

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
MACHIAVELLI

EDITED BY
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 CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Society, class, and state in Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*

The Discourses and The Prince

In the *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy* Machiavelli undertook a wide-ranging comparison of ancient and modern states and societies, enlivened by a running contrast between the ancient Roman republic and modern Florence that gives the work much of its polemical force. The proem to book 1 announces a search for "new methods and institutions [*modi e ordini nuovi*]" for "organizing republics, maintaining governments, ruling kingdoms, organizing militias, conducting wars, rendering justice to subjects, and extending territorial power." Machiavelli chose Livy's history of Rome as his textual interlocutor because of its abundant material on the early history of the ancient republic, which was, for Machiavelli, the exemplary state by which all others, ancient and modern, should be assessed. This was not a purely theoretical inquiry. Motivated by the "inborn desire I have always had to work, without fear or hesitation, for those things I believe will benefit everyone" (proem, book 1), Machiavelli hopes that "those who read these analyses of mine may more easily draw from them that utility for which knowledge of history should be sought." Asserting (proem, book 2) that ancient "virtù" and modern "vice [*vizio*]" are "clearer than the sun" and that the modern debasement of religion, laws, and military training has reached extreme levels of corruption, particularly among those holding the reins of power, he must "boldly" say what he understands of "past and future times, so that those, still young, who will read these writings of mine can reject the present and prepare themselves to imitate those former times whenever fortune gives them the opportunity." Machiavelli must have felt some affinity across the ages with Livy, who similarly wanted to show (book 1, preface) not only "what life and morals were like" in Rome's earliest times and "through what men and by what policies . . . empire was established and enlarged," but also "how, with the gradual relaxation of discipline, morals first gave way, as it were, then sank lower and lower, and finally began the downward plunge which

has brought us to the present time, when we can endure neither our vices [*vitia*] nor their cure."¹ For Livy too, history was "wholesome and profitable," because in it "you behold the lessons of every kind of experience [from which] you may choose for yourself and your own state what to imitate."

To the extent that the *Discourses* follow Livy's text, Machiavelli's attention is chiefly on the first ten books (the first "decade"), which recount Roman history from the origins to 293 BCE, but with frequent references to the third and fourth decades, which take the narrative to 179. (The second decade and the rest of the huge work were lost, and books 41–45 were discovered shortly after Machiavelli died.) But the *Discourses* are not a systematic commentary on Livy. Some sections roughly follow the order of Livy's chapters, while others, most notably the first eighteen chapters of book 1, draw from or allude to scattered bits of Livy in no apparent order.² The uneven relationship to Livy has prompted speculation that Machiavelli may have written the parts that do and do not follow Livy as separate works and then loosely combined them. Some believe that, because in chapter 2 of *The Prince* Machiavelli says he "will omit discussion of republics," having "analyzed them at length on another occasion," he must have drafted the first eighteen chapters of book 1 (the part of the work that comes closest to a systematic "discussion of republics") before *The Prince*, which was mostly written in the second half of 1513. All such speculation is built around the *Discourses*' apparent contradictions and awkward transitions, and, while it is certainly possible that portions of the work were drafted at different times, the only external evidence of when it was written is the statement by contemporary historian Filippo de' Nerli that "Machiavelli composed that book of his discourses on Titus Livy at the request" of his friends who gathered in the Orti Oricellari in 1516–17 to read and discuss works of ancient history.³ The *Discourses* apparently did not receive the final editing Machiavelli may have planned, but their 142 chapters – which exactly match the number of Livy's books and thus pay homage to him – suggest that, even if the work had been revised, the overall structure would not be much different from what we now have.

That the *Discourses* followed *The Prince* also seems likely in view of the critical, deconstructive dialogue they establish with that work. In the dedicatory letter to two friends from the Orti, Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai, Machiavelli departs from the "common practice" of those who dedicate their works to princes and, "blinded by ambition and avarice," praise them for many virtues when they ought to condemn them for every censurable fault. He dedicates his *Discourses* "not to those who are princes, but to those who . . . deserve to be princes." If this is self-reproach for having dedicated *The Prince* to a prince, it alludes to the possibility that the *Discourses* critically revisit other aspects of *The Prince*. To note such revisions

is not to affirm that the two works represent opposing political philosophies (e.g., that Machiavelli advocated monarchy and the pursuit of power in *The Prince* and republican liberty in the *Discourses*). Their differences lie rather in the way Machiavelli wrote about themes they both address. Three of these differences are particularly noteworthy.

