

Machiavelli's *Principio*: Political Renewal and Innovation in the *Discourses on Livy*

Eero Arum

If one wishes a sect or a republic to live long,
it is necessary to draw it back often toward its beginning.

*A volere che una setta o una republica viva lungamente,
è necessario ritrarla spesso verso il suo principio.*

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* III.1

Abstract: Although Machiavelli argues that “return to first principles” is a necessary and perhaps even sufficient condition for counteracting political corruption, few scholars have engaged in a sustained textual analysis of *Discourses* III.1, the chapter in which he outlines the meaning of this enigmatic concept. Reassessing Machiavelli's *exempla* in this chapter will reveal that return to first principles consists in the revival of the ethos of innovation and public-spiritedness that accompanies every successful political founding. This process of renewal entails reviving the psychological forces that initially guide human beings to establish new political orders, including fear of violent death and longing for glory. Existing interpretations of *D* III.1 have tended to emphasize renewal through fear-invoking punishment, neglecting Machiavelli's examples of renewal through exemplary acts of civic virtue. A careful analysis of instruments and agents of return to first principles will illustrate how both spectacular punishment and virtuous acts of self-sacrifice converge to counteract corruption and foster political innovation.

Eero Arum is a graduate student in political science at the University of California, Berkeley, 210 Barrows Hall #1950, Berkeley, CA 94720 (eero.arum@berkeley.edu).

I would like to thank Clifford Ando, Adam Chan, Alex Haskins, Kinch Hoekstra, Michèle Lowrie, John P. McCormick, Nathan Tarcov, and several anonymous referees for their help with and feedback on earlier stages of this paper.

Introduction

In the whole of Niccolò Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*,¹ few arguments have proved as historically influential or as interpretively opaque as his ambiguous claim that political bodies must be periodically returned to their "first principles" or "beginnings" (*principii*) in order to survive. In the centuries that followed the publication of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli's argument for "return to first principles" was appropriated in defense of incompatible political ideologies and agendas. The phrase has been echoed by liberal republicans,² neoabsolutist authoritarians,³ social anarchists,⁴ and economic libertarians.⁵ Political theorists have variously depicted Machiavelli's concept of return to first principles as either a proto-originalist constitutional theory⁶ or an argument for ongoing constitutional innovation,⁷ a call for the ongoing renewal of public authority⁸ or a case for periodic reversions into no-rule,⁹ a dogmatic justification of the status quo¹⁰ or a defense of civic activism aimed at social and political transformation.¹¹

¹Citations to the *Discourses on Livy* (*D*) refer to the translation of Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) by book and chapter number, and to Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, in *Opere I: I Primi Scritti Politici*, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1997).

²J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 358, 407; Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 175, 431, 932.

³Benito Mussolini, "Ritorno al Principio," *Popolo d'Italia*, July 24, 1921; Carl Schmitt, "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," trans. Matthias Konzett and John P. McCormick, in *The Concept of the Political*, expanded ed., trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 94.

⁴See, e.g., Lucy Parsons, "The Principles of Anarchism," in *Freedom, Equality and Solidarity: Writings and Speeches, 1878–1937*, ed. Gale Ahrens (Chicago: Kerr, 2002), 32.

⁵See, e.g., Budd J. Hallberg, *Return to First Principles*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2012), xvi.

⁶Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 340.

⁷Claude Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 469.

⁸S. M. Shumer, "Machiavelli, Republican Politics and Its Corruption," *Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (1979): 26–27, 34n23.

⁹Miguel E. Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000), 254–63.

¹⁰Algernon Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government* (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 1996), II.11; cf. A. Scott Nelson, *The Discourses of Algernon Sidney* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1993), 45–46.

¹¹Hanna F. Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 278–79.

Yet even as numerous interpreters have attempted to condense Machiavelli's argument for return to first principles into a straightforward political teaching, almost none have engaged in a sustained textual analysis of *Discourses* III.1, the chapter in which it appears.¹² A detailed inquiry into *D* III.1 is thus in order, not simply because its historical significance warrants an attempt to understand its meaning, but also because the chapter elaborates on and establishes connections between several of the most fundamental themes in Machiavelli's political thought. For one, *D* III.1 elucidates questions concerning the relationship between the preservation and augmentation of the founding that occupy much of Machiavelli's attention in book I. Second, although the growing body of scholarship devoted to Machiavelli's understanding of corruption tends to neglect his concept of political renewal, *D* III.1 outlines one of his most important mechanisms for the prevention of political corruption.¹³ Third, attending to Machiavelli's *exempla* in *D* III.1 will demonstrate the inadequacy of Leo Strauss's identification of return to first principles with "periodic terror," illustrating one important respect in which Strauss and his followers tend to overemphasize the similarity between Machiavelli's and Thomas Hobbes's political psychologies and, accordingly, exaggerate the extent of Machiavelli's "modernity." As I argue below, the insufficiency of Strauss's reading of *D* III.1 will have significant consequences for his interpretive project as a whole, given that he considers the concept of return to first principles to be the basis of Machiavelli's political philosophy.

In section 1, I demonstrate that return to first principles does not entail the reinstatement of antiquated laws and institutions, but rather the revival of the ethos of innovation and public-spiritedness that accompanies every successful political founding. In the subsequent sections, I argue that this process of renewal entails reviving the psychological forces that initially guide human beings to establish new political orders and subordinate their private interests to what Machiavelli calls the "common good" (*bene comune*). In section 2, I examine how extraordinary and spectacular punishments remind citizens of the collective terror that initially bound them

¹²Two notable exceptions include Pitkin (*Fortune Is a Woman*, 254–84) and Vatter (*Form and Event*, 219–20, 237–63).

¹³Skinner considers the prevention of corruption the fundamental theme of the *Discourses* as a whole (Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 164), but curiously omits consideration of return to first principles. Other influential treatments of the theme of corruption in Machiavelli's political thought that neglect *D* III.1 include David N. Levy, *Wily Elites and Spirited Peoples in Machiavelli's Republicanism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), chap. 3; Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli's Three Romes: Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996), chap. 4; and Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 131–43. A rare exception is Shumer, "Machiavelli, Republican Politics and Its Corruption" (see 22–27).

together. However, in section 3 I argue that scholars who identify return to first principles *solely* with fear-invoking punishment overlook several of Machiavelli's most important *exempla* in *D* III.1, leading them to derive a simplistically proto-Hobbesian account of Machiavelli's political psychology. Section 4 is devoted to an analysis of these exemplars of civic virtue, who are linked by their willingness to sacrifice themselves on behalf of the common good, and, in the majority of cases, by their pursuit of honor and glory rather than material gain. A careful analysis of Machiavelli's examples of instruments and agents of return to first principles will illustrate how both spectacular punishment *and* virtuous acts of self-sacrifice converge to counteract corruption and foster political innovation.

1. Renewal and Innovation in Machiavelli's *Discourses*

At first glance, Machiavelli's temporally inflected language of "return toward the beginning" (*riduzione verso il principio*), along with his praise for the Romans' renewal of "all the orders of their ancient religion" after the Gallic invasion, seems to support a reactionary interpretation of *D*.III 1. Yet it would be wrong to conclude from this chapter, as certain readers have,¹⁴ that Machiavelli advises political leaders to reinstitute previously existing laws and institutions without respect to the demands of their unique historical circumstances.

