

Aristocratic *Insolenzia* and the Role of Senates in Machiavelli's Mixed Republic

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Abstract: This essay offers an alternative to influential interpretations of elites, peoples, and senates in Niccolò Machiavelli's theory of mixed republics. It analyzes in greater depth both Machiavelli's ascription of the morally objectionable and politically dangerous trait of *insolenzia* to the nobles as a social class; and his justifications for the establishment of senates as institutions that partially remedy the problem of aristocratic insolence—justifications that depart from traditional Ciceronian and Polybian standards. Machiavelli demonstrates in *The Prince*, the *Discourses*, and the *Florentine Histories* that republics with senates, such as ancient Rome, manage to mollify aristocratic insolence, while those lacking them, like modern Florence, permit such insolence to proliferate unchecked. Moreover, Machiavelli intimates, republics that collectively gather nobles within senate chambers are afforded the opportunity to entirely eliminate aristocratic insolence. The essay concludes with an analysis of senatorial institutions in Machiavelli's "Discursus on Florentine Matters."

Niccolò Machiavelli exhorts republics to adopt mixed constitutions that incorporate political contributions from both elites and the common people.¹ Eminent scholars such as Leo Strauss and Quentin Skinner largely agree on this point, despite their well-known interpretative differences over the

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¹Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe (De Principatibus)*, composed circa 1513 and published in 1532, ed. G. Inglese (Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1995), hereafter *P*; Machiavelli, *Discorsi* [1513–19], ed. C. Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1997), hereafter *D*; and Niccolò Machiavelli, *Istorie Fiorentine* [1523], ed. Franco Gaeta (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962), hereafter *FH*.

Florentine's political thought.² Both Strauss and Skinner consider Machiavelli to be an advocate of mixed republics, even if Strauss attributes a certain moral or political superiority to elite motivations, while Skinner understands elites and peoples to be equally deficient in disposition and judgment. Strauss attributes to Machiavelli the following view: "It is in the best interest of the people that it be confronted and led by a virtuous and warlike nobility with which it shares political power in due proportion. . . . If there is a proper proportion between the force of the great and the force of the people. . . . [a republic will observe] public liberty and proper consideration for the common good."³ Skinner writes that Machiavelli advises republics to integrate constitutionally both the great and the people "in such a way as to engineer a tensely balanced equilibrium between these opposed social forces, one in which all parties remain involved in the business of government. . . . Although motivated wholly by their selfish interests, the factions will thus be guided, as if by an invisible hand, to promote the public interest in all their legislative acts."⁴

This essay offers an alternative to Strauss's elite-friendly and Skinner's fully impartial accounts of nobles and peoples in Machiavelli's political thought by expanding and deepening our understanding of why and how Machiavelli thinks republics ought to be mixed constitutionally. Specifically, it analyzes in greater depth both Machiavelli's ascription of the morally objectionable and politically dangerous trait of *insolenzia* to the nobles as a social class; and his explicit (and often implicit) justifications for the establishment of senates as institutions that partially remedy the problem of aristocratic insolence. Machiavelli demonstrates that republics with senates, such as ancient Rome, manage to mollify aristocratic insolence, while those lacking them, like modern Florence, permit such insolence to proliferate unchecked. Moreover, Machiavelli intimates, republics that collectively gather nobles within senate chambers are afforded the opportunity, under certain circumstances, to entirely eliminate aristocratic insolence—at least temporarily.

Machiavelli ascribes insolence to individuals and groups within principalities and republics who refuse to obey civil laws or abide by civic norms. When focusing on social groups, Machiavelli most often, and in a highly disparaging way, attributes insolence to nobles who oppress others extralegally through violence and intimidation, or even through formally legal efforts to subjugate, expropriate, or exile political adversaries. This essay serves as a novel contribution to the recent "democratic turn" in Machiavelli studies that, much more than Strauss's or Skinner's approaches, accentuates Machiavelli's general view that socioeconomic elites are driven by a

²See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958) 260; and Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 76–81.

³Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 260.

⁴Skinner, *Machiavelli*, 77–78.

“humor” to “oppress the people.”⁵ By cataloging and analyzing Machiavelli’s myriad examples of aristocratic insolence, the essay further enhances scholarly comprehension of the broader phenomenon of aristocratic oppression of the people; it focuses more precise attention on the specific actions of the nobles (the vast majority of which have been overlooked by Strauss, Skinner and “democratic turn” scholars) which motivate Machiavelli’s general attribution of a “great desire to oppress the people” to socioeconomic elites (*D* 1.5). Moreover, the essay revives an older genre of analyzing Machiavelli’s use of specific terms/concepts across his writings to broaden understanding of his political thought more generally.⁶

I begin by disputing Strauss’s association of *insolenzia* with the common people, arguing that, for Machiavelli, insolence is the most frequent expression of the nobles’ intrinsic desire to dominate, while rage (or indignation) is the most frequent expression of the people’s desire not to be dominated (section 1). I substantiate these claims by examining every instance where Machiavelli applies the term “insolence” to either elites or peoples as social groups in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* (section 2), and in the *Florentine Histories* as well (section 3). I demonstrate that Machiavelli reveals the nobles to be inherently inclined toward insolence, while he depicts the people, on the few occasions where he calls them insolent, to be merely

⁵See John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Filippo Del Lucchese, *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Christopher Holman, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Ronald J. Schmidt, *Reading Politics with Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Yves Winter, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); John P. McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Gabriele Pedullà, *Machiavelli in Tumult: The “Discourses on Livy” and the Origins of Political Conflictualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Camila Vergara, *Systemic Corruption: Constitutional Ideas for an Anti-oligarchic Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). For critical evaluations of this scholarly literature, see Catherine H. Zuckert, “Machiavelli: Radical Democratic Political Theorist?,” *Review of Politics* 81, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 499–510; Marc Stears, Jérémie Barthas, and Adam Woodhouse, “On Machiavelli as Plebeian Theorist,” *Theoria* 66, no. 161 (Dec. 2019): 108–16; and Katherine Robiadek, “For the People: Deepening the Democratic Turn in Machiavelli Studies,” *Political Theory* 49, no. 4 (Dec. 2020): 686–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591720976115>.

⁶See, for example, Felix Gilbert, “On Machiavelli’s Idea of *Virtù*,” *Renaissance News* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1951): 53–55; Russell Price, “The Theme of *Gloria* in Machiavelli,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1977): 588–631; S. M. Shumer, “Machiavelli: Republican Politics and Its Corruption,” *Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (Feb. 1979): 5–34; and Harvey C. Mansfield, “On the Impersonality of the Modern State: A Comment on Machiavelli’s Use of *Stato*,” *American Political Science Review* 77, no. 4 (Dec. 1983): 849–57.

reactively so. Finally (in section 4), I turn to Machiavelli's highly unorthodox (by traditional Ciceronian and Polybian standards) endorsement of senates as institutional means of neutralizing the morally and politically pernicious humor of aristocratic insolence. In particular, I challenge Maurizio Viroli's claim that, in the "Discursus on Florentine Matters," Machiavelli primarily endorses senatorial institutions to empower and reward a republic's "wisest and most honoured citizens." Rather, I show that Machiavelli's constitutional proposal advocates senatorial bodies as institutions that partially appease and contain a republic's most "haughty," "presumptuous," and "insufferable" citizens.

1. *Insolenzia*, Popular or Aristocratic?

Throughout his political writings Machiavelli applies the term *insolenzia* to both elites and common citizens. However, he never attributes insolence to the people without serious and substantive qualification in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, and he seldom does so without comparable qualification in the *Florentine Histories*. Indeed, when analyzing the social classes that comprise "all republics or polities" (P 9; D 1.4–5), Machiavelli applies "insolence" repeatedly and without mitigation to the great, the nobles, the aristocrats, no fewer than twenty-six times.⁷ To be sure, the high frequency of instances where Machiavelli calls the nobles insolent is not in itself dispositive of his substantive attribution of insolence to them. As I will show, there are qualitative, and not merely quantitative, differences between Machiavelli's applications of *insolenzia* to elites and to peoples: the nobles exhibit insolence unprovoked; they cannot be persuaded by reason to relent in their insolence; and they exhibit insolence whether they are unified or divided among themselves. These are characteristics that substantively distinguish the motivations and behavior of the nobles from those of the people in Machiavelli's fully elaborated analysis of social classes.

