

Virtu and Institutionalized Conflict in Machiavellian Politics

Christine Dow

In this paper I argue for a radically democratic turn in Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* over and against the neo-Roman or Cambridge school interpretation, which emphasizes the importance of stability through mixed government and which accepts or assumes elite domination in republican politics.¹ My aim is to show how this democratic interpretation of Machiavelli puts him in conversation with Aristotle about the aim of democratic politics and the fully human life, the aims of *eudaimonia* and *virtù*.

This article has three component parts: first, an analysis of the centrality of conflict in the *Discourses* and the ways in which this

¹ For this neo-Roman perspective, see Maurizio Viroli, "Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 171; Maurizio Viroli, *Republicanism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002); and Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Viroli situates Machiavelli within the republican tradition—committed to the rule of law, to civic excellence, and to the greatness of the republic—but he is careful to articulate the ways in which Machiavelli departs from that tradition. Skinner, by contrast, wants to make it clear that Machiavelli does not in fact stray too far from traditional republican ideals. He argues that even in making his most novel claims and radical departures from classical republican writers, Machiavelli "remains in close intellectual contact" with them. See Quentin Skinner, "Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and the Pre-humanist Origins of Republican Ideas" in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, 135-141. For a clear and scathing critique of this interpretation, see John McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and John McCormick, "Machiavelli Against Republicanism: On the Cambridge School's 'Guicciardinian Moments,'" *Political Theory* 31.3 (2003): 615-643. He argues that the Cambridge school largely neglects the elitism inherent in classical republicanism and the radical populism in the institutional arrangements of the *Discourses*. He criticizes Skinner for over-emphasizing the importance of equilibrium between *i grandi* and *il popolo* and identifying the conflict between them as based on self-interest rather than class.

move shifts the focus of the debate away from mixed government and toward *virtù*; second, an examination of Machiavelli's assessment of human nature and its significance or insignificance in determining the appropriate form of government for a people; and third, an interpretation of Machiavellian *virtù* which points to an almost entirely overlooked conception of human excellence within the text. Over the course of these three sections, I build a case for a democratic interpretation of Machiavellian republican politics, one which relies upon a mobilized public, equipped with an institutional framework and a political skill set which allows them to regularly confront political and social elites in order to avoid domination. I argue that this democratic politics requires an excellent human life not so unlike the one devoted to Aristotelian flourishing in that this concept of *virtù* is politically intertwined with a concept of the common good and the good life. Indeed, I show that, while Machiavelli attempts to excise moral virtue from his political theory, he in fact makes a strong normative case for a life devoted to democratic politics and democratic excellence.

Through this analysis of democratic institutions in his republican theory and the concept of *virtù*, I will show that the *Discourses* offers a new way of thinking about an excellent human life, specifically within Machiavellian politics, while proposing an alternative form of political organization to the Aristotelian mean and neo-Roman equilibrium or stability. I will also show that replacing the mean or middle course with controlled and institutionalized class conflict in fact aligns Machiavelli more closely with Aristotle. The two thinkers, of course, remain in tension with one another—Aristotle demanding moral excellence, Machiavelli non-moral flexibility—but despite their differences, they both grapple with the question of who is best-suited for political life, the perennial question of republican political thought.

I. Institutionalized Class Conflict through Political Participation

While it is customary for a thinker to first examine his conception of human nature before reaching the conclusion of what form of government, which institutions, are best suited to that population, Machiavelli doesn't really take that tack. Instead, he opens the *Discourses* with a discussion of the necessity of good laws to combat the chaotic circumstances of founding.

Machiavelli opens Book I of the *Discourses* with the general impression that limiting the choices of individuals is better for their overall character because, when given the opportunity, they will make lousy decisions. Necessity brings out the best in people, forcing them to be good, but a city founded purely upon necessity will not result in much security, prosperity, or expansion. Therefore, if the conditions at the founding of the city are to be more fertile and forgiving, a substitute for necessity should be found—specifically good laws. The right laws can prevent corruption, no matter how fortuitous the location and strength of the city (*Discourses* I.1).² He contrasts this with cities not lucky enough to have good founders and who therefore must revise their laws (a risky thing to do), and cities which have never been on the right foot from the beginning. The presence or absence of good laws involves a kind of path dependence regarding the possibility of future greatness, just short of the intervention of a virtuous individual who might alter that path. Without the virtuous individual, the institutions in place can solidify a population's character, making it extremely difficult to alter the city for the better.

² Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. Bernard Crick, trans. Leslie J. Walker, S.J., rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003). References to this work will be given parenthetically in the body of the text by Book and Chapter number.

Machiavelli makes use of the Greek typology of political regimes: the three associated with right leadership—principality, aristocracy, and democracy—and the three perversions of those regimes—tyranny, oligarchy, and anarchy. It is noteworthy, however, that he considers democracy a form of government which aims at the common good, unlike Aristotle who thought democracy a perverted regime which only served the interest of the poor. Machiavelli claims that while the latter three are repugnant by definition, the first three are insufficient as well. Even though they may start out with good laws and people willing to obey them, within a few generations, a commitment to the common good gives way to what is convenient to the rulers, and this leads to tyranny. The result is a cycling through the regimes as the virtuous few overthrow the tyrant and eventually become oligarchs whom the people finally depose, before falling into anarchy after a short period of democracy. This progression shows that the personalities of the ruling individuals cannot be trusted to remain good. The character of a good king, of wise aristocrats, even of the entire people, cannot be trusted to uphold the interests of the city—everyone can and will be corrupted eventually, given enough time. Most often, however, another regime, observing the weakness of the one in turmoil, conquers it, proving that time and the cycles of regimes do not actually play out so neatly as the typology suggests. *Fortuna* is just as often the cause of ruin.