The Prince is famous for its rigid categories and either/or constructions, in which terms define themselves by opposition to one another.⁴ Its opening chapter assumes a strict and mutually exclusive opposition between "republics" and "principalities" ("All governments [*stati*] and all dominions . . . have been and are either republics [*republiche*] or principalities [*principati*]"). Following a series of other oppositions, including that between hereditary principalities and new ones, the chapter culminates with the statement that all new principalities "are acquired either with the arms of others or with one's own, either through *fortuna* or through *virtù*," thus establishing the dramatic distinction between dependence on others (fortune) and autonomy (*virtù*) that is the foundation of *The Prince's* advice to, and judgment of, princes. Early in the *Discourses* (1.2) Machiavelli revisits these categories and insists on their instability and mutability. Discussing the classical typology of good and bad forms of government, which Machiavelli knew from Plato, Aristotle, and particularly Polybius ("principato" [monarchy], "ottimati" [aristocracy], and "popolare" [popular government]; and their corrupt counterparts tyranny, government by the few, and anarchy ["licenzioso"]), he asserts the precarious nature of all three good types, which are "so easily corrupted that they come themselves to be pernicious." The three bad forms "depend on" the good ones, and "each is so much like the one closest to it that they easily jump [*saltano*] the one into the other . . . If, therefore, an organizer of a republic establishes one of these three governments in a city, he establishes it for a short time only, because no remedy can prevent it from slipping into its contrary [*che non sdrucchioli nel suo contrario*], on account of the likeness" of the good and bad forms. The inevitable degeneration of good forms into bad opposites introduces a principle that recurs throughout the *Discourses* and is clearly about more than forms of government. The terms of differential pairs no longer mutually exclude each other; indeed, bad forms inevitably and quickly evolve from their good counterparts on account of their "similarity" to them, and good forms are complicit in generating their negative opposites. Machiavelli later (*Discourses* 3.11) underscores the ubiquity of this principle: "As we have said several times before, in everything is hidden some evil of its own [*qualche proprio male*] that causes new contingencies to emerge." In the *Discourses*, in short, things are *not* either this or that, but sooner or later both.

The inevitable slippage of all things into their contraries implants change, instability, mutability, and, therefore, time and history at the center of the

Discourses in a way that is conceptually precluded in *The Prince*, where Machiavelli had used historical examples, with little attention to context, largely as parables of the constant tug-of-war between *virtù* and *fortuna*. The *Discourses* are predicated on the impermanence of forms, and thus on time and change. The opening chapter of book 3 also theorizes change in terms that recall and elaborate the "slippage into contraries," but now with a medical metaphor: "mixed bodies" like republics and religions, says Machiavelli, must periodically return, or be returned, to their beginnings and original principles if they are to live out their natural lives. All bodies necessarily possess some goodness in the beginning, but "in the process of time that goodness is corrupted, and unless something intervenes to bring it back to the mark, [this corruption] kills the body," for, "as the medical doctors say" (Machiavelli paraphrases the ancient medical theorist Galen), "every day something is added [to the body] which at one time or another requires a cure." The body politic is similarly corrupted from within.

A second idea of *The Prince* subjected to critical scrutiny and historical perspective in the *Discourses* is the myth of heroic founders. In *Prince* 6 the "most admirable" founders are Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, and Theseus, who founded states with their own arms and needed from Fortune only the opportunity to show their "excellent *virtù*" and persuade their peoples to accept new laws and institutions. In *Discourses* 1.2 Machiavelli reprises the myth by characterizing as "happy" those "republics" lucky enough to get all their laws at once from a single lawgiver, as Sparta did from Lycurgus. But Lycurgus was yet another figure of myth-history. His example underscores the legendary, semi-fictional status of (three of) *The Prince's* four founders, and the improbability of solitary, heroic founding is further emphasized in this same chapter by the acknowledgment that Rome had no Lycurgus. What no single founder did for Rome was accomplished by chance ("il caso"), as we shall see, in the conflicts of its social classes. In *Discourses* 1.9 the figure of the "fondatore" reemerges with the example of Romulus and the "general rule" that "never or rarely does it happen that a republic or kingdom is well organized from the beginning, or its old constitution completely reformed, unless this is accomplished by one man." Two chapters later, however, Machiavelli admits that Romulus' foundations were incomplete. Although, as its "first founder," Romulus gave Rome birth, beginnings, and a senate, it was Numa, Rome's second king, who, "finding the Romans a most bellicose people and wishing with the arts of peace to make them respect the laws," introduced religion and such reverence for God that the Romans feared breaking oaths more than breaking the laws. So powerful were Numa's religious institutions in disciplining the army and instilling courage in the people that, in any "debate" about whether Rome owed more to Romulus or