Strauss propounds the idea that Machiavelli attributes *insolenzia* to the people rather than the nobles in his monumental *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Without direct citation, Strauss invokes Machiavelli's "remark" concerning "the ambition of the great and the *insolence* of the people," as if it were indicative of the Florentine's political sociology in general.⁸ Perhaps Strauss refers here to Machiavelli's ascription of "ambition" to the nobles and "insolence" to the people in chapter 19 of *The Prince*, a chapter largely devoted to social conflict under Rome's emperors. If so, then Strauss is remiss in neglecting to mention a significant qualification that Machiavelli applies to this apparently generalizable declaration of popular "insolence." Machiavelli swiftly

⁷I will make clear what I consider to be qualified or unmitigated attributions of insolence to the nobles or the people.

⁸Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 235, emphasis added.

proceeds, on the one hand, to specify the rather un-insolent content of the people's disposition, and, on the other, to associate authentic insolence with a different social group altogether. Machiavelli writes: "since the people loved quiet," they preferred "modest princes," that is, emperors who would protect them from the brutal and avaricious behavior of the praetorian guard. These unruly soldiers encamped within the city, according to Machiavelli, preferred emperors who indulged their desire to oppress the people through "insolence, cruelty, and rapaciousness" (P 19, emphasis added). Thus, in Machiavelli's fully considered opinion in this chapter, unnoted by Strauss, the Florentine affiliates soldierly greed and cruelty (*avarizia e crudeltà*) more closely with "insolence" than he affiliates insolence with popular appreciation of peace and quiet.

Much more characteristic of Machiavelli's general view of social classes, I will demonstrate, is a quote from the *Discourses* where Machiavelli describes, on the one hand, "the insolence of the aristocrats" (*la insolenzia degli ottimati*), and, on the other, "the rage of the people" (*la rabbia de' popolari*) (D 1.16, emphases added). My analysis of the textual evidence will confirm that for Machiavelli "insolence" is the most frequent expression of the nobles' inherent humor to oppress, and that "rage" (indignation, or outrage) over such insolence is the most common expression of the people's natural desire not to be dominated.

2. "Halting" and "Correcting" Aristocratic Insolence in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*

Machiavelli's unqualified ascription of insolence to aristocratic actors is ubiquitous in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. For instance, he describes the noble *signori* who ruled the Romagna before the arrival of Cesare Borgia as "impotent lords more inclined to despoil than to correct their subjects," and he places under the rubric of "insolence" the many "thefts" (*latrocinii*) perpetrated by these nobles as they pillaged the province (P 7). Later in *The Prince*, when speaking of the French nobility, Machiavelli refers to the "ambition and insolence" (*l'ambizione de' potenti e la insolenzia loro*) that they directed toward both the French king and the common people (P 19). Machiavelli praises the king for establishing courts to undertake the necessary "striking down" of the insolent nobles so as to "provide security" for the people—all the while diverting blame for these necessary actions against the nobles from himself to these judges.

As mentioned above, when Machiavelli introduces the "greedy and cruel" humor of the praetorian guard under the Roman emperors in *The Prince*, he sets this new, third "humor" of the soldiers against the more familiar ones previously attributed to the *grandi* and *popolo*, which he initially recasts here in terms of the great's "ambition" and the people's "insolence" (P 19). Again, however, he qualifies this supposed popular insolence when he specifies exactly what the people's humor under the emperors actually was: "since

the people loved quiet, they therefore loved modest princes.” On the contrary—now linking “insolence” more closely with the soldiers’ rapacity and malice—Machiavelli declares that, for their part, “the soldiers loved a prince who expressed his military spirit through insolence, cruelty, and rapaciousness” directed at the people (*P* 19). Appearances to the contrary, then, the *onestà* or decency of the people that Machiavelli affirms in contrast to the nobles earlier in *The Prince* (*P* 9) remains intact, in contrast to the soldiers, near the book’s conclusion. Indeed, Machiavelli’s likely sources on imperial Rome in this chapter, Cassius Dio and Herodian, describe no behavior on the part of the Roman people that would qualify as insolent.⁹

Invocations of aristocratic insolence pervade the *Discourses*. For instance, when discussing the social humors that Solon had not fully institutionalized in democratic Athens, Machiavelli refers to “the great’s insolence and the universality’s license” as the two disparate passions that subsequent constitutional reforms were necessary to address (*D* 1.2). In the absence of proper laws, the Athenian nobles oppressed others, and the Athenian people did as they pleased (within the limits of such oligarchic oppression). Furthermore, Machiavelli famously describes how “the Roman nobility became insolent” after the expulsion of the Tarquins, thus inciting the people’s anger (*D* 1.2), which led them to establish the plebeian tribunate with the express intent of “halting the nobles’ insolence” (*D* 1.3). Before the tribunes were established, the Roman nobles “spit venom” at the plebs, notoriously subjecting them to debt bondage, and the terrible physical abuses affiliated with it (*D* 1.3).¹⁰

While making the case that princely action is sometimes required to reform a corrupt republic, Machiavelli discusses Clearchus of Heraclea. Confronted with “the insolence of the aristocrats,” whom, as chief magistrate, he could “neither satisfy nor correct” by any civic mode, Clearchus decided to assuage the “rage of the people” by publicly eliminating the entire nobility (*D* 1.16). Machiavelli thus concludes that republics sometimes reach the point where certain “men”—like the Heracleian nobles or the Roman “sons of Brutus,” also mentioned in the chapter—“cannot be corrected by laws due to their insolence” (*D* 1.16). In these and similar cases, Machiavelli

⁹See Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, vol. 9, *Books 71–80*, trans. Earnest Cary (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927); and Herodian, *History of the Empire*, vol. 1, *Books 1–4*, trans. C. R. Whittaker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969).

¹⁰See Livy 2.21. Machiavelli’s consistent affiliation of insolence with avarice, cruelty, and ambition suggests an affinity with Aristotle’s notion of *pleonexia*. See Gordon Arlen, “Aristotle and the Problem of Oligarchic Harm: Insights for Democracy,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (July 2019): 393–414. Zuckert, on the contrary, argues that it is incorrect to attribute a “moralistic” condemnation of vices, such as avarice, to Machiavelli: see Zuckert, “Machiavelli: Radical Democratic Political Theorist?,” 502. Even if this were correct, Machiavelli certainly levels rather frequent *political* condemnations of such vices. See Eero Arum, “Machiavelli’s *Principio*: Political Renewal and Innovation in the *Discourses on Livy*,” *Review of Politics* 82, no. 4 (2020): 525–47.

argues, republics require “a quasi-monarchical power” to effect the “correction” of insolent men, as Cleomenes undertook in Sparta when he eliminated the ephors and many nobles (*D* 1.18). Indeed, later when Machiavelli invokes “the ambition and insolence of men”—again, those who persistently “transgress the laws” of republics (*D* 3.1)—he draws upon examples predominantly involving Roman nobles (*D* 3.1).¹¹

In his discussion of the tyranny of the Decemvirate in Rome, Machiavelli notes that the ten nobles who comprised the magistracy “became insolent” in the second year of their term, incited by the ambition of their chief colleague, Appius Claudius, and emboldened by the suspension of consular, tribunician and popular-appellate authority (*D* 1.35). Machiavelli also demonstrates that the other nobles comprising the Roman Senate were perfectly willing to indulge the Decemvirate’s insolence so long as it disproportionately injured the plebeians (*D* 1.40). This episode entails something like a double, compounded example of aristocratic insolence.