The best course, therefore, is to combine these forms, retaining elements of each in a mixed form of governance, in the process fortifying *lo stato* against poor statesmen and the weaknesses of each kind of regime. In the case of Sparta, this balance was achieved over the long term through the brilliance of Lycurgus and the tranquil relations between nobility and populace. In the case of Rome, this strategy was stumbled upon when the

fighting between the plebs and the senate served a function not provided in the monarchical constitution. Thus, "chance affected what had not been provided by a lawgiver" (*Discourses* I.2). The consuls replaced the king, and when the nobility had grown so overbearing as to be intolerable, the people rose up and were able to establish their own offices in the tribunes.

Far from harming the republic, this conflict improved it. Indeed, on the subject of fighting between the few and the many, Machiavelli is quite clear:

To me those who condemn the quarrels between the nobles and the plebs, seem to be caviling at the very things that were the primary cause of Rome's retaining her freedom, and that they pay more attention to the noise and clamor resulting from such commotions than to what resulted from them, i.e. to the good effects which they produced. Nor do they realize that in every republic there are two different dispositions, that of the populace and that of the upper class and that all legislation favorable to liberty is brought about by the clash between them. (*Discourses* I.4)

Not just any kind of conflict is productive, however. Left to their own devices the nobility will oppress the people, and a republic need not necessarily provide effective or rigorous ways for the many to check the few. If it does not, the conflict between few and many could result in the complete destruction and dissolution of the city. Machiavelli illustrates constructive versus destructive conflict in the contrast between Rome in the *Discourses* and Florence in *The History of Florence*. Where the Roman system tolerated vast economic and social inequality because it was offset by political and legal equality, the Florentine plebs desired the complete exclusion of the noble class from politics, which Machiavelli considered unreasonable and 'abusive.' The result of class conflict in Rome was laws which favored the common good, whereas laws favoring the victor were all that came out of Florentine class conflict. In Rome, class conflict forced the nobility to do what they otherwise would not have, that is, act in the interest of the populace—to act with virtue—

whereas in Florence, nobles were forced to humble themselves in order to be readmitted to political life, causing the republic to become base in the process.³

It is noteworthy that Machiavelli collapses the social class based on blood (the patricians) and the wealthy into one group: *i grandi*. Their *primary desire* is to oppress the people (or the many—*il popolo*), rather than any supposed desire for glory or reputation.⁴ In short, *i grandi* do not attempt to dominate the many out of a need for an improved image of themselves; they do it out of naked desire for power. This is in direct contrast with Aristotle's aristocracy, a class defined almost entirely by its virtuous character rather than its wealth. According to Machiavelli, there is nothing virtuous about the nobility. Virtue comes from somewhere else.

Thus, according to Machiavelli, there must be ways to control the fighting between the few and the many, but primarily the laws need to "curb the arrogance of the nobility" (*Discourses* I.3). The will of *i grandi* seems to be a constant in any city—they will always desire power. The task of the laws is to ensure that the public has a mechanism for expressing itself, for airing its frustration effectively. Machiavelli suggests, "every city should provide ways and means whereby the ambitions of the populace may find an outlet, especially a city which proposes to avail itself of the populace in important undertakings" (*Discourses* I.4). He comes down on the side of the populace again when claiming that their desires, unlike those of *i grandi*, are not usually dangerous, consisting primarily of the desire to be free of oppression and to prevent oppression (*Discourses* I.58). Generally, the wealthy are more eager to keep what they have at the expense of others, and it is this desire which encourages the masses

³ Gisela Bock, "Civil Discord in Machiavelli's *Istorie Fiorentine*," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, 190.

⁴ See McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 5 & 31 for a concise discussion of this move.

to be grasping and greedy themselves. Aristocrats and oligarchs alike inspire poor behavior amongst the masses.

In his *Machiavellian Moment*, J. G. Pocock explains that the logic of the time, prior to Machiavelli, was that the virtue of the city and of the citizens was in the maintenance of the republic, specifically, its stability. "The ability of the republic to sustain itself against internal and external shocks—*fortuna* as the symbol of contingency—became identical with *virtus* as the Roman antithesis to *fortuna*."⁵ A virtuous citizen contributed to the stability of the city by exhibiting Roman virtues like courage, wisdom, and moderation. For Machiavelli, however, *virtù* is innovation, a necessarily destabilizing principle. The hereditary king needs very little of it, as he has been inured against *fortuna* by the length of his rule, while the new prince has great need of *virtù* to emancipate himself from both the circumstances and the support of the individuals who helped him to achieve his position.⁶

In *The Prince*, there is no advice which focuses primarily on the day to day workings of the commonwealth. Every action the prince takes applies to the continuing struggle of determining allies, and gaining and keeping power. The prince fares better or worse at this based on the *virtù* he possesses. He must continually negotiate between the nobles who wish to live by the old rules and dominate the people (and who know exactly what they'll be losing), and the people who are not yet sure of what the prince can do for them.⁷