to Numa, Machiavelli avers that "Numa would be first." So Rome had at least two founders, and the first, who arrogated all authority to himself, was not the more important, which casts some doubt on the "rule" that founders must act alone. In *Discourses* 1.49, asserting that Rome's experience shows "how difficult it is in organizing a republic to endow it with all the laws that will keep it free," and that, despite all the good laws instituted by Romulus, Numa, and subsequent kings, "new necessities constantly arose that called for new *ordini*," Machiavelli declares in effect that founding requires constant revision, evolution, and many lawgivers: founding is a long historical process that is never quite complete. The need for constant refounding suggests to Machiavelli the superiority of republics over princes: whereas hereditary monarchies always face the risk of a weak or bad king, well-ordered republics can produce "infinite numbers of very able leaders" (*Discourses* 1.20), each with the talents or temperament required by particular circumstances. Rejecting the "common opinion," shared even by Livy, that condemns the "multitude" as fickle and inconstant, Machiavelli concludes that "governments of the people are better than those of princes." Princes might be more efficient in instituting laws, establishing polities, and creating new *ordini*, but the people are much better at preserving and maintaining a state because they are "more prudent, more constant, and of superior judgment than a prince" (1.58).

In the *Discourses* Machiavelli likewise exposes the Prince-redeemer, theorized in *Prince* 26 as Italy's liberator from foreign invaders, restorer of its lost *virtù*, and promulgator of new *ordini*, as an improbability and perhaps a fantasy. He ponders (in *Discourses* 1.17) the difficulty corrupt republics face in preserving liberty: in a completely corrupt state, not even the best laws can help unless they are "implemented by someone who, with exceptional power [*estrema forza*], makes people obey." But Machiavelli says he does "not know if this has ever happened or is even possible," because no one can live long enough to consolidate such reforms. Theoretically, the only hope is for someone to give the city a "new birth, amidst much danger and blood," using "*grandissimi straordinari*, which few men know how to use or would even want to." "*Straordinari*" are measures literally "outside" (Latin *extra* = vernacular [*e*]*stra*) the "*ordini*," which is Machiavelli's term for the public institutions, laws, and customs that sustain healthy states (whether republican or monarchical). Ambitions pursued in violation of the *ordini*, whether by individuals or groups, are, in Machiavelli's lexicon, either a negation of the *ordini* (hence producing *disordine* or plural *disordini*) or methods and ways "outside" the *ordini*: *modi straordinari*, *vie straordinarie*, or simply *lo straordinario* – a degeneration of the *ordini* that he also calls "corruption." The cluster of terms deriving from *ordini*, including the *Ordinanza*, the militia

Machiavelli helped create; the verb *ordinare* (to establish or institute *ordini*); the adjective *ordinario* and past participle *ordinato* (as in well-organized, *bene ordinate*, republics); and the various forms of its negation (*disordini*, *straordinario*, etc.) are, collectively, the central and most frequent element of Machiavelli's political vocabulary, with no fewer than 1,700 occurrences throughout his works, and over 600 in the *Discourses* alone. The only words that approximate this frequency have a wider variety of often non-political meanings: *parte*, *modo*, and *stato*. After *ordini*, the political terms that appear most often are "city" (over 1,100) and "citizen(s)" (c. 600); "prince(s)" (approximately 1,000); *popolo*, *popolare*, and related terms (almost 1,000); and "king," "kingdom," and "to reign" (over 1,000).⁵

In *Discourses* 1.18, still pondering the possibility of applying "straordinari" to corrupt republics, Machiavelli suggests that new *ordini* can be instituted either gradually or all at once. But he immediately asserts the "near impossibility" of both ways. Prudent reformers who proceed gradually are rare and they "never" succeed in persuading others. For the sudden introduction of comprehensive reform, "*modi ordinari* [lawful, constitutional means]" are useless in conditions of complete corruption; it would be "necessary to have recourse to *lo straordinario*, in other words, to violence and arms, and before all else to become prince [*principe*] of that city in order to do with it as one wishes." This is the moment where the *Discourses* come closest to the figure of the Prince-redeemer, and critics who believe that Machiavelli began the *Discourses* before *The Prince* see in these lines the "discovery" of the redeemer-reformer of a corrupt state who employs "*lo straordinario*," setting aside laws and conventional ethics to heal the state and impose new *ordini* – a "discovery" that allegedly prompted Machiavelli to interrupt the *Discourses* and give the idea fuller treatment in *The Prince*. Yet the next few lines argue the *impossibility*, in terms of human psychology, that a prince could ever be capable of both amoral methods and moral objectives: "Because reinstituting in a city a government of laws [*vivere politico*] presupposes a good man [*uomo buono*], and becoming prince of a city through violence presupposes a bad man [*uomo cattivo*], it is extremely rare that a good man will want to make himself prince through evil means, even if his objective is good, or that an evil man, having become prince, will want to do good things or that it will ever occur to him to use for a good end the authority he has acquired by evil means." Far from "discovering" the Prince-redeemer, this passage dismantles the very possibility of achieving "good" ends through "bad" means. Good men are unwilling to use evil measures, even for good ends, and bad men, perfectly willing to use evil measures to acquire power, will not turn that power to good ends. In *Discourses* 1.18 Machiavelli finally buries the fantasy of good princes capable of redeeming states with the

"violence and arms" of "grandissimi straordinari," which he now relegates to the pathology of political corruption.