Machiavelli often attributes insolence to republics collectively—in particular, to aristocratic republics where senates principally determine public policy, especially foreign policy. For instance, he contrasts the constancy of the popular Roman republic and the insolence of the aristocratic Venetian republic in the following way: on the one hand, he positively invokes the “judgment of the Roman People” when validating the trope that “the Romans are neither diminished in spirit when conquered, nor inclined toward insolence when they conquer”; on the other, he denounces the Venetians—effectively, the Venetian Senate—for the tendency “to become insolent in good fortune and servile in bad fortune” when dealing with foreign powers (*D* 3.31; see also *FH* 6.18). The Venetians consistently bite off more than they can chew after winning military battles such that they are usually forced to grovel once they eventually lose the war.

But perhaps Machiavelli’s most damning indictment of insolence exhibited by an aristocratic republic occurs when he discusses the Carthaginians’ conduct of the Second Punic War. In Carthage, aristocratic insolence, motivated by excessive geopolitical ambition, results in mortally devastating strategic misjudgment. Machiavelli describes how, in the aftermath of the Roman defeat at Cannae, the Carthaginian Senate, moved by “an insolence prompted by either victory or a false hope thereof,” imprudently rejected Hanno’s recommendation that Carthage sue for a favorable peace with the Romans (*D* 2.27). The senators thus sealed their city’s ultimate doom at the hands of the Romans when they were decisively defeated in the war.¹²

¹¹Of the transgressors named in *D* 3.1—the sons of Brutus, the decemvirs, Spurius Maelius, and Manlius Capitolinus—only Maelius is not a noble, although he is an exceedingly wealthy plebeian. On *D* 3.1 more generally, see Arum, “Machiavelli’s *Principio*.”

¹²On Machiavelli’s full-scale critique of aristocratic republics such as Sparta, Carthage, and Venice, see Tejas Parasher, “Inequality and *Tumulti* in Machiavelli’s Aristocratic Republics,” *Polity* 49, no. 1 (Jan. 2017): 42–68.

Machiavelli's only invocation of popular insolence in *The Prince* turns out, upon closer inspection, to be a description of the praetorian guard's preference for emperors who treat the Roman people with insolence (*P* 19). Perhaps just as tellingly, his only explicit ascription of insolence to peoples rather than nobles in the *Discourses* is an instance where the Roman people *relent* in this disposition. Machiavelli shows that the plebeians voluntarily "desisted in their insolence" (*non procedé più avanti con la sua insolenzia*) over the proposed relocation to Veii, out of reverence for "some older and venerated citizens" who vehemently opposed the move (*D* 1.53). As Machiavelli often declares, the words of good men are generally sufficient to placate the plebs (*D* 1.4, 1.58), while the nobles require more drastic measures to be dissuaded from their insolence. This is borne out by several cases mentioned above: the establishment of the tribunate, the Heraclea example, Cleomenes in Sparta, and the overthrow of the Decemvirate. Indeed, the cases of insolence adduced by Machiavelli in the *Discourses* overwhelmingly demonstrate that the civic and geopolitical ramifications of aristocratic insolence count among the most dire threats that republics will face; and that the means required to "correct" such aristocratic insolence will rank highly among the most severe that republics must implement to insure their liberty and security.¹³

Put simply, peoples are demonstrably less insolent than nobles in Machiavelli's estimation: in the *Discourses* he invokes aristocratic insolence no fewer than eleven times, and popular insolence only once. And as we have just seen in the Veii episode, the people cease and desist in their insolent behavior. The nobles, on the contrary, *never* voluntarily relent in their insolence: Machiavelli illustrates that aristocratic insolence must be institutionally halted, forcibly corrected, or mortally eliminated.

However, Machiavelli shows that offices established to act *on the people's behalf* may very well come to be occupied by individuals who become just as insolent as nobles who hold senatorial or, as we shall observe, censorial offices. Machiavelli's singular praise for the plebeian tribunate as an institution that made Rome "more perfect" in book 1 of the *Discourses* is now well known (*D* 1.3).¹⁴ In book 3, he reaffirms this endorsement, but he also provides a significant addendum:

The tribunes of the plebs wielded great and necessary power in the city of Rome because, as I have stated many times, without the check that they provided against the nobility's ambition, the latter would have corrupted

¹³For a Machiavellian formulation of the corruption-inequality-domination nexus, see Camila Vergara, "Populism as Plebeian Politics: Inequality, Domination, and Popular Empowerment," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (June 2020): 222–46.

¹⁴See the monographs cited in note 5 above, as well as Jeremie Barthas, "La composizione del Principe di Machiavelli e la restaurazione dei Medici a Firenze. Per un nuovo paradigma interpretativo," *Rivista storica italiana* 131, no. 3 (Dec. 2019): 761–811.

the republic long before it actually succumbed to corruption. Nevertheless, as I have also stated often, since within everything there resides a hidden evil that causes the emergence of new accidents, new orders become necessary to address them. (*D* 3.11)

In this light, Machiavelli commends Appius Claudius Crassus for devising the strategy of persuading one tribune to veto a colleague's proposal when "tribunician authority became insolent and formidable to the nobility and indeed to all of Rome" (*D* 3.11). The exercise of such collegial vetoes served to prevent "inconveniences" that might have proved "deleterious for Roman liberty"—specifically, instances when the tribunes behave "ambitiously" rather than pursuant to the common good (*D* 3.11). However, the one specific example of tribunician "insolence" that Machiavelli mentions does not involve recourse to the tribunes' collegial veto, but rather a public appeal to the people's civic piety: Machiavelli describes how Appius Claudius Pulcher publicly sought the people's support against the tribunes' "insolence" with respect to religious observances (*D* 3.33). Thus, Machiavelli's invocations of occasional insolence exhibited by the plebeian tribunes ultimately serves to accentuate the general lack of insolence expressed by the Roman people writ large.¹⁵

It should come as no surprise that Machiavelli also cites instances when aristocratic magistrates, such as the censors, display insolence while in office. He denounces "Appian insolence" in circumstances where the censor Appius Claudius Caecus, descendant of the notorious chief decemvir, refused (in the family tradition) to leave office at the end of his appointed term (*D* 3.46). Machiavelli praises Publius Sempronius, tribune of the plebs, for rightfully insisting that Appius Claudius Caecus step down. However, Appius's insolence goes unpunished as he evades removal from office by employing precisely the tribunician veto devised by another one of his ancestors mentioned above, Appius Claudius Crassus.¹⁶ Thus, aristocratic manipulation of the tribunician veto, which Machiavelli praises for sometimes working on behalf of the common good, can also be used decisively against

¹⁵Machiavelli discusses how good armies that lose excellent commanders often become "insolent" (*D* 3.13). Whether this serves as an indirect application of insolence to peoples enrolled in armies is doubtful: after all, Machiavelli's examples here are Alexander the Great's army after his death and Roman legions during the Civil Wars. Machiavelli explicitly argues that militaries which begin as popular armies are no longer in fact civic entities once they have served under one commander far away from their *patria* for many years (i.e., in this case, Alexander's army in Asia, and Rome's in Gaul or in Greece) (*D* 3.24). Machiavelli also mentions that conquered "subjects" tend to become insolent if commanded with excessive leniency by occupying forces (*D* 3.19); but this example does not distinguish between local nobles and peoples among the *sudditi*. This same indeterminacy applies to Machiavelli's invocation of "insolence" among Rome's foreign enemies, the Latins (*D* 2.1, 2.14) and the Veientes (*D* 2.25).