The "beginning" to which Machiavelli urges a "return" cannot simply be identified with a legal or institutional condition at any prior temporal moment. The Italian word *principio* does not necessarily carry a temporal connotation: like the Latin word *principium*, it can refer both to a chronological starting point, a source or origin in the logical sense, and a fundamental principle. Moreover, reading *D* III.1 as advocating the reinstatement of previously existing political institutions would contradict Machiavelli's insistence that not only "laws" (*leggi*) but also "orders" (*ordini*)—the structures of rules that organize the ordinary processes of legislation and politics—become outmoded if they are not altered in response to unpredictable "accidents" (*accidenti*) that emerge over time (*D* I.18; cf. *D* III.9). In recommending periodic political renewal, Machiavelli encourages not only ongoing legal reform, but also periodic transformations in political form in response to fluctuating internal and external conditions.¹⁵ The longevity of

¹⁴Such misreadings of *D* III.1 include, for example, the interpretations advanced by Hallberg, *Return to First Principles*, xvi; Rakove, *Original Meanings*, 340; Sidney, *Discourses Concerning Government*, 2.11; and representatives of the American Whig Party in "Opinions of the Council of Three: Political Bigotry, Conservatism, Radicalism," *American Whig Review* 6, no. 3 (1847): 243.

¹⁵This point has been emphasized by radical-democratic interpreters such as Christopher Holman, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 259–65; Lefort, *Machiavelli in the Making*, 343; and

a constitutional order is determined, in part, by its *flexibility*.¹⁶ Even Machiavelli's apparently conservative account of Roman religious renewal after the Gallic invasion emphasizes the duality of preservation and innovation: the revival of Rome's ancient religious orders helped the city to be "reborn" (*rinascesse*) and, through this process, to attain "new life and new virtue" (*nuova vita e nuova virtù*) (*D* III.1, emphases added).

Although Machiavelli's emphasis on the need for constitutional flexibility might appear to conflict with his call for return to beginnings, his conception of the "beginnings" of well-ordered political communities encompasses far more than the institutional structures present at their inception. In describing the "beginning" (*principio*) of Rome, which he takes as his model of an exemplary regime and encourages others to imitate (cf. *D* I.5 and *D* I.6), Machiavelli ascribes the creation of the original Roman laws to "Romulus, Numa, and the others," but conspicuously declines to specify who these "others" were, leaving the reader to wonder if the original Roman constitution ought to be attributed to several men or to untold thousands, and whether it was formulated over the course of several decades or many centuries (*D* I.1). In the following chapter, Machiavelli writes that Rome's foundational "laws" (*leggi*) were enacted not "by one alone and at a stroke," but "by chance and at many different times, and according to accidents [*accidenti*]" (*D* I.2); in other words, the early Roman Republic developed incidentally and accidentally as it adapted to fluctuating historical circumstances. Insofar as the growth of the Roman political system was contingent and unplanned, its development was not circumscribed by a set of prearranged, inviolable legal norms. Thus, if we are to take Rome as our example, the "beginning" of a well-ordered republic would seem to be a developmental process that occurs over an extended period of time, an event that is continually extended into the present and projected into the future.

Vatter, *Form and Event*, 250–51. Strauss and his followers also tend to emphasize the need for ongoing political innovation (Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 167; cf. Mansfield, *New Modes and Orders*, 299–300), but Strauss stipulates that this continual refounding must be carried out by a republic's "leading men throughout the ages, or its ruling class" (*Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 44; cf. 130). This stipulation seems unwarranted, given that Machiavelli explicitly cites the tribune of the plebs—an institution established and controlled by the plebeian class—as an instrument of return to first principles. See John P. McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 164–66, on class politics in Strauss's reading of Machiavelli.

¹⁶See John P. McCormick, "Addressing the Political Exception: Machiavelli's 'Accidents' and the Mixed Regime," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 4 (1993): 892–96; M. T. Clarke, "Machiavelli and the Imagined Rome of Renaissance Humanism," *History of Political Thought* 36, no. 3 (2015): 465–69; Cary J. Nederman, "Machiavelli and Moral Character: Principality, Republic and the Psychology of Virtù," *History of Political Thought* 21, no. 3 (2000): 360–61.

The two Roman political institutions Machiavelli cites as examples of instruments of return to first principles in *D* III.1, the tribune of the plebs and the office of the censorship, illustrate the necessity of ongoing legal and constitutional reform. The creation of the tribune altered the structure of the Roman constitution by giving the plebeians an unprecedented role in politics, granting the constitution a popular element in addition to its monarchic and aristocratic features (*D* I.2; cf. *D* I.3). Additionally, the establishment of the popular tribunate created future opportunities for political innovation by institutionalizing class conflict, channeling the plebeians' desire not to be oppressed into the creation of laws and institutions aimed at counteracting patricians' appetite for oppression.¹⁷ The creation of the Roman censorship was similarly a departure from, rather than a reinstatement of, Rome's original laws and institutions. In book I, Machiavelli initially discusses the establishment of the censorship as an example for the successful introduction of "new orders" (*nuovi ordini*) in a situation where antiquated political institutions failed to meet the demands of novel historical circumstances (*D* I.49). Like the popular tribunate, the office of the censor served partly as a mechanism for constraining the ambition of elites; its existence helped to "renew" the civic body, counteracting its natural tendency toward degeneration and corruption, by maintaining the accountability of magistrates and public officials.¹⁸

Machiavelli describes return to first principles as a process of political renewal,¹⁹ and renewal necessarily entails innovation. To "renew" (*rinnovare*) is to make something as if new, but it is also to recommence, to begin again, and thus to "innovate" (*innovare*), or introduce something for the first time. If any distinction could ordinarily be drawn between "renewal" (*rinnovazione*) and "innovation" (*innovazione*), Machiavelli blurs the difference by using the terms interchangeably. At *D* I.18 Machiavelli uses *rinnovare* and *innovare* as synonyms in describing a set of legal reforms: "the laws that were renewed [*rinnovavano*] were no longer enough to keep men good; but they would indeed have helped if the orders had been changed together with the innovation [*innovazione*] in laws." Later in the same chapter, Machiavelli proposes that "orders have to be renewed [*rinnovavano*] all at a stroke . . . or little by little," and subsequently refers to the former of these options as that of "innovating [*innovare*] these orders at a stroke." Since the form of

¹⁷See *D* I.18, where Machiavelli notes that the tribunes possessed authority to propose laws and conduct discussion among the assembled people; cf. John P. McCormick's discussion in *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chap. 4.

¹⁸Cf. Mansfield, *New Modes and Orders*, 148 and 252; Jotham Parsons, "The Roman Censors in the Renaissance Political Imagination," *History of Political Thought* 22, no. 4 (2001): 565–86.

¹⁹"The mode of renewing them [*rinnovargli*] is, as was said, to lead them back toward their beginnings [*ridurgli verso e' principii suoi*]" (*D* III.1).

“renewal” Machiavelli describes in *D III.1* is therefore inherently innovative, transformative, and transgressive of the status quo, it is unsurprising that the following chapters are devoted to analyzing forms of dramatic political upheaval: regicides and conspiracies (*D III.2–6*), abrupt “changes” (*mutazioni*) between servitude and freedom (*D III.7*), and the internal “alteration” (*alterazione*) of republics (*D III.8*).