Republics between the nobles and the people

The "path not yet trodden by anyone" that Machiavelli claims to enter in the proem to book 1 of the *Discourses* is a revolutionary inquiry into the social bases of politics, government, and territorial expansion, and into the social structures, class interests, and conflicts underlying the success and failure of states. Each of the three books, Machiavelli says (in *Discourses* 1.1; proem, book 2; and 3.1), focuses on a particular theme. The first explores Rome's domestic political arrangements to identify the laws and *ordini*, both political and religious, "that sustained *virtù* for so many centuries" (1.1). The second deals with the growth of Rome's empire and discusses mostly military topics, including methods of warfare, infantry and cavalry, fortresses, relations with conquered peoples, colonization, army discipline, and, in 2.19, the damage conquests can do to a conqueror (a hint of what comes later). This book also contrasts successful Roman methods of incorporating conquered peoples into the empire with Florence's faltering attempts to preserve its regional dominion in Tuscany. Among the most memorable chapters of the *Discourses* is 2.2, in which Machiavelli attributes to ancient religion the love of freedom that caused the Romans' earliest antagonists to resist them so obstinately – especially the ferocity and grandeur of the ceremonies that instilled greatness of spirit, strength of body, the high estimation of worldly honor and obligation toward one's country – and contrasts this with the debilitating meekness of Christianity, with its preaching of humility rather than glory, abjectness rather than *virtù*. The third book explores the contributions of individuals to Rome's greatness, particularly in military tactics and commands, but it frequently departs from its assigned themes to deal with other issues, for example, the long chapter (3.6) on conspiracies.

Amidst many digressions and detours, the unifying theme of the *Discourses* is the precariousness of republics and their vulnerability to the ambition of noble and elite classes. The motor driving the history of republics, their forms of government, and their capacity for survival, defense, and expansion is the perpetual antagonism between the nobles and the people: in Rome between the senatorial nobility and the plebs, and in Florence between the *grandi* (or *ottimati*) and the politically organized middle classes called the *popolo*. In *Prince* 9 Machiavelli had already distinguished the aims of these classes: whereas the *popolo* desires only not to be oppressed by the *grandi*, the latter actively seek domination over the *popolo* and equality with the prince: because *grandi* consider themselves the prince's equals, he cannot satisfy

their demands "honorably and without damaging the interests of others." Princes will therefore be more secure in alliance with the *popolo*, whose loyalty they can win because the objective of the *popolo* "is more honorable than that of the nobles."

The antagonism between the classes assumes more dramatic significance in the *Discourses*. It appears early in the book: in 1.2 Machiavelli claims that the conflict ("disunione") between the plebs and the Senate drove the Roman state toward "perfection." Under the monarchy of the Tarquins, the nobles had been restrained, but with the establishment of the republic they began to "spit out their poison against the plebs" (1.3) and provoke hostilities. The "security of the plebs" thus required the institution of the Tribunes of the plebs, guarantors of the *ordini* with power to veto laws that threatened the plebs. In praising the Tribunes for making Rome an even "more perfect republic," Machiavelli polemically dissented from prevailing opinion among the Florentine *ottimati*, who admired Venice for its domestic peace and condemned Rome as a "chaotic [*tumultuaria*]" republic. In 1.4, Machiavelli not only defends the Roman republic from such criticism but also argues – in the most strikingly revolutionary idea of the *Discourses* – that "those who condemn the conflicts [*tumulti*] between the nobles and plebs are, it seems, criticizing the chief reason why Rome remained free." Contemporaries were well aware of Machiavelli's penchant for challenging conventional wisdom; but to Francesco Guicciardini the notion that conflict between Rome's classes was not an obstacle to and nothing less than the foundation of Rome's liberty seemed so preposterous that he famously mocked it, saying that "praising discord is like praising a sick man's illness because the remedy that has been used on him is the right one."⁶ Guicciardini had the weight of tradition from Augustine to the Renaissance civic humanists on his side: a millennium of political thought had assumed that good states must have internal peace and that discord is a poison to be eradicated. But Machiavelli argued that competition between Rome's classes yielded the supremely beneficial effect of containing the overweening ambition of the nobles by giving the people a share of political power. Rome's detractors, he continues in 1.4, "do not properly consider that in every republic there are two divergent classes [*umori*], the *popolo* and the *grandi*, and that all the laws made in favor of liberty result from their conflict [*disunione*] . . . Every city ought to have ways in which the people can express its aspirations," for "the desires of free peoples are rarely damaging to liberty." The Tribunes represented and protected the plebs and restrained noble ambition and insolence; for making Rome a popular republic they merit the highest praise.