Further evidence that Machiavelli advocates tension between stability and conflict is his discussion of the ways that the republics of Venice and Sparta differ from Rome. If stability were the primary

⁵ J.G. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 157.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁷ See Peter Breiner, "Machiavelli's 'New Prince' and the Primordial Moment of Acquisition," *Political Theory* 36.1 (2008).

purpose of a political association, Machiavelli would have advocated governments similar to the Venetian or Spartan constitutions. If the purpose of the republic is to maintain a set of political and economic conditions, then the nobility are fit for that, as they enjoy above all keeping their power. In Venice, the people were pacified by the existence of an organic aristocracy. Those who had lived there longest could participate in government; newcomers could not. The number of 'gentlefolk' versus the newcomers was nearly equal, and thus stable.

In the case of Sparta, a roughly equal distribution of property kept the people from rising against the few political leaders, as political inequality was not so important as economic equality. In both cases, the republics were large enough to be self-sufficient, but not so large as to draw the greedy attention of surrounding cities. Nor was it wise for either Venice or Sparta to have designs on expansion or empire, so the civilian populations were not armed. (In fact, attempting expansion did eventually destabilize and lead to the destruction of both republics.) "I am firmly convinced, therefore, that to set up a republic which is to last for a long time, the way to set about it is to constitute it as Sparta and Venice were constituted; to place it in a strong position, and so to fortify it that no one will dream of taking it by a sudden assault" (*Discourses* I.6).

And yet Machiavelli is not satisfied with either Venice or Sparta because, when they did attempt to extend beyond their borders, both lost everything due to their inability to adapt. Stability *is not* in fact a reasonable goal on its own because human beings are not built for it. "Hence if a commonwealth be constituted with a view to its maintaining the *status quo*, but not with a view to expansion, and by necessity it be led to expand, its basic principles will be subverted and it will soon be faced with ruin" (*Discourses* I.6). The

city will either fall when it is forced to go to war or become idle and 'effeminate' if it never has to defend itself.

For this reason, Machiavelli favors organizing a republic as the Romans had done. If the republic is to be large and growing, it must continue to expand and must therefore incorporate the people in this effort. In a marked criticism of the theoretical tradition which places such emphasis on balance and longevity, Machiavelli says:

Wherefore, since it is impossible, so I hold, to adjust the balance so nicely as to keep things exactly to this middle course [between war and indolence], one ought, in constituting a republic, to consider the possibility of its playing a more honorable role, and so to constitute it that, should necessity actually force it to expand, it may be able to retain possession of what it has acquired. (*Discourses* I.6)

This passage effectively shifts the focus of the debate surrounding the proper balance within *lo stato*. Where stability through mixed government and balance between the will of *i grandi* and *il popolo* was the established goal, Machiavelli now claims that it must take a more 'honorable' course—that of expansion, of *virtù*. The political actor who possesses *virtù* is able to innovate, to re-imagine, rather than maintain a balance in the life of the republic. In Rome's case, stability could no longer be the functional goal of the empire because the nature of the population was such that it could never remain static. The republic would have fallen were it not equipped to expand, so by arming the plebs, by granting them political power through the tribunes, Rome was certainly more tumultuous, but it was also in a position to change and improve. Machiavelli effectively gives the republic a purpose which he calls more honorable, but which, practically speaking, demands more of its citizens, demands that they possess *virtù*—a range of characteristics which encompass far more than only the desire for honor or glory, and which markedly lack the restraint and moderation associated with Aristotle.

The institutions which mobilize the citizens serve as a stabilizing force in the republic, an outlet for citizens so that they do not form factions, but stability cannot be the only goal because of the way Machiavelli has shifted the frame of the discussion. Sparta and Venice are now the outliers, incapable of maintaining a republic when a republic now exists to expand and evolve, and Rome is the exemplar.

What are the institutions which promote healthy conflict between the few and the many, as well as *virtù* amongst the people? And how do they manage to bring stability while at the same time never bringing an end to conflict? Given the number of aristocratic and oligarchic constitutions proliferating at the time Machiavelli was writing, they are a set of the most radically democratic institutions seen in Western political thought, breaking significantly with most republican thinkers of the period. These institutions include opportunities for the general public to hold offices reserved exclusively for them and the ability to sanction elites through public trials.

Specifically, Machiavelli argues in favor of Rome's Tribunes, public positions which barred elite participation entirely. So long as the public has a means to contest a policy, then aristocratic power can be checked. This often took the form of veto power and the power to demand the release of pleb prisoners held by noble magistrates. This more reactive power became aggressive when the people suffered abuse at the hands of the wealthy. The tribunes were empowered to indict and prosecute magistrates and citizens if suspected of criminal activity, as well as to propose and pass laws. Thus, the people could be an active force in politics, rather than merely reactive. They react to the rule of the elite as well as participate in ruling. And according to Machiavelli, it is *only* their participation, their influence, which kept the Roman republic going

for as long as it did by checking the greed of the elite (*Discourses* I.37).⁸

The public should also be able to express their judgment in criminal cases, where elites are on trial for political crimes. The function of public accusation of officials and political trials is not only to keep them honest, but to allow the public to vent its frustrations with the elite. Public accusations serve as a release valve. The ugly sentiments that inevitably arise between the classes must have an institutional outlet in order to not be destructive. Since the elite are generally able to dominate other institutions, poorer citizens need alternative ways of making themselves heard. Furthermore, when provided with the appropriate channels to make their case, and the substantive facts of the case, the public is more likely to make a reasoned judgment than they would making blind accusations amongst themselves. Indeed, the decision will most likely be fairer than that of a magistrate, who is easily intimidated by the elite and knows he needs to be reappointed some day (*Discourses* I.7, I.58).