Machiavelli’s theory of return to first principles is undoubtedly radical in its political implications. As noted above, at least one scholar has even mistaken the concept of return to first principles for a “theory of revolutions” which celebrates a liberating condition of no-rule.²⁰ However, Machiavelli’s concept of return to first principles does not aim at the subversion of the state; on the contrary, Machiavelli emphasizes through his medical analogy that ongoing renewal is precisely what enables the state to sustain itself under changing external conditions by bolstering its health and longevity (*D III.1*). For Machiavelli, the survival of a political system depends on its capacity to adapt itself in accordance with unprecedented moments of disruption, and to channel the internal forces of social tumult and disorder into engines of constitutional innovation.

2. Fear, Punishment, and Exceptional Politics

Machiavelli’s examples of individuals and institutions that prompt a *riduzione verso il principio* illustrate that the *principio* to which he refers is a collective state of mind that guides self-interested human beings to devote themselves to pursuing the common good and to engage in acts of political innovation. This foundational politico-psychological condition, which consists in a combination of fear of death and desire for eternal glory, can be “renewed” through two primary mechanisms: spectacular and often extraordinary punishments that instill terror in citizens prone to corruption, and self-sacrificial acts of civic virtue that inspire citizens to promote the public good.

Numerous interpreters have argued that the *principio* to which Machiavelli refers in *D III.1* is *solely* the primal fear of violent death that characterizes political foundings, and which can be revived through spectacular punishments that remind citizens that their physical security is contingent on their obedience to political authority.²¹ These scholars follow Strauss’s suggestion

²⁰Vatter, *Form and Event*, 219–20, 241, 245, 247, 260–61.

²¹See Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s New Modes and Orders: A Study of the “Discourses on Livy”* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 299–305; Matthew Spalding, “The American Prince? George Washington’s Anti-Machiavellian Moment,” in *Machiavelli’s Liberal Republican Legacy*, ed. Paul A. Rahe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 175; Vickie B. Sullivan, “Muted and Manifest English Machiavellianism: The Reconciliation of Machiavellian Republicanism with Liberalism in Sidney’s *Discourses Concerning Government* and Trenchard and Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters*,” in *Machiavelli’s Liberal Republican Legacy*, 70–71; Sullivan,

that “Machiavelli’s return to the beginning means return to the primeval or original terror which precedes every man-made terror, which explains why the founder must use terror and which enables him to use terror.”²² Strauss detects a protoliberal or quasi-Epicurean element in Machiavelli’s theory of return to beginnings: he argues that Machiavelli’s theory of political renewal, like the political philosophies of Hobbes and Lucretius, aims to ground political authority on the fear of death and the desire for self-preservation. Strauss’s interpretation is superior to many in that it understands Machiavelli’s *principio* as a flexible politico-psychological condition, rather than a rigid set of laws and institutions linked to a specific moment in the actual past. Although Strauss’s reading of *D* III.1 is ultimately flawed on several counts—particularly, as I will argue, in that it neglects Machiavelli’s examples of political renewal that involve glory-seeking acts of self-sacrificial virtue—it will be elucidating to consider its merits.

Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock have persuasively argued that Machiavelli uses the term “corruption” (*corruzione*) in a political sense to describe a condition in which rulers and citizens relentlessly pursue private aims at the expense of the common good.²³ Indeed, a substantial number of Machiavelli’s *exempla* in *D* III.1—including the sons of Brutus, the decemvirs, Spurius Maelius, and Manlius Capitolinus—were prominent members of the elite who conspired to undermine republican institutions in pursuit of power and personal gain. The sons of Brutus joined a band of disgruntled young nobles who sought to overthrow the nascent republic and replace it with an oligarchy (*D* I.16);²⁴ the decemvirs, headed by Appius Claudius, eliminated institutional obstacles to their command and transformed a commission for legal reform into the “unequivocal prince of Rome” (*D* I.40).²⁵

Three Romes, 153–57; Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 266; John M. Warner and John T. Scott, “Sin City: Augustine and Machiavelli’s Reordering of Rome,” *Journal of Politics* 73, no. 3 (2011): 857–71; Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 166–67, 278; Catherine H. Zuckert, *Machiavelli’s Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 208–12, 487.

²²Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 167.

²³Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 184; Quentin Skinner, “Machiavelli on *Virtù* and the Maintenance of Liberty,” in *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2, *Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 163–64; Skinner, *Foundations*, 164. Skinner’s and Pocock’s account of *corruzione* finds support in *D* I.17, where Machiavelli identifies early Rome’s “lack of corruption” with its “men having a good end,” and *D* I.18, where he equates the corruption of the late republican period with the tendency of the few to propose laws that advanced their own power rather than the common good. Similarly, Machiavelli later defines a corrupt political proposal as one “put forward by men interested in what they can get from the public, rather than in its good” (*D* II.22).

²⁴Cf. Livy, *Histories* 2.3–5.

²⁵Cf. *ibid.*, 3.56–58.

Maelius procured the national supply of corn, created an artificial shortage so as to induce starvation, and then provided handouts to the plebs in an effort to make himself king (*D* III.28).²⁶ Likewise, Manlius Capitolinus sought to acquire kingship by turning the plebs against the Senate and the consuls (*D* I.8, *D* III.8).²⁷ Machiavelli's praise of the Romans' accusation and execution of these individuals is consistent with his teaching on the mitigation of corruption in book I, where he recommends popularly judged political trials and capital punishment as the most effective means of ensuring elite accountability (*D* I.7, *D* I.49).²⁸ And at the end of *D* III.1, Machiavelli similarly suggests that the French system of *parlements* (supreme legal courts) serves as "an obstinate executor against the nobility," renewing French *leggi* and *ordini* whenever it "makes an execution against a prince" or "condemns a king."

But it is not immediately clear how these punitive measures constitute a return to first principles, or what Machiavelli means when he claims that punishment causes men to "draw back toward the mark" (*ritirare verso il segno*). Machiavelli clarifies the meaning of this enigmatic statement by elaborating on the positive effect punishment serves: "one should not wish ten years at most to pass from one to another of such executions; for when this time is past, men begin to vary in their customs and to transgress the laws. Unless something arises by which punishment is brought back to their memory and fear is renewed in their spirits, soon so many delinquents join together that they can no longer be punished without danger" (*D* III.1). Machiavelli frames spectacular punishment as a means of reaffirming public authority by imposing a sense of terror on potential criminals or defectors (*delinquenti*),²⁹ thereby counteracting political corruption and social disintegration. He thus draws a conceptual link between return to first principles and the renewal of a form of collective fear that plays a central and indispensable role in political life. But Machiavelli's account of the positive effect of violent punishment raises further interpretive and theoretical problems, especially owing to the ambiguous status of his temporally inflected language of recollection and renewal. Does spectacular punishment somehow recall the memory of a foundational event of lawmaking violence? Or, as Strauss suggests, is the fear that is renewed through these punitive acts akin to the

²⁶Cf. *ibid.*, 4.13–16.

²⁷Cf. *ibid.*, 6.11–20. Several of Machiavelli's other examples of renewal through punishment involve figures who allegedly harmed the public good in some other manner: Titus Manlius and Fabius each disobeyed important military orders (*D* I.31–32), and the Scipios were accused of misappropriating public funds (*D* I.29); cf. Livy, *Histories* 8.7–8, 8.30–36, 38.50–60; Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 3.7.

²⁸See McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, chap. 5 (esp. 115–17).

²⁹*Delinquenti* is etymologically derived from the Latin word *dēlinquō*, "to transgress," which in turn comes from the verb *linquō*, "to leave" (e.g., a system).