The people, Machiavelli says in 1.5, are better "guardians of liberty" than the nobles because (as he had written in *The Prince*) the *grandi* have a "great

desire to dominate" whereas the people have "only the desire not to be dominated" and thus a "greater longing to live free." He qualifies this by saying that in republics (like Rome) seeking expansion and empire the people are more effective guardians of liberty, whereas in republics that aim only at self-preservation without expansion (like Venice and Sparta) nobles will best fulfill that role. But he then reformulates the distinction between the classes, no longer emphasizing the difference in their desires, by asking "which kind of men are more dangerous in a republic, those who seek to acquire [the people], or those who fear losing what they have acquired [the nobles]." His answer is that the *grandi* are more dangerous because those who "possess much" are able to "upset things [*fare alterazione*]" "with greater power and impact [*con maggiore potenza e maggiore moto*]." "Alterazione" here means more than disturbance or trouble: "*fare alterazione*" means overthrowing or undermining a government. This is the kernel of the analysis that he subsequently develops throughout the *Discourses*: whereas the people, lacking the resources of the *grandi*, need the state to resist being oppressed, the *grandi* subvert the state in ways made possible by their wealth, which permits them to do more than dominate the people. The very means with which they pursue this end undermine the institutions of the state itself; they are the more dangerous class because they inevitably corrupt and destroy republics. Only from constant discord between the classes can laws emerge to safeguard liberty by giving the people the power to keep the nobles in check. Machiavelli defends "tumultuous" Rome because its conflicts ensured both liberty and territorial expansion by giving the people a decisive role in government (through the tribunes) and the army.

In Florence, by contrast, Machiavelli asserts that these features of a vigorous popular republic were either lacking or incompletely achieved. After affirming in 1.5 that the "guardianship of liberty" is better entrusted to the *popolo* than to the *grandi*, in 1.7 he gives a prime example of such "guardianship": "Those appointed *per guardia* of a city's liberty can be given no power more useful or necessary than that of bringing accusations before the people or the magistrates against citizens who in any way commit offenses against free government [*contro allo stato libero*]." Formal indictments are necessary to restrain offenses committed by nobles against the people (his example is Coriolanus, an "enemy of the popular party" in Rome, who tried to punish the plebs for creating the Tribunes by withholding grain, and whose indictment by the same Tribunes saved him from an angry mob) and also to force those who slander their enemies (slanders being "one of the ways citizens gain great power" [1.8]), to defend and prove such "calumnies" in court. The absence of such procedures, says Machiavelli, led to the assassination in 1498 of Francesco Valori, leader of the Savonarolan party, and to the expulsion

and exile of Piero Soderini in 1512, in both cases because the slanders directed against them by their enemies could not be formally adjudicated and, as Machiavelli presumed in Soderini's case, dismissed. Soderini's *ottimati* enemies therefore resorted, not only to "private forces [*forze private*]" – to factions and conspiracies – but also to the intervention of "foreign forces [*forze forestieri*]" – an explicit allegation that the anti-Soderini *ottimati* conspired to bring in the Spanish army to overthrow him and the republic. Machiavelli again underscores Florence's need for an institution akin to the Tribunes in observing (1.49) that Florentine courts were always vulnerable to bribery and pressure from "the few and the powerful."