The best solution to both the problem of elite domination and the need for the republic to be long lasting is separate political institutions which allow the people to deliberate away from the influence of the elite and select officials from their own ranks. The republican political tradition has almost universally permitted (and encouraged) the ascendance of an aristocratic elite over the public, whether it be by institutions reserved for elites (like the Roman senate) or through electoral processes which allow the public to select leaders who most often come from the elite class. The overwhelming sentiment in this tradition is that the general public is unsuited for political decision making but that it must nevertheless

⁸ See McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 93-96.

be included in some capacity, mainly to provide stability in mixed government.

Machiavelli stands out in this regard, both in that he shifts the argument away from that brand of stability and in his willingness to put serious constraints on the elite through institutional restrictions. He claims, contra classical and contemporary republicans, that the public is more likely to make more reasoned judgments and better decisions than the elite, thus offering both normative and empirical grounds for increased public participation in governance. Public offices held open for plebs and public accusations and trials afford opportunities for members of the lower classes to check the power of elite institutions and the members of the upper classes which populate them. The conflict between elite and popular forces does not abate. A middle course between their interests is not directly sought. Rather, the ongoing tension produces laws which keep the destructive power of both at bay, leads to the city's growth and improvement, and encourages the development of *virtù* amongst the citizens,.

In order to preserve the freedom of the republic and its citizens, the citizens must gain and possess *virtù*. I will discuss the various attempts to define *virtù* at length in Section III, but for now I will use Skinner's articulation of the concept. He defines *virtù* within a republic as a set of capacities which the citizens must exercise for the preservation of their freedom—namely, the courage to defend the community against the threat of external enemies and the prudence to play a part in public life, to participate in political decision-making.⁹ But the citizens must also know when to resist, when not to obey, and this is not something Skinner emphasizes in his definition. This raises the question of the character of the public

⁹ Quentin Skinner, "The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty" in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, 303.

and demands an examination of that public itself, not only the institutions which shape it.

II. The Character of the Public: Practical Considerations of Human Nature

In this section, I outline Machiavelli's use and assessment of human nature as a way of approaching this question of human flourishing and the characteristics associated with *virtù*. How important is the character of the citizens in determining the institutions that will govern them? Is the character of the leader more or less important than that of his subjects? How has Machiavelli altered the meaning of 'character' in his usage? Are the characteristics associated with *virtù* natural or entirely dependent upon the existence of good laws? Finally, based on this assessment, does Machiavelli fall into the same aristocratic conception of excellence as Aristotle, despite the radically democratic nature of his political institutions?

Machiavelli does not mince words when it comes to his assessment of the nature of the human race:

All writers on politics have pointed out, and throughout history there are plenty of examples which indicate, that in constituting and legislating for a commonwealth it must needs be taken for granted that all men are wicked and that they will always give vent to the malignity that is in their minds when opportunity offers. . . . [I]n time—which is said to be the father of all truth—it reveals itself. (*Discourses* I.3)

And because men are by nature both ambitious and suspicious, and know not how to use moderation where their fortunes are concerned, it is impossible that the suspicion aroused in a prince after the victory of one of his generals should not be increased by any arrogance in manner or speech displayed by the man himself. This being so, the prince cannot but look to his own security. (*Discourses* I.29)

Whenever there is no need for men to fight, they fight for ambition's sake. . . . The reason is that nature has so constituted men that, though all things are objects of desire, not all things are attainable; so that desire always exceeds the power of attainment, with the result that men are ill content with what they possess. (*Discourses* I.37)

By all appearances, Machiavelli shares an understanding of human motivation with Hobbes. People are "wicked," "ambitious and suspicious," and infinitely desirous. Given this view, how is it possible that he could reach anything but Hobbesian conclusions regarding the form government should take? Yet, Machiavelli does not call for an absolute monarch to rule in perpetuity in order to control these violent aspects of human behavior. Unlike Hobbes, Machiavelli does not concern himself with individual motivation for acting, only the external results—the political outcome.

On the one hand, Machiavelli describes what kinds of rule are best suited for the population which already exists. Based upon the existing character of *i grandi* and *il popolo*, either a principality or a republic should be instituted. On the other, Machiavelli describes the importance of law in shaping the character of the public. He expresses the desire for a virtuous population through the intervention and maintenance of customs, religion, and law. It is important to note here that, unlike Aristotle, who explicitly stated that the laws of a city can make the people good in an intrinsic sense,¹⁰ Machiavelli wants only to curb and train the desires of the people. While I will argue that this constitutes a certain concern for a conception of the human good, Machiavelli generally expresses very little interest in the inherent character of a political order's citizens. He is more concerned with the political results of the characteristics they possess.