“primeval terror” that initially guides human beings to form political communities?

Machiavelli elaborates on the connection between return to first principles, punitive violence, and fear of death in his allusion to the governing practices of the Medici rulers—who said “that it was necessary to regain the state every five years” by “putting that terror and that fear in men *that had been put there in taking it*” (*D* III.1, emphasis added). Machiavelli refers to the Florentine *balìa*, a set of special powers that were granted to magistrates or councils in emergency situations so as to suspend normal legislative and judicial procedures and expedite decision-making.³⁰ Machiavelli considered the Medici dynasty a tyranny, and rarely upheld their practices as a positive model for imitation without some degree of irony. The fact that the Medici are said to inflict spectacular punishments every *five* years, rather than waiting the suggested duration of ten, raises the possibility that Machiavelli considers their punishments excessive. Nevertheless, Machiavelli’s reference to the *balìa* clarifies that return to first principles specifically aims to reinvoke the terror that accompanies moments of political founding.

Machiavelli emphasizes that political foundings and refoundings are often accompanied by spectacular violence,³¹ and he also suggests that collective terror plays an important role in the emergence of the earliest political communities. In *D* I.1, Machiavelli posits that individuals are initially drawn to enter political society by their fear of physical danger and their desire to “live securely” by joining forces for mutual defense. Human beings’ aversion to the chaos that lies beyond the comforts of civilization impels them to embrace political authority and identify their private interests with the common good. This anthropological principle might help to explain why Machiavelli emphasizes the relationship between spectacular violence and political renewal. If the emergence of human civilization is contingent on collective terror, civilization will collapse in turn if citizens—who are naturally inclined to selfish, oppressive, and asocial behavior (cf. *P* 17)³²—are not periodically reminded of the primal fear that initially bound them together.³³ In particular, Machiavelli teaches that the “great” (*grandi*), who seek to enrich

³⁰Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 77–80.

³¹Cf. Machiavelli’s discussion of Romulus and Cleomenes in *D* I.9, of the sons of Brutus in *D* I.16, and of new princes in *D* I.26. See also Yves Winter, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), chap. 4.

³²Citations to *The Prince* (*P*) refer to the translation of Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) by chapter number.

³³See Gabriele Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult: The “Discourses on Livy” and the Origins of Political Conflictualism*, trans. Patricia Gaborik and Richard Nybakken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), chap. 3; Nathan Tarcov, “Law and Innovation in Machiavelli’s *Prince*,” in *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Svetozar Minkov (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 89; Warner and Scott, “Sin City,” 866–68.

themselves to the detriment of the more decent interests of the “people” (*popolo*), are in need of correction through recurring extralegal violence.³⁴

However, punishment is an important component of political renewal not only because it reestablishes the psychological basis for obedience to political authority and law, but also because it creates an occasion for operating *outside* the constraints of the existing legal order, thereby facilitating radical acts of innovation. When Catherine H. Zuckert claims that “the regular ‘executions’ Machiavelli states are necessary to preserve a republic . . . are not examples of the use of ‘extraordinary’ force, if ‘extraordinary’ means extralegal,” she fails to notice that many of Machiavelli’s examples of punitive violence in *D III.1*—including the executions of Maelius, Appius, the son of Titus Manlius Torquatus, and the sons of Brutus—are paradigmatic cases of exceptional politics.³⁵ Each of these figures poses an extreme threat to public order which requires the suspension of the existing legal system.

Earlier in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli argues that the inevitability of *accidenti*, unforeseeable events that disrupt routine political processes and procedures, necessitates institutional mechanisms for temporarily suspending existing norms, enabling innovation in response to fluctuating internal and external political circumstances (*D I.34*). Return to first principles—which Machiavelli frames as the result of either “intrinsic” or “extrinsic” *accidenti* or “intrinsic prudence” (*prudenza intrinseca*) (*D III.1*)—is one such mechanism for responding to unforeseen political phenomena.

An especially potent example of legal-norm suspension is Spurius Maelius, the third of Machiavelli’s *exempla* of renewal through punishment, who was executed without due process for aspiring to kingship. As Michèle Lowrie has argued, Livy’s account of this story reveals that both the nature of the threat Maelius poses and the political response to it entail an institutional mechanism for suspending the ordinary system of law: the leading senators agree that Maelius’s deed effectively negates his citizenship and renders him beyond all legal protection, and they subsequently elect a dictator who

³⁴See *P* chap. 9 for Machiavelli’s view that the *grandi* are predisposed to disregard the common good and oppress the *popolo*; for his belief that acquisitive instincts of the *grandi* must be held at bay through extralegal violence, see *P* 8–9; *D I.9* and *I.55*; and McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli*, 52–68. But cf. Catherine H. Zuckert, “Machiavelli: Radical Democratic Political Theorist?,” *Review of Politics* 81, no. 3 (2019): 499–502, for a critique of McCormick’s interpretation of class conflict in Machiavelli.

³⁵Zuckert, *Machiavelli’s Politics*, 18. In her insistence that return to first principles operates strictly within the parameters of the rule of law, Zuckert—unlike Strauss and Mansfield—tends to misunderstand the relationship between return to first principles and political innovation. See, for instance, her remark that the executions in *D III.1* are meant to “remind people of the fearsome punishments they face if they dare to transgress the laws or try to innovate” (209, emphasis added).

suspends the entire legal system and has Maelius extrajudicially killed.³⁶ A similar sort of exceptionality is at play in Machiavelli's examples of Appius Claudius, who is extrajudicially imprisoned and stripped of all legal rights,³⁷ and both Lucius Junius Brutus's and Manlius Torquatus's killings of their own sons. In these acts of filicide, the preservation of a republican legal system based on the impartial treatment of all citizens requires the suspension of social and ethical norms grounded in bonds of the nuclear family.³⁸ But the republican principle of common treatment under the law is itself subject to suspension under the logic of Machiavellian political renewal. Machiavelli commends accusations against the Scipios that, in Livy's retelling, appear to have been unjust; later in the same paragraph he also praises Cato the Elder, who helped level the false allegation against Scipio Asiaticus.³⁹

Machiavelli's final two examples of men who allegedly effected a return to first principles, St. Francis and St. Dominic, confirm the relationship between political renewal and fear of violent death. Machiavelli initially appears to praise Francis and Dominic for urging their followers to live in poverty and imitate the life of Christ; however, he promptly observes that the saints also taught their followers not to condemn acts of evil, leaving wicked men for God to punish. This teaching, Machiavelli writes, has encouraged men to "do the worst that they can because they do not fear the punishment that they do not see and do not believe" (*D* III 1). Despite Machiavelli's ironic equivocation, it seems clear that in his eyes the Franciscan and Dominican renewals of Christianity were not wholly successful, and that the *exempla* they provide are, therefore, largely negative: by curtailing violent and

³⁶Michèle Lowrie, "Spurius Maelius: Homo Sacer and Dictatorship," in *Citizens of Discord: Rome and Its Civil Wars*, ed. Brian Breed, Cynthia Damon, and Andreola Rossi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 173. In Livy's account, the dictator Cincinnatus, who is deemed "free and exempt from the shackles of law," claims that Maelius's deeds place him outside the natural boundaries of political life: "nor could one treat him as if he were a citizen, who was born in a free people among rights and laws" (Livy, *Histories*, trans. Valerie M. Warrior [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006], 4.13–15).

