



in his view, must be channeled effectively from above if it is to prove beneficial to the republic. The dispositions Machiavelli has in mind in the beginning of book 3 are absent from the people as a collectivity.

Even in *Discourse* 1.18, which seems to suggest a deliberative democratic ideal, Machiavelli says that incremental reform must be brought about by farsighted individuals, not the ordinary citizens, who are incapable of changing with the times or confronting corruption as it sets in (1.18.4; cf. 3.9 with *The Prince* 25). Even incremental reform is therefore difficult, if not impossible, because the people will typically not be persuaded that it is necessary or useful. In the case of corrupt cities, Machiavelli maintains that ordinary citizens are poorly situated to exercise such foresight because of their short-term thinking and their aversion to changing the modes and orders by which they live (1.18.3–4). Extraordinary leaders, capable of what had always been virtually unthinkable, are the only individuals suited to play this role. Hence, Machiavelli shines a bright light on the paradoxical necessity of ambitious individuals who have salutary aims but lose their goodness in the process of acquiring the power to reform (1.18.4). Needless to say, these reflections could hardly be welcome to a genuinely democratic or deliberative theorist.

At the same time, even in his presentation of “execution” and punishment, Machiavelli does not intend to exclude the people altogether from political life. He grants that a people well governed by sound laws, modes, and orders will be capable of imposing on “multitudes of the erring” (3.49.1) various salutary punishments and other corrections through legal means and within the framework of existing institutions.<sup>43</sup> This emerges from a consideration of the first part of *Discourse* 3.49, which is entitled “A Republic Has Need of New Acts of Foresight Every Day If One Wishes to Maintain It Free; and For What Merits Quintus Fabius Was Called Maximus.” Machiavelli argues that cities need “physicians” to address “accidents” that “arise every day”—and even occasionally a “wiser physician” if the accident happens to be especially important (3.49.1). But these physicians act within the framework of institutionalized political life, and citizens of all orders, especially public-office holders, agree to and help to further the punishment of transgressors. For example, the Roman people used striking punishments in the ordinary course of institutional life, in order to correct “diseases” such as the Bacchic worshipers and the Roman women who had conspired to poison their husbands (3.49.1); “nor did it hesitate to have killed by way of justice an entire legion at once” and to impose banishment on the soldiers who lost the battle at Cannae, even forcing them to eat standing up (3.49.1). The problems and diseases addressed by these punishments, according to Machiavelli, “are not fatal because there is almost always time to correct them” (3.49.1). In these passages, Machiavelli shows that in its

<sup>43</sup>On these points, see the important discussion of Fischer, “Prologue,” liii–lvi.

institutional functioning Rome was neither an egalitarian, deliberative democracy nor a tyranny of the wise few over the many.

When crises arise that affect the state itself, however, Machiavelli holds that a “prudent individual” must act immediately and with great force in order to save the community (3.49.2–3). But, unlike the drastic solutions necessary to correct a totally corrupt people—solutions that occur outside the framework of laws—Machiavelli is still speaking here of the legal modes and orders through which the city could correct itself by the normal workings of republican institutions. Thus, in addition to discovering extralegal punishments and “executions” imposed by outstanding individuals, as in *Discourse* 1.18, Machiavelli also finds room in his presentation of Rome for serious punishments that occur within the framework of existing institutions, albeit promoted and guided by a “prudent individual” (3.49.3).

The second possible objection arises from *Discourse* 3.34. Toward the end of this *Discourse*, Machiavelli explains that, when the people were inclined to elect a certain Titus Ottacilius to the consulship, Fabius Maximus spoke out against him and “turned the favor of the people to whoever deserved it more than he” (3.34.4). McCormick interprets this anecdote as a positive assessment of the assembled Romans’ capacity for good judgment:

The people form appropriate judgments while participating in assemblies [*consigli*]; especially, Machiavelli notes, deliberative assemblies [*concioni*] [*sic*] (D III.34). In well-ordered republics, such as Rome, Machiavelli argues, the people do not “deceive themselves” into electing “inadequate men” because in such assemblies, “every citizen is permitted, in a manner that accrues to their glory, to publicize the defects of an individual such that the people will know and judge him better” (D III.34). Just as princes avail themselves of ministerial advisors, when the people advise *themselves* in assembly, Machiavelli insists, they actually err less and distribute offices better than do individual princes: “in electing magistrates, the people judge according to the surest signs ascertainable about men.”<sup>44</sup>