The natures of the few and the many appear to be static, focused almost entirely on the exercise and the avoidance of domination. Yet, if Machiavelli believed that there was nothing to be done other than keep those groups from destroying one another, if

¹⁰ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b, 1180a30, 1180b15-25, and *Politics*, 1252b.

he believed they could never rise above their nature, why have such a commitment to the rule of law and institutions which produce good laws and eventually citizens who possess civic *virtù*? Why devote so much energy to historical descriptions of leaders who possess this *virtù* and great versus weak republics?

In the previous section, I outlined the institutions which encouraged a popular check on elite power. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli details the institutions which shape successful and unsuccessful republics, but he also explains which populations make for good republicans and which good subjects of princes. In terms of state building and organization, one person should do the actual founding because too many people determining the founding principles will result in squabbling. "Wherefore the prudent organizer of a state whose intention it is to govern not in his own interests but for the common good, and not in the interest of his successors but for the sake of that fatherland which is common to all, should contrive to be alone in his authority" (*Discourses* I.9).

But when the state has been established, power should be dispersed to more people, for "though but one person suffices for the purpose of organization, what he has organized will not last long if it continues to rest on the shoulders of one man, but may well last if many remain in charge and many look to its maintenance" (*Discourses* I.9). According to Machiavelli, a general population is not suited for the activity of building a political community and determining its character due to the incredible diversity of interests amongst them, but they can be trusted to know its value and not throw it out on a whim.

Where the people are unruly and disorganized, however, no tool is so powerful as religion for the control and manipulation of subjects. Religion is the most lasting of institutions which can best preserve the virtue of the republic. When a population does not

respect the laws imposed by a prince or a constitution, they will often follow religious tenets for fear of divine retribution should they be broken (*Discourses* I.11). Superstition about the likelihood of the success or failure of a military campaign can make all the difference in the confidence of the soldiers. And the presence or absence of a unified church can mean the successful unification of a country or its continued disorganization. Religion is yet another weapon in a founder's arsenal to preserve the principality or republic, to control the ambition and cowardice of its citizens. While religion may serve to instill a moral code in its follower, the substance and content of that code is not so important as its existence. Machiavelli does not attribute any moral value to religion, seeing it only as a mechanism for maintaining a republic or principality.

In the middle sections of the *Discourses* (16-18, 25-27), Machiavelli gives the reader a series of if-then statements about the character of the public and the sort of government best suited for that public. If the people have only known the rule of a heavy-handed prince, or some foreign power, then they will be ill suited to maintain their liberty if circumstances or fortune should make them suddenly free. They will most likely surrender to the first power that seeks to fill the vacuum—often the former elite who benefited from the previous regime. When a population desires security, it is all too easy for the people to allow a worse tyrant to take the place of the old one (*Discourses* I.16). If the institutions already in place in protection of that security are sound, the populations should pull through.

A corrupt public, however, cannot maintain its institutions. Even with new laws, the people will be unable to bring itself around. Without a strong tradition of virtue, no good law can change a population. It is interesting that Machiavelli places the blame for this corrupt regime on the prince; it is the prince who rules for his

own interest, rather than a public doing the same, which ruins a population. Likewise, it is only a virtuous figure, ready to make use of force and coercion, who can hope to change both institutions and people (*Discourses* I.17).

If the people are virtuous, and the leader wishes to change the form of the government, he should make sure to leave the people with some feeling that their customs remain, that if changing from a monarchy to a more democratic form, at least the titles of the offices are the same. Significant change causes the people to become restless and change their minds about the rulers, so the appearance of constancy must be maintained, even if the government has radically changed (*Discourses* I.25).

If the republic is seized by an entirely new force, that force must change everything about the population and its institutions; there must be a clean, cruel break. While Machiavelli offers advice on how to maintain this sort of regime, he does not think it a wise course of action, because, he claims, it is more difficult than most people realize to be entirely cruel, even though absolute cruelty is necessary (*Discourses* I.26, 27). Here, Machiavelli asserts the persistence and strength of the character of the population, as well as how strongly they attach themselves to religion, custom, institutions, and laws. Given the opportunity, a population will latch onto a system which allows them to maintain liberty and security, adapting their behavior to that system.

Given the ambiguities of Machiavelli's assertions about human nature in these sections, there seem to be two possible conclusions: first, that adopting the laws and customs of a republic or principality does in fact serve the desirous and wicked nature of man, or second, Machiavelli considers humans to be generally malleable creatures, subject to the circumstances and institutions of their time rather than some innate nature. As desires change, the

institutions change, and the behaviors of the citizens change with them through institutional feedback.

Despite his claim that people are ambitious and suspicious at their very core, he finds, through his analysis of the ancient Roman and Greek republics, that the people can more often be trusted to avoid these vices than can the nobility. A population living together and relating as equals tends to produce more virtuous members, members who are not ungrateful, and who are only suspicious of the nobility who would try to dominate them. Indeed, when all serve equally, particularly in military service, valor, victory, and virtuous deeds are shared by many, so that no one wants to appear too ambitious and bring the wrath of any other member (*Discourses* I.29, 30).