¹⁶See Livy 9.33–34.

public liberty. We might say, revising Machiavelli's words (at *D* 3.11): there also turned out to be an evil concealed under the very order that was established to correct the evil that lay beneath the tribunate's "great and necessary authority" in the first place. This second evil would prove very great indeed, as aristocratic abuse of the tribunician veto eventually sparked "the controversies," arising from the tribune Tiberius Gracchus's enactment of the Agrarian Laws, controversies that Machiavelli identifies as the start of the Roman Republic's demise (*D* 1.37).¹⁷

3. Irrepressible Aristocratic *Insolenzia* in the *Florentine Histories*

The *Florentine Histories* follows the pattern of Machiavelli's other major political works by attributing *insolenzia* overwhelmingly to the nobles rather than to the people as he analyzes the motivations and behaviors of social groups within his native city. In this book, where Machiavelli supposedly takes a less sanguine view of peoples than he did in other works,¹⁸ it is still almost invariably aristocratic classes, sects, parties, and cliques whom he calls "insolent"—indeed, he shows them to exhibit even more insolence than do the nobles of ancient polities. A plausible explanation for why nobles behave more uncivilly in the Florentine context, which I will explore in greater depth below, is the absence of a senate.

The nobles of the Guelf Party are early and frequent targets for Machiavelli's moral and political disapprobation in the *Histories*. Their "insolence" incites such fear among the Ghibelline nobles that the latter flee Florence (*FH* 2.10), which only increases the "insolent" behavior of the Guelf nobles: the departure of their Ghibelline adversaries prompts them to

¹⁷See Livy 2.41–43; and Plutarch, "The Life of Tiberius Gracchus," 10.1–3.

¹⁸See, for instance, James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 484; Albert Russell Ascoli, "'Vox Populi': Machiavelli, *Opinione*, and the *Popolo*, from the *Principe* to the *Istorie Fiorentine*," *California Italian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2013): 1–23; Francesco Bausi, *Machiavelli* (Rome: Salerno, 2005); Robert Black, *Machiavelli* (London: Routledge, 2013); Humfrey Butters, "Machiavelli and the Medici," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 64–79; Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 75–78, 86; Mark Jurdjevic, *A Great and Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Machiavelli's Florentine Political Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Mario Martelli, "Machiavelli e Firenze dalla repubblica al principato," in *Niccolò Machiavelli: Politico Storico Letterato*, ed. J.-J. Marchand (Rome: Salerno, 1996), 15–31. See Mario Martelli's introduction to his edition of Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (Rome: Salerno, 2006), 15–31; David Quint, "Narrative Design and Historical Irony in Machiavelli's *Istorie Fiorentine*," *Rinascimento* 43 (2003): 31–48; and Giovanni Silvano, "Florentine Republicanism in the Sixteenth Century," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. G. Bock, Q. Skinner, and M. Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41–70.

ignore the authority of the magistrates and to commit or encourage many unpunished “murders and assorted violent acts” (FH 2.11). Guelf “insolence” hence urges the leaders of the trade guilds to invite the Ghibellines back to Florence, in the hopes of diminishing the Guelf nobility’s rampant disruption of civic order (FH 2.11). Going further, Machiavelli notes, the people enrolled in guilds established the magistracy of the gonfalonier of justice for the express purpose of suppressing the widespread violence being committed among the nobles themselves and by the nobles against the people more generally.¹⁹ Machiavelli reports that while the nobles were initially alarmed by the establishment of this office, “they soon returned to their insolence” (FH 2.12). The nobility evaded the gonfalonier’s punishment by corrupting members of the *Signoria* and by intimidating witnesses, with the result that “Florence and the people, in a short time, again endured the disorders and abuses caused by the great” (*talché in breve tempo si tornò Firenze ne’ medesimi disordini, e il popolo riceveva dai Grandi le medesime ingiurie*) (FH 2.12).

The republic attempted to strengthen the gonfalonier’s authority by enlarging the armed companies of the guilds and by establishing new supporting magistracies “against the great’s insolence” (*contro alla insolenzia de’ grandi*) (FH 2.22). But these reforms did little to halt the rise of Corso Donati, “a rapacious and cruel” young noble, who displayed “expansive insolence” (*tanta insolenzia*) within the city (FH 2.25). Corso, as Machiavelli shows in subsequent chapters, personifies the classic bad man who, despite a certain “virtue,” knows not how to do the good things that bring security to his *patria* and good reputation to himself; instead he ceaselessly marauded among the people and instigated civil discord until the very end of his very “restless” career (FH 2.13–23). Corso was the chief agent of virtually every one of the many civil disturbances, political controversies, foreign interventions, exiles, and deaths that ensue between the establishment of the gonfalonier of justice and the violent conclusion of Corso’s even more violent life.²⁰

Later in the *Histories*, Machiavelli describes how an oligarchic clique (*pochi potenti*) who gained control of Florence became “ever more insolent” (*più insolenti*) after crushing the Bardi and Frescobaldi families (FH 2.32), inciting the latter to enlist “the insolence” of the Duke of Athens against the entire republic in retaliation (FH 2.33). But after the duke’s indisputably insolent tyranny was overthrown, and the nobles were invited by the guilds to share rule with the people once again, the nobles, “wanting to be lords,” repudiated “a civil way of life,” such that “each day brought forth a new example of their insolence and pride” (*ogni giorno nasceva qualche esempio della loro insolenzia e superbia*) (FH 2.39). Echoing the passage from *Discourses* 1.16 discussed above, Machiavelli describes the situation in terms of “insolence” (*insolenzia*) exhibited on the aristocratic side and “outrage” (*sdegni*) expressed on the popular

¹⁹See John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200–1575* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 84–85.

²⁰See *ibid.*, 89–95.

side (FH 2.39)—a conflict of humors that eventually culminates in a civil war where the nobles were defeated by the guildsmen.²¹

Although the nobles had been vanquished militarily, interpreters often overlook the fact that Machiavelli illustrates quite clearly that they maintained formidable, even fearsome, political power within the republic through continued membership in the Parte Guelfa.²² The party's captains could exile virtually any citizen they wished under the by-now anachronistic charge of being a "Ghibelline" (FH 3.3). This "insolent mode" of behavior on the part of the Guelfs, whether motivated by "avarice or ambition," in Machiavelli's words, resulted in over two hundred exiles and general popular indignation (FH 3.3). At this time, Salvestro de' Medici, appalled "that the people were being oppressed by a powerful few" (*che il popolo fussi da pochi potenti oppresso sopportare*), became determined to "put a stop to this insolence" (*porre fine a questa insolenza*) exhibited by the Guelf nobles, and thus he proposed strict laws "against the great" (*contro ai Grandi*) to do so (FH 3.9). But when Salvestro met stern opposition in his effort "to correct the powerful few's insolence" (*correggere la insolenza de' potenti*), he resigned the office of gonfalonier, leaving the nobles uncorrected and the republic unreformed (FH 3.9).²³

Although I have been focusing primarily on the insolence of social groups rather than individuals in Machiavelli's writings, especially in the *Histories*, the case of Giorgio Scali brings both together. Corso Donati and Giorgio are perhaps the two most "insolent" Florentines whose careers Machiavelli narrates in the book. While Corso was born of an ancient noble family, Giorgio was one of the "popular nobles" among the guild elite, whose family neither merged through extensive intermarriage with the ancient nobility nor formed political alliances with the Guelf Party. Along with Tommaso Strozzi, and members of the Ricci, Alberti, and Medici families, Giorgio would become a leader of the middle and lower guildsmen (*popolani di minore sorte*) (FH 3.8).²⁴

Machiavelli seems to invite readers' suspicion as he recounts the events of the Ciompi Revolt. He subtly raises the possibility that Giorgio directs most of the action behind the scenes: by the end of the insurrection, one might surmise that Giorgio at first induces Michele di Lando to lead the *ciompi* and *plebe* against the conservative alliance of Guelfs, ancient nobles, and the most powerful popular nobles of the guilds; and then, once the latter were defeated, he directs Michele to militarily crush the *ciompi* and *plebe minuta* (FH 3.18), so that Giorgio can easily disenfranchise the latter groups virtually no sooner than they had been enfranchised (FH 3.18). By whatever means Scali actually arrived there, by the end of the Ciompi Revolt, Machiavelli declares that

²¹See *ibid.*, 137–38.