In *Discourses* 1.33, Machiavelli returns to Florence's failure to contain its *grandi*. Problems afflicting republics, he says, "more often emerge from internal than external causes," and the internal causes can be divided into two categories: citizens who are "allowed to take more power than is reasonable" and corruption of the laws. But both causes converge on elite subversion of the state. The first danger occurs when a "young noble" of "virtù istraordinaria" emerges – and the "straordinaria" nature of his "virtù" is already a clue to the danger – and citizens "compete to honor him, so that if he has any ambition at all . . . he quickly achieves such power that, when the citizens realize their error, they have few options to stop him." Machiavelli's example is none other than Cosimo de' Medici, the founder of the family's political fortunes, who, "thanks to his prudence and the ignorance of his fellow citizens, acquired such reputation that he began to cause fear within the *stato*." Cosimo's rise to power and victory over his rivals was achieved with his "parte," his faction, which made him "principe della repubblica" (first citizen, although the allusion to princely pretensions is unmistakable), just as happened, Machiavelli adds, "with Caesar in Rome." This is a stunning juxtaposition, especially in view of Machiavelli's judgment that the ancient historians who praised Caesar had been "corrupted" and intimidated by his power (1.10) and that Caesar became the "first tyrant in Rome" (1.37). The daring comparison exposes the full implications of what had seemed (to the Florentines) the innocuous appearance of a popular "young noble" of "virtù istraordinaria." Machiavelli later (1.52) attributes Cosimo's success to his strategy of favoring the people, but this follows a chapter about the Roman Senate's attempt to win the gratitude of the plebs by instituting regular pay for the army and hoping thereby to weaken the Tribunes, who opposed the gesture as a trick to increase taxes. Cosimo's seemingly unobjectionable tactic of favoring the people takes on a different meaning when placed in the context of attempts by "nobles" to deceive the people.

Elite subversion of the state acquires another dimension in *Discourses* 1.46: ambitious citizens, says Machiavelli, seek to protect themselves from being

harmful by private citizens or punished by the magistrates by "seeking friendships [*amicizie*]" in "ways that have the appearance of being honorable, such as helping people with money or shielding them from the powerful. And because this seems virtuous [*pare virtuoso*], it easily fools everyone and nothing is done to prevent it, until, forging ahead without opposition, [a citizen] attains such power that private citizens and the magistrates alike fear him." Republics ought therefore to have among their *ordini* some method of "preventing citizens from doing evil under the camouflage of good." Machiavelli elaborates on this in *Discourses* 3.28, recounting from Livy the episode of Spurius Maelius, not a patrician but "very rich," who "acquired a huge following among the people" by stockpiling grain and distributing it "privatamente" in order to win the people's gratitude. Fearing this "liberality," the Senate appointed a dictator (a special prosecutor) who put him to death. Machiavelli has a larger point here (announced in the chapter title) about how "the beginning of tyranny often hides under a pious deed," which leads him to the paradox that, while "citizens of repute" are indispensable to republics ("a republic without citizens of repute cannot last"), they are at the same time "the cause of tyranny." Reputation is acquired in two ways, "public" and "private," and republics must distinguish between them and curb the latter. The "private" methods include doing favors "to this and that citizen by lending money or arranging marriages for their daughters," and they are dangerous because "such things make men *partigiani* [faithful clients of factional leaders] and embolden those distributing favors to corrupt public institutions [*il pubblico*] and transgress the laws."

These "private" ways of acquiring reputation are available only to wealthy *grandi*, who gather clients and build powerful factions that make them more feared than the magistrates. The privatization of politics begins with acts of seeming friendship and culminates in forms of extra-legal power that overwhelm the state. Machiavelli repeatedly emphasizes that nobles and *grandi* carry out their subversion of republican *ordini* through "private methods" that reflect the practices and inclinations of their class, through the very virtues, we might say, of "nobility" and what we now call patronage. Twice (*Discourses* 1.16 and 3.3) he admonishes free governments, especially newly liberated ones, to prevent factions and the corruption and tyranny they breed by "killing the sons of Brutus," a reference to the conspiracy against the fledgling Roman republic hatched by the legendary founder's sons, who plotted to restore the monarchy. In Machiavelli's reading, the "sons of Brutus" are not simply enemies of the state; they are nobles who seek to overthrow the new republic because it did not allow them to profit "straordinariamente," as they had under the kings, "so that it seemed to them that the people's liberty became their servitude" (1.16). The "sons of Brutus" stand

for all *grandi* ready to scuttle republics to secure the "extra-legal" privileges they expect from alliances of mutual advantage with princes. A "free *stato*" makes "partigiani" – factions – its enemies, not its friends, for those who once benefited from a "stato tirannico" by "feeding on the prince's wealth cannot live happily if deprived of the chance to reap such benefits and will feel constantly impelled to re-impose tyranny to regain" them (1.16). Tyranny, as Machiavelli analyzes it in chapters 29, 34, 35, and 40 of book 1, is not simply the excessive authority of one man: the institution of the dictator in Rome did not cause tyranny, because it was generally done "according to the *ordini publici*" (1.34). Tyranny originates instead from the temptation by either class to have recourse to a protector. When the *popolo* does so, even if provoked by the need to protect itself from the nobility's desire to "tyrannize," Machiavelli says it is always an error (1.40). But more often it is the *grandi*, the "sons of Brutus," who bring on tyranny.