However, Machiavelli's insistence that the people are more trustworthy than the nobles does not mean he is entirely optimistic about their ability to govern themselves. While united, they are passionate and bold, but apart, cowardly and easier to manage. "Because, though in one sense there is nothing more formidable than the masses disorganized and without a head, in another sense there is nothing more weak. . . . [W]hen their ardor cools off a little, and each sees the other turning back to go home, they begin to lose confidence and to look to their own safety" (*Discourses* I.57)—a wise piece of political prudence for *il popolo* to keep in mind when attempting to resist the will of *i grandi*, or for *i grandi* themselves if trying to put an end to a political disturbance. The public is also easily deceived by bold proposals and tempted by the appearance of sure victory, when in fact, the proposal may not be in their interest at all (*Discourses* I.53). Because the public is so easily swayed, the virtuous character of a few of its citizens is particularly important; someone must be able to talk sense. Despite their fickle and passionate nature, Machiavelli asserts that the public will listen to

reason once this person or group emerges and is able to articulate the specific consequences of misguided action (*Discourses* I.54).

Yet, unlike many thinkers writing at the time, Machiavelli does not dismiss the public for their changeable emotional opinions. Rather, he accuses princes of possessing similar attributes and generally being much worse at maintaining their principalities than the people are at maintaining their republic. "For a licentious and turbulent populace, when a good man can obtain a hearing, can easily be brought to behave itself; but there is none to talk to a bad prince, nor is there any remedy except the sword" (*Discourses* I.58).

Essentially, the public requires a set of concrete circumstances in order to make the best decision. When forced to recognize the reality of the situation and the consequences of their choice, the public performs better. "[I]t is possible to make the populace open its eyes as soon as a way can be found of making it see that it is a mistake to generalize, and that it ought to get down to particulars" (*Discourses* I.47). This is not unlike the Aristotelian conception of politics: the public is better qualified to make judgments about particular circumstances than about general principles.

However, unlike in the Aristotelian conception, these citizens are not tasked with applying ethical principles to particular circumstances (as in the exercise of *phronesis*), but rather with determining the political specifics of how to most effectively, advantageously, or efficiently implement a law or policy. It is the constantly changing circumstances of politics which bring out a population's capacity to reason and improve the constitution.

This complex understanding of human behavior and action—wickedness and suspicion, ambition and desire, along with a willingness to listen to reason, and skill in negotiating particulars—I suggest points to something intrinsic within people, specifically, the

desire to preserve one's liberty, and with that liberty, govern one's own life. This is not 'character' in the way that Aristotle defines it, as the presence or absence of good moral habits, but the presence or absence of a drive within both citizens and leaders to remain free. I think that Machiavelli would say this desire is natural but that not many possess the ability to act upon it effectively and successfully, particularly if the political conditions are not right. Perhaps this drive is innate in the examples Machiavelli gives of nearly superhuman political, religious, and military figures, but amongst citizens it must be cultivated in much the same way moral virtue is cultivated for Aristotle—through repeated opportunities to sharpen the skills associated with *virtù*. These opportunities arise most frequently when institutions are arranged so that *il popolo* may regularly challenge *i grandi*.

Machiavelli makes a normative distinction between the desire to remain free of domination and the desire to dominate. The former he associates with the productive conflict between *i grandi* and *il popolo*, the latter with the destructive appetites of *i grandi*. While the desire to dominate and to remain free of domination are politically inevitable and, for Machiavelli, necessary, those with *virtù* do not seek to dominate others for that end alone. They act based on the desire to remain free, and they act politically to shape law and policy so that they may continue to remain free. In a well organized republic, citizens will be just as visible as leaders in this ongoing conflict.

From this, I suggest that Machiavelli makes use of, and cannot in fact escape, a concept of human form—though not a teleological form as with Aristotle. The aspect of human nature that remains constant is the desire to exercise individual liberty. The best, most effective and admirable form this liberty can take is the exercise of *virtù* in the preservation of a political system, be it a

principality or a republic—though more likely a republic as they tend to last longer. For Machiavelli, the individual who exercises *virtù* possesses a distinctly human excellence. In the following section, I will articulate this concept, which is not so much one of purpose or essence but an ideal of democratic citizenship.

III. The Art or Activity of Politics: Virtù as a Form of Human Excellence

The Discourses and *The Prince* are populated by a wide cast of characters who fall into essentially three categories: *il popolo*, *i grandi*, and the leaders who found and shape the political association. Machiavelli is very taken with these nearly superhuman founders. What he admires most about them is their ability to form something that will last. Those who found religions, therefore, should receive the most praise because religions last the longest. After that come founders of republics and principalities, then military officers "who have added to the extent of their own dominions or to that of their country's." "Men of letters" come next, those considered experts in their field, and finally, those who excel in the practice of their "art" also deserve praise. Of this last group, "the number is legion" (*Discourses* I.10). All of these individuals may be said to possess *virtù* in some form or capacity. But are these instances of *virtù* all of similar value? Do political or military leaders have more than citizens or merely a different set of skills?

Amongst Machiavelli scholars, interpretations of how a person possesses *virtù* are quite diverse, ranging from those who believe that *virtù* is most clearly embodied by military leaders and a militarized citizenry to those who argue that *virtù* requires creativity in political life, not only among leaders and not only at times of war.