²²Admirably unusual in this respect is Jurđjević, *A Great and Wretched City*, 163.

²³For a more favorable assessment of Machiavelli's view of Salvestro, see *ibid.*, 163–64.

²⁴See Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 167–72.

Messer Giorgio stands atop the group of “almost princes” who rule the republic with the support of “the lower status guildsmen” (*artefici di minore qualità*), a regime that—given its recent subordination of the actual *plebe*—Machiavelli rather extravagantly calls “plebeian” (*plebea*) in character (FH 3.18). (Although this is, no doubt, how the regime’s conservative enemies viewed it.)

Despite its initial success, Machiavelli largely attributes the “plebeian” republic’s short, three-year duration to Giorgio’s insolence. Scali’s and Tommaso Strozzi’s “insolence” was such that their “authority exceeded that of the magistrates” and everyone feared being oppressed by the two men through their “favor with the plebs” (FH 3.20). But this “insolence” was fated to end, Machiavelli writes, as Giorgio and Tommaso brazenly circumvent the laws, using force to break a political ally out of prison, and ransacking the offending magistrate’s home for good measure (FH 3.20). “This final insolence” turned the people generally against Scali, and provided his enemies with the occasion to seize authority from “Messer Giorgio and the plebs” (FH 3.20). Benedetto Alberti, who had been Giorgio’s ally against the “insolence and tyrannical modes” of the popular nobles and the Guelph party, now turned on Giorgio when he observed “the heads of the plebs” (*i capi della plebe*) behaving with similar insolence (FH 3.20). Giorgio was arrested and decapitated—but not before denouncing the magistrates, decrying the multitude, and placing a curse on the head of Messer Benedetto (FH 3.20; see P 9).

At the start of book 4 of the *Histories*, Machiavelli ruminates on the differences between ancient and modern republics; the latter, he observes, alternate between tyrannical and licentious states, in which, respectively, “the insolent and the foolish hold authority” (*nell’uno hanno troppa autorità gli uomini insolenti, nell’altro gli sciocchi*) (FH 4.1). Turning, more specifically, to the government of the “popular nobles,” the so-called Albizzi Oligarchy that overthrew the post-Ciompi Revolt “plebeian” republic, Machiavelli writes of the deficiencies that led to its downfall: first, the popular nobles “grew insolent through uninterrupted rule,” and second, the popular nobles’ envy of each other made them careless regarding threats from outside their own ranks (FH 4.2). The insolence of the Albizzi nobles declared by Machiavelli here is later substantiated by the Florentine exiles who encouraged the *condottiero* Niccolò Piccinino to attack Florence; assuring him that the people, “overburdened by the taxes and the insolence of the powerful,” would support him with an armed revolt against the Albizzi (FH 5.26).²⁵

Yet even when the Albizzi regime was eventually overthrown with Cosimo de’ Medici’s return from exile in 1434, and the Medici were hailed as the people’s champions and saviors, Machiavelli reveals on more than one occasion that the Medici regime failed to protect the people from aristocratic abuse. Indeed, Cosimo’s heir, Piero de’ Medici, is eventually compelled to

²⁵See *ibid.*, 289.

call out the pro-Medici nobles, his dubious “friends” (*amici*) within the family’s intimate circle, for their avaricious and arrogant behavior toward common Florentines: “It is clearly insufficient for you to live as princes within this city.... You expropriate neighbors of their goods, you whose justice, you evade civil judgments, oppress peaceful men and exalt those who are insolent” (*FH* 7.23).

Thus, in the *Histories*, we have observed Machiavelli attribute “insolence” to social groups eighteen times: thirteen to aristocratic groups comprised of, or in alliance with, the traditional nobility or the nobles in the Guelf Party (fourteen total, as we will see); once to the “heads of the plebs” in the 1378–82 republic; twice to the popular nobles of the Albizzi regime; and once to the pro-Medici nobles. All eighteen cases involve aristocratic or oligarchic classes, parties, sects, or cliques. It remains to discuss the three instances in the entire *Histories* where Machiavelli seemingly attributes insolence to the plebs or to the people.

First, in book 1’s general history of Italy, Machiavelli traces the animosity between the Roman popes and the Roman people (which persists in his own day) to the papacy of Clement II (AD 1047). Machiavelli reports that the people at the time were enraged that, having freed themselves from the rule of the emperors, they now had to suffer the direct rule of the popes (*FH* 1.4). While the popes had previously exacerbated the oppression of the people by the emperors by depriving them of participation in imperial elections (under Gregory V), they now made papal authority similarly unaccountable by denying the people participation in the election of the pope, granting this privilege exclusively to the college of cardinals (under Nicholas II) (*FH* 1.4). Thus, while the pontiffs could increasingly make the princes of Western Europe “quake in fear of excommunication,” Machiavelli describes how the popes in their own city faced the constant enmity of and the threat of injury and insurrection from the Roman people; the latter, directly experiencing the pope’s material oppression (or neglect), apparently cared little about the spiritual censure of excommunication (*FH* 1.4; see *D* 1.12).

To illustrate this intense animosity between Roman popes and peoples, Machiavelli recounts how the people aided the German emperor’s army in besieging Pope Gregory VII within his fortress (*FH* 1.15). When the Norman captain, Robert Guiscard, entered Rome to liberate Gregory, the imperial forces fled, but the Roman people remained firm in their siege of the pope. As Machiavelli remarks on the event, “at Gregory VII’s impetus,” Robert drove the Germans from Rome and “overcame its people” (*quello popolo domò*) (*FH* 1.16). More specifically, “Robert sacked Rome and again reduced it to the ancient ruins” that so many pontiffs had endeavored to reconstruct over subsequent centuries (*FH* 1.15). In other words, rather than grant concessions to the Roman people, whom the popes governed unaccountably, Gregory would rather permit a foreigner like Robert to destroy the city and terrorize the people in the manner of ancient barbarians. This

is the broader context of Machiavelli's declaration that Gregory wanted Robert "to defend him from the German emperor and from the *insolence* of the Roman people" (*FH* 1.16, emphasis added); a context that perhaps somewhat mitigates this charge of popular "insolence." Moreover, the fact that the *Histories* is a book commissioned by a prelate, and dedicated to a pope—no more loved by the inhabitants of Rome than were his papal predecessors (*D* 1.12)—may further qualify the force of this attribution.

Second, in his recounting of the Ciompi Revolt, Machiavelli invokes the "extraordinary insolence" displayed by two representatives sent by the recently formed wool workers' guild when addressing Michele di Lando (*FH* 3.17). The *ciompi* had acclaimed Michele as gonfalonier of justice weeks earlier in the midst of their conquest of the Palazzo della Signoria (*FH* 3.16). Machiavelli reports that when the plebeian delegates' initial speech of entreaty for further reforms "ended in threats," Michele could no longer endure the "arrogance" of the emissaries; thinking more of "the high rank that he held than of his abject origins, it *seemed to him* that he must use *extraordinary modes* to check such *extraordinary insolence*" (*FH* 3.17, emphases added). Resorting to physical violence, Michele struck the plebeian emissaries with his sword and ordered them arrested and imprisoned. Michele's actions result in a battle in the streets where Michele leads the forces of the guilds against the *ciompi*, vanquishing and dispersing the latter (*FH* 3.17)—a military defeat that leads to Giorgio Scali's cancellation of their recent political enfranchisement (*FH* 3.18).

Machiavelli declares that it is Michele's own perception (*gli parve*) that extraordinary insolence required extraordinary violence as a response in these circumstances. Could it be that Machiavelli hereby indicates that it is the gonfalonier rather than the representatives of the *ciompi* who actually indulges in less than appropriate insolence? After all, Machiavelli shows quite clearly that Michele seemed to be turning his favor from the plebs to popular nobles, such as Giorgio Scali and Salvestro de' Medici—a shift in policy that prompts a crisis of confidence among the *ciompi* (*FH* 3.15). After enrolling the *ciompi* in a guild of their own and securing them seats in the Signoria, Michele begins cozying up to such powerful *nobili popolani* and arranges for himself a prominent magistracy in the foreign city of Empoli (*FH* 3.15).