³⁷In Livy's *Histories*, Virginius justifies this extrajudicial punishment on the grounds that "[Appius] was the one man who had no claim on either the laws or the agreements that bind citizens and men" (Livy, *Histories* 3.57).

³⁸In a passage of Polybius's *Histories* with which Machiavelli was intimately familiar (see J. H. Hexter, "Seyssel, Machiavelli, and Polybius VI: The Mystery of the Missing Translation," *Studies in the Renaissance* 3 [1956]: 75–96), the classical historian depicts these killings as moments of justified exception to otherwise universal ethical norms: "there have been instances of men in office who have put their own sons to death, contrary to every law or custom [παρὰ πᾶν ἔθος ἢ νόμον], because they valued the interest of their country more dearly than their natural ties to their own flesh and blood" (Polybius, *Histories*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert [London: Penguin Books, 1979], 6.54, emphasis added).

³⁹Cf. Livy, *Histories* 38.50–60.

spectacular punishment, Francis and Dominic engendered corruption rather than counteracting it.⁴⁰

The foregoing analysis indicates that the spectacular punishment involved in return to first principles is not a means of maintaining or reinstating earlier legal conditions, but rather an instrument for reestablishing a politico-psychological condition that counteracts corruption and facilitates political innovation. Through the periodic repetition of extralegal violence, citizens are reminded of the collective terror that originally compels human beings to join political communities, and the *grandi's* inclination to oppress the *popolo* is held in check.

3. Beyond "Periodic Terror"

As noted above, many scholars insist that an interpretation of *D* III.1 in terms of fear of violent punishment suffices to explain every example Machiavelli gives in that chapter. Strauss asserts that "Machiavelli indicates in what the beneficent effect of *all* renovation consists" through his discussion of spectacular punishments, and later simply defines return to first principles as "periodic terror."⁴¹ Harvey C. Mansfield believes that what Machiavelli reveals in *D* III.1 is that "the purpose of the new is to inspire fear," and Paul A. Rahe defines return to first principles as "a salutary return to the primeval terror and the oppressive awareness of solitude that drove Machiavellian man into civil society in the first place."⁴² Even Pocock seems tacitly to endorse Strauss's reading by stating that "Machiavelli . . . had seen *ridurre* and *repigliare lo stato* as *no more than* an affair of exemplary purges at intervals of a few years."⁴³ However, approximately half of Machiavelli's examples in *D* III.1—including Horatius Cocles, Scaevola, Fabricius, Marcus Atilius Regulus, and the two Decii—do not fit with this simplistic identification of return to first principles with violent purges or periodic terror. Machiavelli emphasizes that exceptional punishment is only one component of internally guided political renewal: a return to first principles can arise either from a punitive "law that often looks over the account for the men who are in that body *or* indeed from a good man who arises among them, who with his examples and his virtuous works produces the same effect as the order." Machiavelli's disjunctive "*or*" (*o*) indicates that renewal through violent punishment and virtuous deeds are two distinct categories of the phenomenon of return to first principles.

The inadequacy of Strauss's reading of *D* III.1 bears directly on his interpretation of Machiavelli's political writings as a whole. As mentioned in the

⁴⁰Mansfield, *New Modes and Orders*, 304.

⁴¹Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 166 (emphasis added), 278.

⁴²Mansfield, *New Modes and Orders*, 304; Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 36.

⁴³Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 521 (emphasis added).

introduction, Strauss suggests that the entirety of Machiavelli's political thought is grounded on the protoliberal political psychology he reveals in his argument for return to first principles: "The recovery of ancient virtue consists of the reimposition of the terror and fear that had made men good at the beginning. . . . At the beginning there is not Love but Terror; Machiavelli's wholly new teaching is based on this alleged insight (which anticipates Hobbes' doctrine of the state of nature)."⁴⁴ Strauss certainly rests on solid ground in contending that there are meaningful similarities between Machiavelli's philosophical anthropology and Hobbes's.⁴⁵ However, in Strauss's singular focus on the "radical terror and fear" associated with the "beginnings" of political life, he tends to exaggerate the similarity between the psychological foundations of Machiavelli's and Hobbes's political philosophies, especially by neglecting Machiavelli's emphasis on the importance of honor, glory, and virtue in establishing and restoring political unity.⁴⁶ Strauss's comparison between Machiavelli's *principio* and Hobbes's state of nature is also misleading in that the two concepts serve radically different purposes in their respective argumentative contexts: while the former is a generative political moment that needs to be renewed, the latter is an origin that must be "remembered" precisely in order to be *avoided*.

If Strauss exaggerates the similarity between the psychological bases of Machiavelli's and Hobbes's political philosophies, it is not because he was negligent of their considerable disagreement with respect to honor and glory, but rather because he was determined to read Machiavelli as the

⁴⁴Leo Strauss, "Machiavelli," in *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd ed., ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 310.

⁴⁵This being said, Strauss's comparison may also rest partly on a simplification of Hobbes, who, despite his emphasis on fear of violent death, stresses that the establishment of political society has more than one motivational spring: "The Passions that encline men to Peace, are Feare of Death; Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a Hope by their Industry to obtain them. And Reason suggesteth convenient Articles of Peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement" (*Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 90).

⁴⁶Many scholars who have followed Strauss's example, such as Mansfield and Rahe, have similarly underestimated the importance of honor and glory in Machiavelli's political thought. Mansfield and Rahe each seem to reduce Machiavelli's entire political psychology to the single natural impulse of fear. Mansfield argues that Machiavelli's *gloria* is only another manifestation of terror: "When glory is understood in a system of necessity, so that glory-seekers perform a necessary function, it must somehow be reducible to fear" (*New Modes and Orders*, 140). Likewise, Rahe states that the terror that is renewed through Machiavelli's return to first principles is "the foundation of the only loyalty and friendship and the only sense of common purpose [human beings] will ever know" (*Republics Ancient and Modern*, 266). Predictably, both Mansfield (*Machiavelli's Virtue* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966], 51, 294) and Rahe (*Republics Ancient and Modern*, 36) present Hobbes as the direct inheritor of Machiavelli's political project.

progenitor of modern liberalism and Hobbes as an early and confirmed disciple. In "What Is Political Philosophy?," Strauss explicitly draws attention to the stark contrast between the foundational principle of Machiavelli's political thought and that of Hobbes's: "whereas the pivot of Machiavelli's political teaching was glory, the pivot of Hobbes's political teaching is power."⁴⁷ However, in the same essay, Strauss suggests that Hobbes's disagreement with Machiavelli is relatively insignificant in light of their substantial agreement on one basic principle—namely, that political science should take its bearings not from man's teleological "natural end," but from his "beginnings": "the elementary wants or urges" that dictate human behavior in the "primary" or original condition of mankind.⁴⁸

In Strauss's view, Machiavelli and Hobbes are fundamentally in agreement on the need to find an "immoral or amoral substitute for morality," rooted in man's elementary motives, that is powerful enough to induce naturally selfish human beings to become good.⁴⁹ Whether this substitute for morality is provided by glory, self-preservation, or acquisitiveness, the underlying principle is essentially the same. Hobbesian contractualism—and, later, Lockean economism—simply draw Machiavelli's antiteleological principle to its natural conclusion by orienting politics closer and closer to man's original, fundamental motive, which is his concern not for goodness or virtue, but for survival and "mere life."⁵⁰ Strauss thus occasionally slips into a polemical mode of reading Machiavelli in the light of his reading of liberalism's conceptual forefathers, Hobbes and Locke.⁵¹