The militaristic view of the concept is most clearly articulated by Neal Wood. Men of *virtù* are:

...predominantly warriors who triumph in circumstances of extreme danger, hardship, and chance. Success is not always proof of *virtù*, but if one fails, he must do so in a glorious fashion. . . . *Virtù* is most typically exhibited by an individual who 1) founds a commonwealth and secures it, or inherits a commonwealth and secures it; 2) conspires to seize power and, having seized it, secures it; 3) preserves or extends a commonwealth by organizing an army and commanding it, or by commanding an army already organized.¹¹

And:

Survival under conditions of perpetual tension and warfare requires *virtù*, which is recognized and honored. Each state, living in continual fear of the other, is obliged to keep up its military discipline and organization. *Virtù*, therefore, is the consequence of the necessity of war and defense, which, in turn, results from the great number of republics.¹²

By contrast, I. Hannaford argues that political actors who possess *virtù* "establish laws which favor all parts of the community and which conform to the special requirements of a political community;" "provide for the transmission of legitimate authority from one generation to another" through the establishment of reciprocal rule between the one, the few, and the many; "resist the degenerate viciousness of tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy, which can only lead to the atrocity of war;" and are "glorious" because they establish civil *and* military institutions "within the constitutional

¹¹ Neal Wood, "Machiavelli's Concept of *Virtù* Reconsidered," *Political Studies* 15 (1967): 165.

¹² *Ibid.*, 168. For another version of the militaristic view, see Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment*. Pocock, in his sections on the *Prince* and *Discourses*, also largely identifies *virtù* with military excellence, asserting that the armed citizen embodies *virtù* and that the *virtù* of the prince is military—he trains his army to evolve into "a people." The citizens possess the will rather than the knowledge to act swiftly in defense of the republic. This represents, for Pocock, the militarization of citizenship, the assertion that the citizen body must be both "lion and fox."

limitations placed upon them by the civilian community."¹³ In this model, military and civic responsibility go hand in hand, but are separate.

This is a critical intervention. The law is not an artificial source of necessity, and neither is it the final word on a style of governance; it is evidence of the productive capabilities of virtuous citizens and leaders. In the absence of war, they can make something lasting and independent from war-like necessity. Reducing politics to a friend-enemy distinction is what allows for the rise of military despots and the kind of destructive class politics that Machiavelli explicitly rejects. No one piece of political prudence, and no historical example of a past prince can provide a complete system of leadership. The advice is only useful if the actor or actors know what to do with it in their own particular set of circumstances. The advice won't hold forever, and in Machiavelli's model of institutionalized conflict it can't.¹⁴

Apart from these broad interpretive categories, arguably the most significant contribution to the literature on *virtù* is the account of Machiavelli's shift in grammar—specifically in pronoun usage. In his short essay, "The Perspective of Art," Charles Singleton shows how Machiavelli shifts the focus of politics from activity to art by altering the very grammar of the way politics is written about.¹⁵

¹³ I. Hannaford, "Machiavelli's Concept of *Virtù* in *The Prince* and *The Discourses* Reconsidered," *Political Studies* 20 (1972): 187.

¹⁴ See Breiner, "Machiavelli's 'New Prince,'" 66-92. Breiner defines *virtù* as the ability to recognize one's own position in a political situation and know how to act in that situation. "It would seem that each shift in the struggle to find and keep the people from deserting you or to conquer a new territory demands a different combination of advice and the *virtù* to translate it into the given situation" (74).

¹⁵ Charles S. Singleton, "The Perspective of Art," *The Kenyon Review* 15 (1953). See also J.H. Hexter, "The Predatory and the Utopian Vision: Machiavelli and More. The Loom of Language and the Fabric of Imperatives: The Case of *Il Principe* and *Utopia*" in *The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation: More, Machiavelli, and Seyssel* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Hexter draws attention to a similar shift in language, particularly in how Machiavelli uses the

Making use of Aristotelian language, Singleton describes art as concerned with making, whereas action is concerned with doing. Thus, the craftsman must be concerned with the quality of his product, while the political actor must be concerned with the activity of prudence, the making of good decisions. For Aristotle, the character of the political actor is intimately tied, is indeed vital, to the decisions he will make. If the actor is not virtuous, the decisions will not be virtuous. At best, he will be clever. The character of the artist is not important; it is the quality of his work that matters.

According to Singleton, Machiavelli sees the new prince as an artist, shaping something that is coming into being, external from himself. This shift is in the grammar of Machiavelli's writing. By using the pronoun *chi*, "whoever," in reference to the individual doing the action, Machiavelli removes moral judgment from the equation and pushes the political operation into the realm of art, something valued for its product rather than the activity itself. "[V]irtù is consequently the power essentially to make, to impress a form upon matter, durably—or as durably as possible. *Virtù* is the power of the sculptor, of the forger."¹⁶ In this way, the political association exists in the realm of constantly coming into being, rather than as the natural end of human association, as it is for Aristotle. There can be no moral scale in production of the political process. In offering the perspective of art rather than action when defining the work of politics, Singleton indicates that Machiavelli

idea of *lo stato*. "*Lo Stato* is no body politic; it is not the people politically organized, the political expression of their nature and character and aspirations, their virtues and their defects. Rather it is an inert lump, and whatever vicarious vitality it displays is infused into it not by the people, but by the prince who gets it, holds it, keeps it, and aims not to lose it or have it taken away" (188). See also Russell Price, "The Senses of *Virtù* in Machiavelli," *European Studies Review* 3 (1973).