Machiavelli attributed Rome's collapse into tyranny to two principal causes. The first was the enraged response of the nobility to the revival of the agrarian laws by the Gracchi late in the second century BCE (*Discourses* 1.37). By limiting the landed wealth of nobles and distributing the conquered lands of the expanding empire to Rome's soldiers, the original agrarian laws had enabled the plebs to "hold in check the ambition of the nobles" and protect Rome's liberty. But their revival sparked such bitter enmity between patricians and plebeians that both classes resorted to "private remedies," raising armies and plunging Rome into civil wars that "brought the destruction of the republic . . . and ruined Roman liberty." Machiavelli acknowledges that this analysis "might seem inconsistent" with his earlier contention that conflicts between the Senate and the plebs had preserved liberty, but he explains the apparent contradiction, partly by claiming that the plebs themselves changed and became more determined "to share honors and wealth with the nobles," but mostly by asserting that the "ambition of the nobles is so great that, if it is not resisted in various ways, it quickly brings a city to ruin." Even though the agrarian laws could not permanently contain the ambition of Rome's nobles, liberty would not have lasted as long as it did without those laws: "If the contention over the agrarian law took three hundred years to enslave Rome," without such laws "the city would have lost its liberty much sooner," and nothing could have prevented complete dominance by the nobles. Even as Machiavelli castigates the aims and methods of the nobles, he concedes that the nobility's furious reaction goaded the plebs – who were not always innocent victims – into "illegalities [*straordinari*]" of their own. But when noble ambition, particularly in defense of property and wealth, caused the conflict to descend into the "private remedies" of factions and civil war between armies led by the warlords Sulla,

Marius, and ultimately Caesar, Rome became a thoroughly "corrupt" republic and tyranny was inevitable.

The culmination of Machiavelli's polemic against the *grandi* comes in *Discourses* 1.55. Praising the uncorrupted "goodness" of the free cities of Germany, he explains that they retain their virtuous way of life because they permit no one to live "in the style of a gentleman [*gentile uomo*]" and thus maintain among themselves a "balanced equality [*una pari equalità*]." These "gentlemen," defined as those "who live idle, on income from landed possessions, unconcerned with cultivating the land or other activities to support themselves," are "pernicious" to republics. But "still more pernicious are those who, besides enjoying this landed wealth, command walled towns and have subjects who obey them" – quasi-feudal lords who exercise jurisdiction over rural populations. Both groups are "hostile to all *civiltà*" – the customs and institutions of republican government – and their preponderance in the Kingdom of Naples, around Rome, in Lombardy, and in the Romagna explains why republics do not exist in those regions. By contrast, in Tuscany, home to three republics (Florence, Siena, and Lucca) and other cities eager to recover (from Florence) their lost liberty, the absence of "gentlemen" guarantees "equality" before the law and compels the elite class to live within the political and legal framework established by republics. Machiavelli is not arguing here the theoretical superiority of one or the other form of government. His point is analytical: a city's (or region's) form of government is determined by the power and legal status of its elites. Republics are possible only where there is no powerful class of landed gentlemen or feudal lords; where such "gentlemen" predominate, only princedoms are possible, because only a monarchy (a "mano regia") has the "absolute and overwhelming power" needed to restrain the "extreme ambition and corruption" of the nobles. To institute a republic in a region dominated by "gentlemen" would require their elimination; conversely, installing a princedom in an area of great "equality" would require creating a class of "gentlemen" and giving them landed possessions and jurisdiction. "Gentlemen" and feudal lords are incompatible with republics because they exercise autonomous jurisdiction and create hierarchical forms of power manifested by the obedience they command from their factions; they are the most visible and unrestrained form of "private" power and "corruption."

The "gentlemen" of *Discourses* 1.55 and the urban *grandi* who in every republic contend with the people are two quite different categories of nobles: "gentlemen" prevent republics from coming into being at all, whereas urban *grandi* compete with the people in a republican framework and do not exercise formally autonomous jurisdiction. But a closer look at the argument reveals that the two kinds of nobles represent different points, indeed moving

points, on a continuum of danger to republics. The link is suggested in Machiavelli's observation that "he who wishes to construct a kingdom or a princedom where there is much equality can do so only if he draws out of this equality many men of ambitious and restless temperament and makes them gentlemen . . . endowing them with fortified towns and landed possessions and giving them grants of property and men, so that, placed among them, he maintains his power through them and they fulfill their ambitions through him." Despite declaring it nearly "impossible" to accomplish this, Machiavelli here in effect explains how republics can be transformed into principalities. The key element is the presence in republics of "men of ambitious and restless temperament" whom the prince can turn into "gentlemen." These can only be the urban *grandi* whose ambition, so Machiavelli assumes, makes them always and already disposed to accept privileges from princes and become the "gentlemen" needed to sustain a monarchy. Their overweening ambition, in other words, makes *grandi* potential "gentlemen," prepared to turn their backs on the republic and become pillars of a princely order in return for money, property, and prestige. The passage alludes to what Machiavelli no doubt feared the Florentine *grandi* were in the process of doing (and what the Medici principate achieved some years after he died).