Notwithstanding Strauss's occasionally polemical portrayal of Machiavelli as a proto-Hobbesian, his interpretation of *D* III.1 might be more complex than it appears at first glance. Strauss distinguishes "Machiavelli's return to the beginning" from "ordinary return to the beginning," identifying the latter with "return to the terror accompanying the foundation," and the

⁴⁷Leo Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy?," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 48–49.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 47–48.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁰See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 248; cf. *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 180 and 184n23. Strauss seems to think that much of the trajectory of modern political thought—including even the Romantic backlash against liberal contractualism—is essentially a radicalization of Machiavelli's call for "return to beginnings." Strauss argues, for instance, that "romanticism as a whole is primarily a movement of *return to the origins*," and that the core of Rousseau's philosophical project consisted in his claim that "man ought to go back . . . [to] the absolute beginning. . . . [to] the feeling of the sweetness of mere existence" ("What Is Political Philosophy?," 50, 53, emphasis added).

⁵¹For an example of Strauss's tendency to interpret Machiavelli in Lockean as well as Hobbesian terms, see his discussion of industriousness and property accumulation in explicating Machiavelli's doctrine of "necessity" (*Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 248–49).

former with “return to the primeval or original terror *which precedes every man-made terror* . . . return to the terror inherent in man’s situation, to man’s essential unprotectedness.”⁵² Strauss seems to indicate that the terror associated with return to first principles is a fear more fundamental to human psychology than Hobbesian fear of death at the hands of other human beings. Perhaps Strauss’s “original terror” is, then, not simply fear of violent death, but rather an *existential* terror that follows from the Epicurean principle that “all worldly things have a limit to their life,” as Machiavelli states at the opening of *D* III.1, and that nothing we know or hold dear will persist indefinitely.⁵³ In Strauss’s “Notes on Lucretius,” he describes a similar set of Epicurean tenets as the source of “the fundamental fear” inherent in the human condition—the same term he uses in *Thoughts on Machiavelli* to describe the basis of Machiavelli’s political psychology.⁵⁴ Hanna Pitkin, whose understanding of return to beginnings is partly indebted to Strauss, has similarly described the terror involved in Machiavellian political renewal as “the existential fear inherent in recognizing the full extent of human responsibility, the fragility of the human order and its dependence on our commitment.”⁵⁵ From a civic republican perspective, a politics oriented around citizens’ realization of the sheer magnitude of human responsibility certainly seems more palatable than a politics oriented around fear of state-sanctioned violence.

Nevertheless, a reading of *D* III.1 that focuses exclusively on terror of any sort will fail to account for Machiavelli’s examples of citizens who performed virtuous actions that were neither punitive nor fear invoking. Scholars who consistently attempt to uphold Strauss’s interpretation of *D* III.1 have found it difficult to account for Machiavelli’s deployment of these positive examples. Mansfield, for instance, is unsuccessful at providing a convincing explanation of any principle that unifies all of the examples in *D* III.1. As he admits, “we have fourteen Romans who combine being sacrificed, sacrificing, and accusing, but no one man . . . who combined all three.”⁵⁶ This observation points to a tension that Strauss’s interpretation fails to resolve. A more rigorous application of Strauss’s insight that return to first principles entails not the reinstatement of antiquated political institutions, but rather the restoration of a foundational politico-psychological condition, will help to illuminate the sense in which each of these exemplary figures carries out a return to first principles.

⁵²Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 167.

⁵³Cf. Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 5.90–140.

⁵⁴Leo Strauss, “Notes on Lucretius,” in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 135; cf. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 248.

⁵⁵See Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 276–67.

⁵⁶Mansfield, *New Modes and Orders*, 303.

4. Glory, Exemplarity, and Political Refounding

The second major class of *exempla* in *D III.1*, which comprises a set of six men who advanced the common good at the expense of their narrowly understood self-interest, gives us a sense of how the spirit of the founding might be revived in a more positive sense than Strauss and his followers suggest. Machiavelli presents these *exempla* as illustrations of the principle that republics can be renewed through exemplary virtue rather than punitive executions: "This drawing back of republics toward their beginning [*ritiramento delle repubbliche verso il loro principio*] arises also from the simple virtue of one man, without depending on any law that stimulates you to any execution; nonetheless, they are of such reputation and so much example that good men desire to imitate them and the wicked are ashamed to hold a life contrary to them" (*D III.1*). As mentioned above, most commentators have neglected this second set of examples. Strauss himself fails to mention any of them in his discussion of *D III.1*;⁵⁷ Mansfield alludes to them in vague terms, but does not pause to reflect on any individual figure.⁵⁸ Zuckert, who is significantly more attentive to these *exempla* than either Mansfield or Strauss, attempts to account for them within the conventional Straussian interpretation of return to first principles through a parenthetical remark that "awe is akin to fear."⁵⁹ But it is not immediately clear why awe-inspiring acts of self-sacrifice would have the same effect on observers as violent punishment, and Zuckert does not elaborate on this claim.⁶⁰

A brief overview of these self-sacrificing figures will serve to illustrate the considerable disparity between Machiavelli's first class of *exempla* and his second. Horatius Cocles either deliberately sacrificed his life or put himself at great danger by single-handedly holding off enemy forces at a bridge (*D I.24*).⁶¹ Scaevola forced his own hand into a fire after failing to assassinate the enemy king Porsena (*ibid.*),⁶² and Fabricius negotiated a treaty with the Greek general Pyrrhus while refusing to accept bribes and monetary rewards.⁶³ The two Decii led their soldiers to victory by ritualistically sacrificing themselves in combat (*D II.16, III.45*);⁶⁴ Regulus Attilius, the last of the six *exempla*, kept his promise to go back to Carthage after advising the Romans not to return Carthaginian hostages, and was violently killed upon his

⁵⁷See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 166–67; "Machiavelli," 309–11.

⁵⁸Mansfield, *New Modes and Orders*, 303.

⁵⁹Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 210.

⁶⁰Zuckert's account of these figures' contribution to political renewal is especially weak when applied to Fabricius, whose "awe-inspiring" action consists not in any form of bodily self-sacrifice, but in his refusal to accept enemy bribes.

⁶¹Cf. Polybius, *Histories* 6.54–55; Livy, *Histories* 2.10.

⁶²Cf. Livy, *Histories* 2.11–13.

⁶³Cf. Plutarch, *Lives*, trans. John Dryden (New York: Random House, 2001), 1:535.

⁶⁴Cf. Livy, *Histories* 6.9, 10.28–29.

return (*D* III.25).⁶⁵ There are at least two important commonalities among these stories. First, each of the figures demonstrates his virtue through some form of self-sacrifice in which he relinquishes either his material self-interest, bodily integrity, or worldly existence. Second, in the majority of these cases, the exemplary figures' virtuous actions are publicly commemorated in a manner that emphasizes public recognition at the expense of economic reward, illustrating that material acquisitiveness ought to be subordinated to the countervailing passion of *gloria*.