¹⁶ Singleton, "The Perspective of Art," 178.

means something functionally different from the Greeks when he writes of activities associated with *virtù*.

To distinguish my argument, I divide these interpretations of Machiavellian *virtù* into two further categories: those that see the concept as having some moral or ethical significance and those that do not. Singleton and J. H. Hexter, represent the latter view by illustrating how the language itself is stripped of moral or ethical language—how by referring to the actor as "whoever" seizes control and to *lo stato* as the inert thing to be molded rather than an association with an intrinsic purpose, Machiavelli successfully excises Aristotle from his political theory.¹⁷ This non-moral actor is adaptable and quick to seize an opportunity, not bound by moral virtue to do right but only the desire to acquire and keep. Whatever characteristics or actions this requires are not judged on their intrinsic worth, but on whether they successfully achieve the goals associated with preserving *lo stato*.

Wood, Pocock, and Hannaford, by contrast, attribute to leaders and citizens a kind of Roman or Renaissance ethic—one which revels in acts of valor for the improvement of the empire. This is apparent in Wood's and Pocock's account of the militarized citizen. For Pocock,

The plebeian as Roman citizens is less a man performing a certain role in a decision-making system than a man trained by civic religion and military discipline to devote himself to the *patria* and carry this spirit over into civic affairs, so that he conforms to the dual model of the Machiavellian innovator displaying *virtù* and the Aristotelian citizen attentive to the common good.¹⁸

¹⁷ See also Price, "The Senses of *Virtù* in Machiavelli" and Breiner "Machiavelli's 'New Prince.'"

¹⁸ Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 203.

In both military and political matters, the ability of citizens and leaders to create lasting institutions and laws depends upon an ethic of commitment to the constitution.

Neither of these definitions is quite satisfying. The first downplays the significance of the political actors who possess *virtù*. "Whoever" can successfully shape *lo stato* is in fact a fairly specific kind of individual, someone with courage, boldness, cleverness, foresight, and moral flexibility. Machiavelli doesn't want just anyone doing the work of political governance; he wants "whoever" can do it in the manner he proposes. The second ignores the centrality of conflict to Machiavelli's republican politics. While a patriotic devotion to the constitution is necessary for citizenship, it is not sufficient for virtuous action as Machiavelli defines it.

Thus, I propose a third option, not bound to an ideal of greatness or empire per se, but to the mobilization of a democratic skill set possessed by both leaders and citizens. This third option emerges from the centrality of conflict as I have laid it out in Machiavelli's political theory as well as his ambiguous assessment of human nature—that above all, human beings want to be free of domination. To this end, Machiavelli's virtuous citizenry is mobilized and critical, a body of individuals equipped to recognize and react to domination, to change the institutions which further it, and replace them with new ones better able to carry out the ongoing conflict between *i grandi* and *il popolo*. This third conception of *virtù* is inherently democratic, combining the class-based conflict described in the *Discourses* with the innate desire for self-rule. The citizen who possesses *virtù* exhibits the characteristics listed at various points in this article—those traditionally associated with the concept—but possesses them with the express intention of protecting their liberty from the infringement of *i grandi*. This is a potentially unruly and destabilizing democratic mobilization based

upon the fundamental desire to remain self-governing. It is *this* desire which drives the population to act in its own defense, rather than single-minded devotion to a constitution or a leader (though, without the constitution, the public would not be equipped to defend it.)

Conclusion

Even though Machiavelli changed the grammar of politics—referring to the new prince as "whoever" could take control of a state and mold it into something new—and thereby made the moral virtues explicitly subservient to *virtù*, he cannot entirely escape the idea of an ideal human actor—the political actor, the engaged citizen pushing back against the destructive force of *i grandi*. His critique of Aristotelian morality is profound, his effect on the language of politics even more so, but he *does not* leave behind the idea of politics as a human activity of great worth nor of the political actor as worthwhile and admirable. This is because, without *virtù*, a republic can never grow past the need for balance and stability between *il popolo* and *i grandi*. It can never grow beyond a collection of individuals whose will must bend to the great leader's. Machiavelli wants more than stability, more even than a brilliant leader—he wants the kind of continuously evolving and improving politics that can only come about through direct confrontation with the political and social forces which threaten domination of the public.

While it is true that Machiavelli most vocally admires the prince or the republican who possesses the qualities of great leadership and he invested great time and care in descriptions of these individuals' accomplishments, I believe that the long-term success of these institutional arrangements requires more of the

citizens than reasoned following of virtuous leaders and vigilance against corruption. By situating the conflict between *i grandi* and *il popolo* at the center of republican politics, Machiavelli places change at the center of republican politics—and institutional changes need not exclude *virtù* on the part of the public. Indeed, change *requires* *virtù* on the part of the public, as those entrenched in the political elite inevitably begin to lose sight of the good of the republic and seek only personal gain. It is the centrality of both democratic institutions *and* the constantly evolving needs and desires of *il popolo* that makes Machiavelli a distinctly democratic thinker—one who imagines a version of the good life and the excellent citizen, despite the fact that he may seem to reject both.