Suspecting that Michele is selling out their interests to the popular nobles, the *ciompi* set about establishing their own tribunician institution with veto authority over the workings of the government: "The heads of the plebs decided that eight members elected from their own guilds should always reside with the priors in the Palace, and that all of the Signoria's decisions must meet their approval" (*FH* 3.17). Since Machiavelli so boldly praises the Roman plebs for establishing the plebeian tribunate to obstruct the insolence of the nobility (*D* 1.3–5), and since he himself, as we will see, proposes such an institution in his "Discursus on Florentine Affairs," readers must ask: Is it plausible that Machiavelli would genuinely consider it insolence on the part of the Florentine plebs to demand a similar tribunician institution for

themselves?²⁶ Moreover, Michele's military destruction of the plebs immediately deprived Florence of the opportunity to field one of the most expansive citizen armies in Europe, and it eventually contributed to the city's increasing reliance on mercenary arms; leaving Florence hopelessly vulnerable to a veritable procession of foreign invaders.²⁷

Third, while narrating the rise of the Albizzi Oligarchy, Machiavelli describes the meeting of certain "first citizens" who conspired to "reacquire the state" (*ripigliare lo stato*) from "the heads of the multitude" (*capi della moltitudine*) (FH 4.8). Rinaldo degli Albizzi gives a speech outlining the plan to overthrow the 1378 republic by (re)inflating the authority of the traditional nobility and reducing that of the lower guildsmen. Rinaldo enjoins his coconspirators to "return the state to the great and deprive the lesser guilds of their power by reducing their number from fourteen to seven guilds. The plebs would hence exert less authority in the councils and the great much more, since the former would be fewer and the latter would act unfavorably to them in memory of past hostilities" (FH 4.9).

Rinaldo justifies this strategy in terms of a judicious manipulation of the insolences raging both above and below the popular nobles in the social hierarchy of Florence: "while their fathers had set the plebs against the great's insolence, now that the latter were made humble and the plebs had become insolent, it was proper to check the plebs' insolence with the help of the great" (FH 4.9). Since Machiavelli has already firmly established his own view regarding the insolence of both the *grandi* and the pro-Albizzi *nobili popolani*, the attribution of insolence to the *plebe* in this speech likely reflects the opinion of Rinaldo (and his archconservative confederates) rather than Machiavelli's own.²⁸

4. Containing "Haughty," "Presumptuous," and "Insufferable" Citizens within Senates

Among others, Skinner and Viroli argue that Machiavelli cannot be deemed a democrat, nor can a democratic politics be derived from him, owing to the

²⁶See John P. McCormick, "Faulty Foundings and Failed Reformers in Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*," *American Political Science Review* 111, no. 1 (Feb. 2017): 212.

²⁷Christopher Lynch argues that the gradual disarming of Florence is one of the central themes, perhaps the central theme, of the *Histories*. See Lynch, "War and Foreign Affairs in Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*," *Review of Politics* 74, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 1–26.

²⁸For demonstrations of Machiavelli's rhetorical strategy of leveling political critiques subtextually in the *Histories*, see Danielle Charette, "Catilinarian Cadences in Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*: Ciceronian Humanism, Corrupting Consensus and the Demise of Contentious Liberty," *History of Political Thought* 39 (2018): 439–64; and Danielle Charette and Michael Darmiento, "A Tribune Named Niccolò: Petrarchan Revolutionaries and Humanist Failures in Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*," *History of European Ideas*, 44, no. 8 (2018): 1046–62.

simple fact that he was a staunch adherent of the traditional republican doctrine of mixed government, associated with Aristotle, Polybius, and Cicero.²⁹ As we have observed, Machiavelli certainly recommends that republics establish senates, which provide positions of honor and authority to citizens of wealth and status.³⁰ However, Machiavelli does so on highly unorthodox grounds.

First, senates are necessary to placate at least partially a republic's most ambitious, domineering citizens (not to accommodate its best, wisest, most public-minded ones); and thus to discourage such citizens from launching oligarchic coups (*D* 1.29), often enlisting foreign support in doing so (*D* 1.7, 2.27). Second, Machiavelli insinuates that senate houses conveniently gather all the nobles in one place when it becomes necessary to eliminate them at a stroke—that is, when their oppressive behavior has become unbearable to the common people and dangerous to the city (*P* 8; *D* 1.16). These are decidedly *not* Ciceronian or Polybian justifications for mixed government. As Machiavelli shows with respect to Romulus and Cleomenes: the former collected the proud but not yet fully insolent Roman nobles in a senate (*D* 1.2, 1.9); the latter, finding Sparta's magistrates and senators irredeemably corrupt and excessively insolent, in a "just and praiseworthy" manner, killed many of them and distributed their wealth to the common people (*D* 1.9, 1.18).³¹

Buildings where a republic's entire senate is either killed or threatened with elimination figure fairly prominently in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. When Machiavelli introduces the concept of "cruelty well used" in *The Prince*, he describes how Agathocles of Syracuse orders the slaughter of his republic's assembled senate; this enables him both to free Sicily of Carthaginian domination and to establish a relationship of mutual "security" between himself and the Syracusan people (*P* 8).³² Furthermore, to illustrate the fact that peoples will sometimes exact "horrific" vengeance on nobles who have "usurped" or "stolen" their liberty, Machiavelli details in the *Discourses* how the Corcyrean people ultimately destroyed their entire senate by removing the roof of the edifice where all the nobles were confined, stoning them to death with pieces of the roof (*D* 2.2).³³ More immediately conducive to the preservation of a republic than either of these two cases is an episode from ancient Capua,

²⁹See Skinner, *Machiavelli*, 76–81; and Maurizio Viroli, *Founders: Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 117, 127, 146.

³⁰Machiavelli's criticisms of, in particular, Athens for failing to provide an institutional place for its nobles early in the *Discorsi* (*D* 1.2) are significantly scaled back later in the book when he praises the Athenian "republic" (*D* 1.29, 1.58, and 2.2).

³¹See Plutarch, "The Life of Cleomenes," 10.3–5.

³²Machiavelli's source, Justin (22.2), reports that Agathocles convokes the senate in Syracuse's Gymnasium to discuss policy before massacring them.

³³See Thucydides 4.46–48.

recounted by Machiavelli from Livy in the *Discourses*. With Capua threatened by both foreign invasion and civil war, the republic's chief magistrate, Pacuvius Calanus, locks the nobles in their senatorial palace, and offers the people the opportunity to execute the senators one by one (*D* 1.47). The episode concludes with the people's hatred for the nobles being assuaged and the senators' arrogance toward the people being tamed—without anyone being physically harmed in the process.³⁴ In short, senates not only seem to function, for Machiavelli, as institutions that flatter a nobility's sense of self-importance, but also, when necessary, they provide opportunities for princes or peoples to deflate (or eliminate) such delusions of grandeur.³⁵

During Rome's founding, Romulus's gathering of the wealthiest citizens in a senate insured that future class conflicts in Rome would be favorable to liberty (*P* 9; *D* 1.4–5). In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli lauds Roman institutions (undergirded by a full-scale citizen military) that both resulted from class conflict, and then effectively rechanneled it: a senate and popular assemblies kept noble and plebeian citizens unified among themselves, as well as politically fixated on their class adversaries. Intense but productive class conflict at home, and unprecedented territorial expansion abroad, for Machiavelli, herald Rome's singular greatness and its ultimate value as a model to be emulated by all subsequent republics.