The examples of Horatius Cocles and Scaevola exhibit each of these two qualities. Machiavelli introduces Cocles and Scaevola in *D* I.24, where he argues that punishments can effectively discourage citizens from advancing their private interests over the common good *only* when leaders also encourage virtuous behavior through the bestowal of honors. Cocles and Scaevola are Machiavelli's key examples of how a republic should "institute rewards and punishments for their citizens," and his account of their commemoration emphasizes that they were rewarded through ceremonial public glorification rather than substantial material rewards. Indeed, Machiavelli conspicuously alters Livy's account of these figures' public commemoration so as to downplay the value of the material gifts they received. Livy says that the Roman state rewarded Cocles by building him a statue in the Comitium, having every citizen give him something from his private store, and providing him with "as much land as could be traced around with a plow in a single day";⁶⁶ the Senate rewarded Scaevola, in Livy's account, by giving him a sizable plot of land across from the Tiber and naming it after him.⁶⁷ Machiavelli, in contrast, says that Cocles and Scaevola were each given only two *staiora* of land, a Tuscan measure equivalent to approximately half of what was needed to support a single person (*D* I.24).⁶⁸ Given that even the poorest Roman farmers ought to have possessed at least two *staiora* of land for mere subsistence, the "rewards" Machiavelli has the Romans give Cocles and Scaevola seem extraordinarily and improbably meager.

Immediately after his discussion of Cocles and Scaevola, Machiavelli goes on to downplay the extent of Manlius Capitolinus's material compensation, stating that the Romans gave him only "a small measure of flour" for his service. In contrast, Livy says that each of Manlius's soldiers brought him both a measure of spelt *and* a chalice of wine.⁶⁹ Machiavelli's alterations of each of these stories seem to indicate that it is the prospect of social

⁶⁵Cf. Livy, *Periochae* 18.

⁶⁶Livy, *Histories* 2.10.

⁶⁷Ibid., 2.13.

⁶⁸See Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 60n4; Leslie J. Walker, *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli* (London: Routledge, 1991), 52n5.

⁶⁹Livy, *Histories* V.47; see Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 60n5. Few scholars have noticed Machiavelli's changes to these stories, and none seem to have reflected at length upon his intention in making these alterations.

recognition, rather than material gain, that ought to encourage citizens to behave virtuously.⁷⁰ Indeed, Machiavelli prefaces the stories of Cocles, Scaevola, and Manlius by emphasizing that it is honor, rather than wealth, that is the soldiers' reward: "every small gift given to anyone, in recompense for a good however great, will always be esteemed by him who receives it as honorable [*onorevole*] and very great" (*D* I.24).

The three *exempla* that follow Cocles and Scaevola are similarly characterized by their love of honor and their virtuous prioritization of the common good over private gain. While Machiavelli has little to say about Fabricius outside of *D* III.1, Plutarch's *Lives*, which Machiavelli likely drew upon in writing that chapter, emphasizes Fabricius's stubborn resistance to bribery and his intense love of glory. Fabricius consistently rejects offers of money and gifts from the Greek general Pyrrhus, and he objects to Epicurean ethical teachings on the grounds that aversion to glory makes men weak and unmotivated.⁷¹

In Machiavelli's rendering of the story of the two Decii, imitative desire for glory is the psychological force that inspires citizens to carry out virtuous acts of self-sacrifice, and thus also to overcome fear of death. Decius the Elder's ritual self-sacrifice at the Battle of Vesuvius initiates a chain of imitative action that not only propels his soldiers to sacrifice their lives in combat, contributing to a major Roman victory, but also subsequently inspires Decius the Younger, Fabius Maximus Rullianus, and each of their respective armies to sacrifice or at least risk their own lives in the Battle of Sentium. At Sentium, Machiavelli writes, Decius the Younger "sacrificed himself to the Roman legions in imitation of his father, so as to acquire with death the glory [*gloria*] he had been unable to attain with victory." This act inspires Fabius, in turn, to order his reserve troops into battle "so as not to acquire less honor [*onore*] by living than his colleague had acquired by dying," resulting in another "very happy victory for Rome" (*D* III.45).

We find another exemplar of virtuous self-sacrifice in Regulus Attilius, the Roman general who suffered a horrendous death in the first Punic War after keeping his promise to return to Carthage. Machiavelli later states that Regulus and another exceptionally virtuous figure, Cincinnatus, are "notable" because of their "poverty, and the fact that they were content with it, and that *it was enough to those citizens to get honor [onore] from war, and everything useful [utile] they left to the public*" (*D* III.25, emphasis added). Machiavelli's nonpunitive examples of return to first principles thus exhibit several important and related qualities: willingness and even eagerness to

⁷⁰Cf. Machiavelli's argument that soldiers "who engage in combat for their own glory" are more effective and trustworthy than mercenaries (*D* I.43); cf. *P* 12 and Niccolò Machiavelli, *Art of War*, trans. Christopher Lynch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 109–10 (5.94–106).

⁷¹Plutarch, *Lives*, 535. On Machiavelli's appropriation of Plutarch in *D* III.1, see Mansfield and Tarcov, *Discourses*, 211nn19 and 22.

face near-certain violent death, pursuit of public honors and recognition, and rejection of material incentives for virtuous action. Machiavelli's favorable attitude toward these figures offers an important source for understanding his perspective on the proper role of acquisitiveness in political life, a topic that has been the source of considerable disagreement in recent scholarship.⁷²

Machiavelli's pairing of glory-seeking and fear-inspiring *exempla* in illustrating his concept of return to first principles—which we have seen to consist in the revival of a foundational collective psychological condition—suggests that desire for glory, like fear of violent death, may be an “original principle” of political life. It is clear that for Machiavelli, political life is inconceivable in abstraction from glory. Since longing for eternal glory is the psychological force that guides human beings to found new political orders and refound existing ones,⁷³ *gloria*—and not simply fear of death or physical insecurity—enables human beings to transcend the bestial, solitary, and atomized prepolitical existence Machiavelli depicts in *D I.2*.⁷⁴ Moreover, since glory is the essential passion that motivates founders and refounders to engage in acts of political creation, to foster love of glory is to promote a politico-psychological condition favorable to political innovation. In particular, agonistic competition for glory can create a political atmosphere conducive to populist socioeconomic and institutional reform. While Strauss and his followers may be correct to argue that desire for glory is primarily a passion of the *grandi* rather than of the *popolo*,⁷⁵ it is crucial that the *grandi* depend on the *popolo* for fulfillment of this desire. As Machiavelli suggests toward the end of his “Discursus on Florentine Affairs,” a political leader's posthumous glory ultimately rests on his popular reputation.⁷⁶

To present the concept of return to first principles as purely or primarily Hobbesian in its politico-psychological outlook is to overlook one crucial respect in which Machiavelli, in his endorsement of a classical heroic code

⁷²See Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics*, 147n63 and “Machiavelli: Radical Democratic Political Theorist?,” 502.

⁷³See *D I* 10.6; *P* 24 and 26; cf. Victoria Kahn, “Revisiting Agathocles,” *Review of Politics* 75, no. 4 (2013): 572.

⁷⁴See Markus Fischer, “Machiavelli's Political Psychology,” *Review of Politics* 59, no. 4 (1997): 811, who argues, adapting a phrase from Neal Wood, that Machiavelli's *gloria* endows self-interested human beings with an “unsocial sociality”; cf. Neal Wood, “The Value of Asocial Sociability: Contributions of Machiavelli, Sidney, and Montesquieu,” in *Machiavelli and the Nature of Political Thought*, ed. Martin Fleisher (New York: Atheneum, 1972), 282–307.