The second cause of Rome's corruption was the privatization of military commands. Vast territorial conquests were made possible by the "full powers [*commissioni libere*]" (2.33) the Senate gave to consuls and other commanders, reserving to itself only the right to start or end wars. This policy was predicated on the assumption that broad discretionary authority to make battlefield decisions would enhance the determination of commanders to win glory for themselves and thereby instill greater discipline and motivation. But the very expansion that proved its wisdom turned a good practice into a fatal flaw (3.24). Unlike the virtuous Cincinnatus, who refused the Senate's invitation to extend his consulship (in violation of its own decree against reelection), the consul Publilius Philo was offered and accepted reappointment, because it was thought unwise to change commanders in the middle of a war. Machiavelli finds in this episode the beginning of Rome's ruin: "although decreed by the Senate for the public good, in time this destroyed Roman liberty." It became a bad thing, ironically, because the practice of giving commanders greater autonomy and longer terms had been so successful: "The farther the Romans took their armies, the more such extensions of command seemed necessary to them, and the more they did it." One result was that fewer men had experience of command and the prestige of victory. Even worse, "when a citizen commanded an army for a long time, he won it for himself and made it his private army [*partigiano*], for in time that

army forgot the Senate and recognized him as its leader." "In this way," Machiavelli adds, now linking the extension of commands and the privatization of military power to the civil wars sparked by the agrarian laws, "Sulla and Marius were able to find soldiers to follow them against the public good; in this way Caesar was able to seize his country." Rome's liberty slipped into its contrary by a process that was difficult to recognize before it was too late. Expansion transformed its armies from expressions of the state's, or the people's, authority into instruments of the personal ambition of dangerous warlord-generals. Both Rome and Florence, despite their differences, fell victim to dangerously powerful citizens: as Roman commanders made armies their "partigiani," so Florentine factional bosses, above all the Medici, similarly made citizens their "partigiani."

The *Discourses* are much more than fulsome praise of Rome's liberty, power, and territorial conquests. Woven into this acclaim and admiration is the story, equally exemplary in its negative portrayal, of how the *ordini* that made Rome powerful and free were eventually corrupted and "slipped into their contraries," a corruption that turned *ordini* into *disordine* and *modi straordinari*. Machiavelli believed that the decline of Roman liberty that resulted from the spread of different forms of private power reached its nadir in the late republic and not, as the civic humanists had held, under the emperors. Indeed, he saw the disease to which Rome fell victim as peculiar to republics, precisely because the open class antagonisms permitted by healthy republics are easily corrupted and "slip into" factional and private power. What makes the *Discourses* so compelling is the effort to understand how and why strong states and peoples destroy themselves. *The Prince* tried to theorize the success and failure of individuals in terms of the struggle of *virtù* against an external, malevolent, and ultimately inexplicable *fortuna*. In the *Discourses*, by contrast, the evolution and transformation of political institutions and social structures govern historical change in processes that, while not easily predictable, have a logic and an etiology that can be understood, at least in retrospect. Whether Florence could learn from Rome's errors was a matter for the next generation to decide.

NOTES

1. Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, ed. and trans. B. O. Foster (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 1:6-7.
2. Felix Gilbert, "The Composition and Structure of Machiavelli's *Discorsi*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 14 (1953): 136-56. See also appendix 2, by Cecil H. Clough, "Machiavelli's Use of Livy in His *I Discorsi*," in *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, ed. and trans. Leslie J. Walker, 2 vols., new edition (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 2:323-7.

3. Filippo de' Nerli, *Commentari de' fatti civili occorsi dentro la città di Firenze* (1728), p. 138; Gilbert, "Composition and Structure," p. 151.
4. Michael McCaules, *The Discourse of Il Principe* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1983).
5. Counted from the Intratext website: www.intratext.com/IXT/ITA1109/_FA.HTM
6. Francesco Guicciardini, *Considerazioni sui Discorsi del Machiavelli*, in *Opere*, vol. 1, ed. Emanuella Lugnani Scarano (Turin: UTET, 1970), p. 616; trans. James B. Atkinson and David Sices, in *The Sweetness of Power: Machiavelli's Discourses and Guicciardini's Considerations* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), p. 393.

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