This interpretation, however, is beset with several difficulties, both on its own terms and in light of *Discourse* 3.34 as a whole. Even though McCormick frequently refers to Rome’s deliberative assemblies, Machiavelli does not show the people deliberating either in this passage or in any others; his emphasis falls on the prudence of an extraordinary individual—in this case, Fabius Maximus. To say that the people “advise *themselves* in assembly” distorts Machiavelli’s way of telling this story, because the people had already disposed themselves to elect Titus Ottacilius; it was only the last-minute intervention of Fabius that saved them from a serious

<sup>44</sup>McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 74. Cf. *ibid.*, 45, where McCormick uses 3.34 to suggest that “a noble’s speech might be contested publicly by a plebeian.” This may have been legally possible at Rome, but Machiavelli’s examples do not emphasize that plebeians will publicly and usefully contest the speech of nobles—on the contrary.

political error. Hence, Machiavelli's narrative is reminiscent of the earlier story (1.53.1) in which the Senate, shielding itself with certain "old and esteemed citizens," prevented the people from disastrously moving house to Veii. As this example illustrates, the people do not distribute offices better than a "prince of the republic" such as Fabius Maximus, even if, as Machiavelli says, they often distribute offices better than actual princes in principalities.

When Machiavelli describes Fabius's timely intervention, he says only that Fabius showed the "inadequacy" of Ottacilius, but he omits to explain why Ottacilius was an inferior candidate. If we read Livy's account of Fabius's speech, however, then we discover that it was Fabius, not the people, who relied on Ottacilius's past record to dissuade the Roman assembly from its mistake. Fabius's judgment was based on Ottacilius's complete failure to carry out the tasks assigned to him during the previous year—those of disrupting Hannibal's supply lines from North Africa and keeping the coast of Italy safe from Carthaginian incursions (Livy 24.8.15–16). If the people are capable of distributing offices prudently, then why did they need Fabius Maximus to point out to them these obvious facts about Ottacilius's inglorious recent career? Observe, too, that the people had only recently come to recognize Fabius's own credibility through his tactics of delay, which they had initially and bitterly opposed; and, finally, that when Fabius turns the people away from Ottacilius, Fabius himself becomes consul.

This is enough to raise questions about the prodemocratic interpretation of *Discourse* 3.34. Yet readers of that *Discourse* will still be puzzled by several features left unexplained in McCormick's reading. For, in fact, if we examine the entirety of *Discourse* 3.34, then the case against the prodemocratic Machiavelli becomes even more powerful. Machiavelli points out that individuals acquire good reputations in three ways: by being born or married into the right families, by association with able men who are reputed wise, and by extraordinary and notable actions (3.34.2). Of the three, as Machiavelli emphasizes, the last is the only one with any credibility: to prove the point, he provides examples from the lives of Titus Manlius Torquatus and Scipio the Elder.

Although McCormick's analysis might give the impression that 3.34 is primarily about the people's sound judgment, the bulk of 3.34 consists of Machiavelli's analysis of the life of Titus Manlius Torquatus. Machiavelli praises Titus Manlius for rare and splendid acts such as violently confronting the accuser of his father (3.34.1) and executing his own son for engaging in combat against orders, albeit successfully (3.34.2). Machiavelli similarly, albeit more briefly, praises the rare acts of Scipio the Elder (3.34.3). What are the connections between Titus Manlius, Scipio the Elder, and Fabius Maximus? And why does Machiavelli tell their stories together in a chapter entitled "What Fame or Word or Opinion Makes the People Begin to Favor a Citizen; and Whether It Distributes Magistracies with Greater Prudence Than a Prince"? However we answer these questions, it is important to recognize that McCormick has taken the story of Fabius Maximus out of context in order to further a preexisting idea about Machiavelli's supposed

prodemocratic sympathies, without taking into account either contrary interpretations or the subtlety of Machiavelli's literary and political designs.

First consider again the stories surrounding Titus Manlius. Titus Manlius's first notable action was to hold a knife to Marcus Pomponius's throat, in order to free his imperious father from any public accusation. In doing so, he used a religious oath in order to circumvent Rome's ordinary judicial processes (*Discourse* 1.11.1). Despite Machiavelli's apparent praise for judicial transparency (1.7–8), Machiavelli's admiration for Titus Manlius's action (3.34.2) shows that his commitment to democratic institutional procedures was more "flexible" than we might have initially supposed. Interestingly, Titus Manlius is elevated in stature for this extraordinary assault, not only by the Roman people, but also by Machiavelli himself (3.34.1–2). Paradoxically, then, the people agreed with Machiavelli about the virtuosity of Titus Manlius, but not because of his obedience to the law or his compliance with democratic ideals—but rather because of the violent and exceptional nature of his act, which, as it happened, undermined the transparency and integrity of Rome's judicial processes. Perhaps in this way, and unexpectedly, the Roman people exhibited a prudence that Machiavelli himself could respect. But this was no ordinary democratic prudence such as McCormick discerns in *Discourse* 3.34. The same could be said of the people's respect for Titus Manlius's execution of his own son, which was a paradoxical case of violent and extraordinary compliance with the law. Although they are passionate and unpredictable, the people themselves occasionally warm to the greatness of a genuinely great individual, especially when they are driven to do so by a frightening and violent deed.