⁷⁵Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 134, 250; Mansfield and Tarcov, introduction to *Discourses on Livy*, xxviii.

⁷⁶Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discursus on Florentine Affairs*, in *Opere I*, 741–42, 745; cf. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 103–7, esp. 104.

of honor, is decidedly more “ancient” than “modern.”⁷⁷ Unlike Hobbes, who criticizes the classical honor ethic and aims to diminish and control glory-seeking in order to minimize civic conflict, Machiavelli advocates an agonistic model of republicanism that centers largely around the promotion and manipulation of citizens’ passionate desire for glory and honor. Machiavelli’s praise of the Roman honor ethic, and his attendant endorsement of the tumultuousness and discord of the Roman Republic, are directly opposed to Hobbes’s project of internal pacification.⁷⁸

In one sense, then, Strauss goes astray when he suggests that *D* III.1 provided the politico-psychological groundwork of Hobbes’s state of nature theory and the liberal republican tradition that followed. But Strauss is correct to highlight this chapter as a foundational passage in early modern state theory, for it contains the origins of the idea that public authority must be periodically restored by reestablishing its connection to its popular psychological foundations. Indeed, this is a notion that animated the tradition of Anglo-American republicanism, spanning from mid-seventeenth century English Parliamentarians to the late-eighteenth century American Federalists.⁷⁹

Conclusion

To return to first principles is to renew the past, and thus to innovate upon the modes and orders of antiquity. If “conservatism” means adherence to original laws and institutions out of veneration for their longevity, the argument of *D* III.1 is anything but conservative. But at the same time, Machiavelli’s interest in preserving the spirit of the founding guides him to embrace the internal dynamism of Roman republicanism. His endorsement of continual refounding is thus motivated by an impulse that is, albeit in a very unusual sense, quite literally “conservative.” The polarizing dichotomies of contemporary political discourse, which place preservation of the founding in stark opposition to the progressivism of “living constitutionalism,” are an impediment to

⁷⁷I am in agreement with scholars who have argued, *pace* Strauss, that Machiavelli is neither strictly “ancient” nor “modern,” but rather an interstitial figure between antiquity and modernity. See Patrick J. Coby, *Machiavelli’s Romans: Liberty and Greatness in the “Discourses on Livy”* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), esp. 2–12; Roger D. Masters, *Machiavelli, Leonardo, and the Science of Power* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 338; and Cary J. Nederman, “Machiavelli and Moral Character: Principality, Republic, and the Psychology of *Virtù*,” *History of Political Thought* 21 (2000): 363–64.

⁷⁸On Hobbes’s rejection of the Roman honor ethic, see *On the Citizen*, trans. Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Epistle Dedicatory, p. 3, and *Leviathan*, chap. 2. For his emphasis on peace as the overarching objective of the state, see *Leviathan*, chaps. 16 and 25.

⁷⁹See Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 358–59; see also 518; cf. Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (New York: Norton, 1969), 613.

understanding Machiavelli's political thought. Contrary to existing interpretations of *D III.1*, Machiavelli's argument for return to first principles is neither a reactionary case for the imitation of the past, nor a protomodern "theory of revolutions," nor simply a reminder of the need for "periodic terror." It is, rather, a mode of political innovation that aims to sustain political bodies by periodically reestablishing the popular foundations of political authority.

Public authority is grounded in a collective state of mind that Machiavelli calls "reverence" (*riverezia*), and this encompasses the range of psychological motives that originally impel fundamentally self-interested human beings to subordinate their private interests to the good of their political communities.⁸⁰ To return to the *principii* of political life is thus not only to revive the dynamic spirit of the founding, but also to return to the first principles of political psychology—namely, fear of death and longing for eternal glory—each of which seeks to escape the necessary fact of human mortality.⁸¹ The renewal of these psychological forces combats the natural tendency of degeneration inherent to all political communities by restoring the social bonds that initially make collective human existence possible.

Machiavelli's key insight in *D III.1* is that the psychological foundations of political community must be periodically renewed in order to maintain the health of political bodies. It is in this sense that we ought to understand his reformulation of the concept of political renewal toward the end of *D III.1*: "nothing is more necessary in a common way of life [*vivere comune*], whether it is sect or kingdom or republic, than to give back to it the reputation [*riputazione*] it had in its beginnings." This "reputation" is the popular foundation of political authority, which, in Machiavelli's view, is the only stable, secure, and enduring foundation on which all governments ultimately rest.

Several of the most prominent thinkers of the Anglo-American liberal republican tradition were enthralled by Machiavelli's idea of a return to first principles. James Harrington,⁸² John Pym,⁸³ Algernon

⁸⁰Machiavelli seems to identify the "goodness" (*bontà*) of political beginnings with the quasi-religious "reverence" citizens feel toward new leaders and nascent laws or institutions: his statement that "all the beginnings of republics, sects, and kingdoms must have some goodness in them" (*tutti e' principii . . . conviene che abbiano in sè qualche bontà*) (*D III.1*) mirrors his assertion that "all states have some reverence in their beginning" (*tutti gli stati nel principio hanno qualche riverezia*) (*D I.2*). In the context of the anacyclic sequence of *D I.2*, this spirit of "reverence" seems to originate from citizens' recollection of the horrors of tyrannical government and their gratitude to live under a "popular state." The "reverence" Machiavelli identifies with the "goodness" of beginnings is, then, a collective attitude of respect and appreciation the people feel toward their regime and its laws.

⁸¹See Hillyar Zmora, "A World without a Saving Grace: Glory and Immortality in Machiavelli," *History of Political Thought* 28, no. 3 (2007): 449–68.

⁸²Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 394.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 358.

Sidney,⁸⁴ John Trenchard, and Thomas Gordon⁸⁵ each explicitly or implicitly appealed to *D III.1*; so, for that matter, did George Washington⁸⁶ and Charles Sumner.⁸⁷ However, many aspects of Machiavelli's concept of return to first principles—which entails the instrumentalization of state-sanctioned violence, the suspension of legal and juridical norms, and the manipulation of individual wills to advance collective aims—should trouble a modern liberal audience. Indeed, we have seen that in *D III.1* Machiavelli rejects all higher-order legal norms, endorses a militaristic glory ethic, and asserts that political life necessarily takes place against a backdrop of collective terror.

Yet despite the evident disparities between liberal and Machiavellian republicanism, there is a basic affinity between the core principles of modern political thought and the themes that underlie Machiavelli's theory of political renewal. Machiavelli's concept of return to first principles gives expression to the characteristically "modern" thoughts that the nature of political authority can be appropriately understood by accounting for how human beings emerge from an imagined prepolitical condition into political life, that the maintenance of public authority rests on the effective channeling and manipulation of self-interest, and that the key to effective governance lies in rulers' ability to maintain a reputation among their citizens that legitimizes their own rule. Taking these factors into account, Machiavelli's concept of return to first principles may indeed have substantially influenced the trajectory of modern liberal political thought, but in a quite different sense than Strauss and his followers have typically assumed.

⁸⁴Nelson, *Discourses*, 45–46.

⁸⁵Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 248; Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Formation of Liberal Republicanism in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 244–47.

⁸⁶Spalding, "The American Prince?," 175.

⁸⁷Charles Sumner, *No Property in Man: Speech of Hon. Charles Sumner on the Proposed Amendment of the Constitution Abolishing Slavery through the United States* (New York: Loyal Publication Society, 1864), 19.