In the *Histories*, by contrast, Machiavelli shows what social conflict looks like in a republic without an armed citizenry, a plebeian tribunate, a large popular assembly, and, for our purposes, an aristocratic senate. Machiavelli demonstrates how social conflicts in Florence raged not only between two classes, but also and especially among myriad wealthy families, cliques, and parties. Such factions of nobles should have been rendered united from without by effectively institutionalized popular pressure, and from within by the norms and orders of collective membership in a senate. Machiavelli exhaustively chronicles how the Florentine Republic's bleakly defective ordering results in its gradual enfeeblement: a steady decline measured eventually by the civic corruption typified by the rise of the Albizzi Oligarchy (1382–1434) and the first Medici Principate (1434–1512), as well as by gradual

³⁴According to Livy (23.2), Pacuvius declares the following to the Capuan people—words which perhaps were not lost on Machiavelli: “You may now impose justice on this despicable and disreputable senate . . . without risking your lives in vain attempts to storm the houses of individual senators, fiercely guarded by their clients and slaves. Punish them such as they are here and now: unarmed, unaided and confined in the senate chamber.”

³⁵See John P. McCormick, “Subdue the Senate: Machiavelli's ‘Way of Freedom’ or Path to Tyranny?,” *Political Theory* 40, no. 6 (Dec. 2012): 717–38; and John P. McCormick, “Machiavelli's Greek Tyrant as Republican Reformer,” in *The Radical Machiavelli: Politics, Philosophy, and Language*, ed. F. Lucchese, F. Frosini, and V. Morfino (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 337–49.

geopolitical debility, ultimately exemplified by the French and Spanish invasions of Tuscany (in 1494 and 1512, respectively).³⁶

In Machiavelli's estimation, when all the nobles are united publicly in a senate, as they were in Rome, violent conflict among the nobles themselves is minimized, and they focus collectively on a common object of oppression, the people. The opposite is also true: Rome observes no distinction, as Florence does, between *plebe* and *popolani*, between plebs and people (i.e., guildsmen). In Rome the plebeians and the people are one and the same, thus maximizing their collective military virtue, and ensuring that political reforms earned through class conflict are enjoyed by all of the common people. The secessions of the entire plebeian population in Rome result in the establishment/restoration of the plebeian tribunes, a civic benefit for all non-noble Roman citizens. In Florence the distinction between the *popolo* enrolled in guilds and the disenfranchised manual laborers among the *plebe* facilitates military weakness and civic inequality. The *ciompi* are obliged to revolt in order to gain an occupational guild of their own and political inclusion within the republic's government; and once they are violently crushed by the princes of the guilds, Florence loses the opportunity to field one of the largest civil militaries in Europe, and the *plebe* are permanently consigned to conditions of political and economic subordination.³⁷

Machiavelli demonstrates that a public, dual-agent conflict between the senate and the people characterizes Roman politics, while private, multiagent conflicts among cliques, factions, families, and parties plague Florence. In Rome, both the nobles and people are forced to openly and consciously negotiate legal/institutional compromises, most notably the plebeian tribunate; the latter magistracy was not imposed unwittingly on a distracted, disorganized noble class in Rome, as the Signoria and gonfalonier of justice were foisted upon the quarreling nobles without their knowledge or consent in Florence (FH 2.11–12). Moreover, the expectation that magistrates would become senators upon the termination of their offices in Rome induced a certain degree of collegial behavior among Roman officials—a robust collegiality not remotely observable among the Florentines (D 1.49, 3.1, 3.49). The promise of being accepted by and the hope of getting along with prospective senatorial

³⁶See, again, Lynch, "War and Foreign Affairs in Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*," 1–26.

³⁷Recent scholarship on the *Florentine Histories* suggests that Machiavelli communicates intense disappointment that, in vanquishing the *ciompi*, Florence missed the opportunity to incorporate permanently the *plebe*, civically and militarily, into the republic's politics. See Winter, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence*, 167–91; McCormick, "Faulty Foundings and Failed Reformers," 213–14; Amanda Maher, "The Power of 'Wealth, Nobility and Men': Inequality and Corruption in Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*," *European Journal of Political Theory* 19, no. 4 (Oct. 2020): 512–31; and Christopher Holman, "'Gli Umori Delle Parti': Humoral Dynamics and Democratic Potential in the *Florentine Histories*," *Political Theory* 48, no. 6 (Dec. 2020): 723–50.

colleagues must have predisposed Roman magistrates toward behavior pleasing to other nobles.

In contrast to Rome, the Florence of the *Histories* seems to be trapped in a persistently pernicious feedback loop: originally deficient institutions facilitate sectarian conflicts; conflicts that conclude temporarily with the establishment of defectively partisan constitutional reforms; these reforms subsequently inspire the proliferation of even more severe social conflicts; conflicts that persists in episodically destructive rather than in beneficially constructive ways.³⁸ Machiavelli declares that a “wise legislator” could have imposed a proper constitutional order upon the Florentine Republic (*FH* 3.1); laws and orders that might have properly institutionalized social conflict along “natural” class lines (*FH* 2.12). Instead, the city’s either naively “good” leaders like Giano della Bella, Michele di Lando, and Salvestro de’ Medici, or imprudently “bad” leaders, like Corso Donati, Walter Brienne, and Giorgio Scali, permit or encourage social discord to persist in ever more chaotic and variegated ways. Such discord manifests itself through intense conflicts among rival families such as the Buondelmonti and the Uberti; between Guelf and Ghibelline nobles (and then “Black” and “White” Guelfs); between the so-called popular nobles of the richest guilds and middle-class citizens of the middling/lower guilds; and, finally, through conflicts between various elite groupings and the city’s *plebe* and *ciompi*, who, again, were neither enrolled in nor represented by occupational guilds of their own.

The evidence presented by Machiavelli in the *Histories* suggests that the Florentine people lack comparable civic-military arrangements enjoyed by their Roman counterparts; institutions through which they can more ordinarily air their political-economic grievances and gain future concessions without recourse to the riots, arson, and pillaging that they were compelled to commit in the absence of such institutions. Indeed, how differently would the Ciompi Revolt have unfolded if, on the one hand, all of the common people—*popolani* and *plebe* alike—had enjoyed recourse to a magistracy like the Roman tribunate that could formally voice their grievances; and if, on the other hand, the entire Florentine elite—*grandi* and *nobili popolani*—had been gathered together, as in ancient republics, in a senate building? (At the very least, the *ciompi* would need not have hunted down their class adversaries house to house.) Machiavelli suggests that the humors characteristic of both Rome and Florence are fundamentally the same; it is primarily the institutional modes and orders through which they are channeled that differ in a substantive way.

The powerful institution of the Guelf Party, which, as we have seen, served as a kind of shadow government in Florence, rendered the republic’s civic institutions largely impotent; indeed, Machiavelli declares that the Guelf nobles “felt no fear of the magistrates” (*FH* 2.11). In some sense, the party

³⁸See McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli*, 69–108.

functioned as a senate; it was an aristocratic institution that initially excluded commoners and fostered some solidarity and collective decision-making among its noble constituency. However, the Guelph Party differed decisively from the Roman Senate in that it did not include the entire city's noble class, but rather assembled merely a dominant clique of *grandi* and wealthy *popolani*. Moreover, the party was a semipublic, semiprivate institution, not a formally public one as was the Roman Senate; therefore it was an institution much more difficult to make accountable to the city as a whole. Finally, its ostensible political *raison d'être* was allegiance to a foreign power, the papacy, rather than a primary commitment to the common good of Florence.