What then of the connections between this and the rest of *Discourse* 3.34? We might speculate that the red thread connecting the stories of Titus Manlius, Scipio the Elder, and Fabius Maximus is the idea that extraordinary, rare, and notable actions both establish the reputations of individuals and enable the ordinary politics of the republic to function well.<sup>45</sup> Republics need such individuals just as much as principalities need their rare and extraordinary princes (3.34.3). This model makes sense of Titus Manlius's brave and violent actions, as of Scipio the Elder's exploits in saving his father while still a boy and in extracting an oath from the soldiery after Cannae (3.34.1). But it applies less well to Fabius Maximus, who gained the support and respect of the people only after his prudent policies of delaying had proved themselves valuable in the course of the Second Punic War. Perhaps Machiavelli's idea is that Fabius could have saved the republic from additional suffering if he had acquired an extraordinary reputation earlier in life. For, after all, Machiavelli concludes this discourse by saying that "the citizen who wishes to begin to have the support of the people ought to

<sup>45</sup>The idea that extraordinary actions help the republic to function well in ordinary ways is a central claim of Mansfield, *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders*.

gain it for himself with some notable act, as did Titus Manlius" (3.34.4). Perhaps, too, Fabius began to approach this model when he criticized Ottacilius before the assembly, since Ottacilius was, as we learn from Livy (24.7–9), the husband of Fabius's granddaughter. We do not insist on this particular explanation of the connections, but we think it important to explore the logic of each *Discourse* more carefully than McCormick has done.

## Conclusion

For McCormick, the Roman people's salient attribute is foresight, while the elite's most notable quality is selfishness: "while Machiavelli extols the people's powers of foresight (D I.58), they clearly cannot foresee what is beneficial or deleterious for the common utility as quickly as the grandi foresee what is in their own interest." (90) But our investigation has yielded a different picture, in which Machiavelli's ordinary citizens often lack prudence and foresight and require the leadership of great individuals in order to keep the republic healthy.

But this does not mean that Machiavelli favors principalities over republics. Even great individuals, such as Fabius Maximus, have their limitations: as Machiavelli points out, Fabius was a "Hesitator" (*Cunctator*) largely because of his natural temperament, which would not have suited any and every political situation. Rome needed Scipio Africanus to finish the Second Punic War by attacking Carthage on its own territory. Machiavelli drew a general lesson from his reflections on circumstance and the need for flexibility:<sup>46</sup> that republics are stronger than principalities precisely because they can call on a variety of talented leaders, with a variety of politically useful attributes, who can manage the people effectively, as diverse circumstances dictate (3.9.1). If Fabius had been a king, then Rome would eventually have been defeated.

Conversely, Machiavelli undoubtedly considers the people's political forcefulness to be worthy of recognition and careful theorizing. Hence, he emphasizes the importance of finding political institutions through which the people can express their interests and vent their frustrations. But our analysis shows that Machiavelli's endorsement of popular participation in these venues does not amount to a broader theory of democratic power. To claim otherwise involves overlooking or misreading Machiavelli's deep reservations concerning democratic self-rule. The people require (often unwittingly) the leadership and judgment of prudent individuals, and in that way they assume a decidedly secondary role in Machiavelli's mixed regime.

To appreciate a text in all of its twists and complexities means to take seriously, even most seriously, whichever aspects we find especially

<sup>46</sup>On Machiavelli's emphasis on flexibility, see especially Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 36–38.

strange, provocative, or downright abhorrent. Any such hermeneutical principle will compel us to treat Machiavelli's endorsement of elite manipulation, civil religion, and the radical acts of extraordinary individuals not as deviations from an otherwise firmly democratic ideal, but rather as a criticism of that very ideal. We are convinced that careful attention to the logic and structure of individual discourses, as well as to the interconnections between these discourses, is the best way to understand these controversial yet fundamental principles of Machiavelli's political theory. McCormick insists that any interpretation of Machiavelli along the lines we have chosen is not helpful for democratic theory. To our minds, however, this is precisely the enduring challenge of Machiavelli.