Given the social chaos and institutional deficiencies so characteristic of Florence's history, it is perhaps not surprising that senatorial institutions figure quite prominently in Machiavelli's most elaborate constitutional reform proposal for the city. Indeed, in his "Discursus on Florentine Matters" (1520–1521), Machiavelli proposes that the Medici pope, Leo X, establish a mixed republic that features not one but *two* quasi-senatorial bodies.³⁹ Machiavelli hopes that his constitutional model will secure the (relative) loyalty of Florence's wealthiest and most prominent citizens, who, as he illustrates in the *Histories*, had so often undermined or usurped republican regimes. Given how frequently Machiavelli applies the term *insolenzia* to past aristocratic actors in the *Histories*, which he was already writing at the time, the term's absence in the "Discursus" is conspicuous. Rather than calling living members of the Florentine nobility "insolent" (as he quite readily did their ancestors), Machiavelli refers to "men of lofty spirit" or "haughty men" (*animo elevato*); that is, presumptuously entitled citizens who "think that they deserve precedence before all others" (*pare loro meritare di procedere agli altri*) (DF 738).

Machiavelli calls for the formal establishment of a class of sixty-five life-tenured citizens to alternate offices in Signoria. This signorial class would be divided into two sets of thirty-two *signori*, each group containing the names of the nobles eligible to serve as priors in alternating years. Thus, at any particular moment, the Signoria, according to this plan, would be constituted by eight priors from among the set of thirty-two, who would serve for three months at a time alongside the gonfalonier, who himself would be filling as much as a three-year term. Below this nine-membered executive committee, Machiavelli proposes the "Council of the Select," a more conventional senatorial body of two hundred life-tenured members. Comprised mostly of upper guildsmen, rich *popolani* who did not qualify for the more exalted signorial posts, Machiavelli intends "the Two Hundred" to satisfy the ambitions of the "middling" citizens within the regime (DF 740). Leo

³⁹See Machiavelli, "Discursus Florentinarum Rerum Post Mortem Iunioris Laurentii Medices," in *Opere*, vol. 1, *I Primi Scritti Politici*, ed. Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1997), 733–45, henceforth *DF*. On the historical context of the composition of the "Discursus," see Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 434–41.

himself, according to Machiavelli, would determine the initial composition of both of these senatorial bodies.

Machiavelli anticipates that these senatorial institutions, especially the highly restrictive Signoria, will at least partially satisfy the “presumptuous and insufferable citizens” (*cittadini . . . prosuontuosi e insopportabili*) whose insolent behavior had proved so toxic for previous incarnations of the republic (DF 745). Machiavelli does not, as Viroli—in good Ciceronian fashion—insists, establish this life-tenured “signorial” class in order to reward Florence’s “wisest and most honoured citizens,” or, as Viroli further identifies them, the city’s “best men.”⁴⁰ In his commentary on “The Discursus,” Viroli ignores Machiavelli’s reference to “haughty men” who presume to outrank all others (DF 738). Hence, he overlooks the fact that Machiavelli explicitly proposes this institution to mollify Florence’s most “presumptuous and insufferable citizens” (DF 745).

These senatorial institutions, Machiavelli avers, will give the pope such a secure hold over the republic that Machiavelli then proceeds, gently but firmly, to suggest that Leo consider entertaining Machiavelli’s next proposition: re-instituting the Great Council as the assembly reserved for the “generality” or “universality” of the people (DF 740–41). Machiavelli advises Leo to allow his *amici*, his “friends” (i.e., his relatives, clients, and henchmen) to determine in secret the results of any elections held in the Council—but *only* for the length of the pope’s lifetime (DF 741). After Leo’s death, the Great Council, which should return to the three-thousand, six-hundred members it sported in the 1494–1512 Republic, must freely elect magistrates, as well as positions that come open in the *Signoria* and the Two Hundred. Here, Machiavelli does not express his preferences, set forth in the *Discourses*, for much larger, Roman-styled assemblies that include plebeians, presumably because this would be an absolute non-starter for the Medici and their *amici*. Merely convincing Leo to re-open the Great Council would be achievement enough in this context. However, Machiavelli does not preclude the possibility that the Great Council might be expanded further after the pope’s death.

Finally, Machiavelli proposes the establishment of tribunician magistrates to aid the Great Council in exerting more and more authority, “little by little,” over the course of time: namely, the *proposti* from the sixteen gonfaloniers of the companies of the *popolo* (DF 744). These tribunes, or “provosts,” drawn from the lower classes of citizens and randomly placed among the nobles in the Signoria and elite guildsmen in the Two Hundred, have the power to refer all matters decided in those bodies to the Great Council for

⁴⁰Maurizio Viroli, “Machiavelli and the Republican Idea,” in Bock, Skinner, and Viroli, *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, 155. Rather than address Machiavelli’s several disparaging descriptions of the Florentine *ottimati*, Viroli seizes upon his invocation of the city’s “grave and reputed men” (*uomini gravi e di reputazione*) (DF 739), which Viroli equates with the Ciceronian category of a republic’s “best men.”

final approval.⁴¹ Thus, what is born as a largely aristocratic mixed republic during the pope's lifetime matures to become a thoroughgoing popular mixed republic after his death. The senatorial bodies that initially dominate the republic in Machiavelli's constitutional proposal will eventually come under the full control of the republic's tribunician and more widely participatory institutions over time.

Conclusion

Machiavelli attributes *insolenzia* to the people once in each of his major political works, *The Prince* and the *Discourses*—but only in the circumstances regarding, respectively, the praetorian guard (*P* 19) and the Veii controversy (*D* 1.53), circumstances where the Florentine significantly qualifies this attribution. Machiavelli's thirteen unqualified invocations of aristocratic insolence in those works, and his likewise widely disproportionate attribution of insolence to aristocratic and popular social groups in the *Florentine Histories* (respectively, eighteen clear cases to three qualified ones), undermine any attempts to relativize or equate popular and elite motivations in Machiavelli's political thought.⁴² Machiavelli's frequent identification of the nobles as the social class that is inherently inclined to use violence to break the laws and/or to appropriate the laws so as to oppress others unjustly necessitates the following conclusion: a Machiavellian "mixed" republic must institutionally corral aristocratic insolence within senates.

Again, it is not merely the overwhelming number of instances where Machiavelli applies the term *insolenzia* to the nobles, but more importantly the fact that he describes insolence as endogenous to their nature; that is, insolence is an inevitable expression of their humor to pursue oppression (over either rival noble cliques or over the people "universally") (e.g., *FH* 2.10, 2.12). On the contrary, Machiavelli consistently presents the people's insolence, or more often indignation, as reactions to the external stimuli of aristocratic oppression (e.g., *D* 1.2; *FH* 3.3)—and, when it is not, the people can be easily persuaded to desist in their insolence (e.g., *D* 1.53). In Machiavelli's political writings, the aristocrats require no external provocation to engage in insolence (e.g., *P* 7; *D* 1.3; *FH* 2.32), neither can they be reasoned out of this disposition (e.g., *D* 1.35)—rather they can only be dissuaded from it through fear or force (e.g., *D* 1.3, 1.18). Furthermore, Machiavelli indicates

⁴¹See John P. McCormick, "'Greater, More Honorable and More Useful to the Republic': Plebeian Offices in Machiavelli's 'Perfect' Constitution," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 8, no. 2 (2010): 237–62; and Jérémie Barthas, "Il Pensiero Costituzionale di Machiavelli e la Funzione Tribunitaria nella Firenze del Rinascimento," in *Il Laboratorio del Rinascimento: Studi di Storia e Cultura per Riccardo Fubini*, ed. Lorenzo Tanzini (Florence: Le Lettere, 2016), 239–55.

⁴²See Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 271, 130; and Viroli, *Founders: Machiavelli*, 5–10, 125–26.

that the aristocrats exhibit insolence whether they are united or divided (e.g., *D* 1.2; *FH* 4.2), while the people are more likely to display it, if at all, when they are divided, and hence even more vulnerable than usual to aristocratic oppression (e.g., *FH* 3.17).

Machiavelli proposes senates to temporarily mollify and partially contain the oppressive appetite of a republic's elite citizens. When senates no longer serve that function, Machiavelli seems to imply, they may then serve another: a magistrate (*D* 1.47), prince (*P* 8), or the people themselves (*D* 2.2) know exactly where to find—all in one place—nobles who require more severe modes of "correction."