Democratizing Machiavelli? A Critique

Anthony Lawrence A. Borja

Abstract: Appropriating Machiavelli for a political camp is tempting, and appropriations by all sorts of political leanings have rendered his body of thought as contradictory at best. John McCormick, in two relatively recent works, tries to cut through this by portraying Machiavelli as a populist and a democrat. Despite his insights, McCormick tries to end the conversation with the hopes of making his appropriation of Machiavelli conclusive. In response, I take a Gadamerian hermeneutical approach towards him and Machiavelli in order to keep the conversation open by asking two questions: (1) What is the relationship between popular sovereignty and statecraft? (2) What is the relationship between class conflict and statecraft? I will illustrate that Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* and *The History of Florence* do not contain any notion of popular sovereignty along populist or even democratic lines despite exposing the strengths and limitations of the People in relation to the life of the republic and to other sectors within it. Overall, democratizing Machiavelli casts aside his gift of being sensitive to the internal problems facing a democratic project—a sensitivity to the weaknesses of the People and the complexities of factional conflict beyond binary oppositions and in relation to statecraft.

Keywords: Gadamer, Machiavelli, democracy, politics

Approaching Machiavelli: Joining an Endless Debate?

As morbid as it sounds, the body of Machiavelli's legacy is now drawn, quartered, and sent to the different corners of the political realm. Its persistence, however, is founded on Machiavelli's time-tested status as an iconoclast, appropriated through the centuries for a myriad of political

projects. He had been considered a voice for humanists,[1] authoritarians,[2] democrats,[3] republicans,[4] plebeian populists,[5] and socialists of varying colors.[6] Aside from political projects, analyses of Machiavelli's works have had contradictory interpretations—at least seventeen interpretations as Isaiah Berlin notes.[7] Machiavelli's portraits range from being a satirist, a patriot, a hard-nosed pragmatist, a cold and politically uncommitted technician, a revolutionary thinker, a bitterly frustrated closet utopian dreamer, a prescientific critic of metaphysics and religion, a teacher of evil rather than being simply amoral, and ultimately, a man of his age who is stuck between the birth of modern states and the decay of feudal systems. It will take entire volumes to review all these but for the current study,[8] I will provide an analysis of Machiavelli's relationship with politics itself. Thus, despite these conflicting appropriations and interpretations, Machiavelli remains, as Louis Althusser argues, both gripping and elusive,[9] an assessment that Berlin shares in his own reading of both Machiavelli and contemporary interpretations.

For Althusser and Berlin, Machiavelli presents questions that political thought could not escape from. On the one hand, Althusser sees

---

[1] See Robert Kocis, *Machiavelli Redeemed: Retrieving his Humanist Perspectives on Equality, Power, and Glory* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1998).

[2] See Joseph Femia, "Machiavelli and Italian Fascism," in *History of Political Thought*, 25 (2004).

[3] See Boris Litvin, "Mapping Rule and Subversion: Perspective and the Democratic Turn in Machiavelli Scholarship," in *European Journal of Political Theory*, 18 (2019); Christopher Holman, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); John McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); John McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[4] See J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Marcia Colish, "The Idea of Liberty in Machiavelli," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32 (1971); Paul Rahe, ed., *Machivelli's Liberal Republican Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Vickie Sullivan, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Formation of a Liberal Republicanism in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[5] See Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness: A Plebeian Theory of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Yves Winter, "Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising," in *Political Theory*, 40 (2012); Yves Winter, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[6] See Miguel Abensour, *Democracy against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, trans. by Max Blechman and Martin Breaugh (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011) and Ross Speer, "The Machiavellian Marxism of Althusser and Gramsci," in *Décalages*, 2 (2016).

[7] See Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas - Second Edition*, ed. by Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[8] See Giovanni Giorgini, "Five Hundred Years of Italian Scholarship on Machiavelli's *Prince*," in *The Review of Politics*, 75 (2013).

[9] See Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us,* trans. by Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 1999).

these questions as the question of beginnings (i.e., of establishing a state) and conjunctures (i.e., necessitated political practice in the context of change, unpredictability, and converging factors).[10] On the other hand, Berlin sees the questions as real yet unresolved, and probably irresolvable contradictions between moral systems (e.g., private vs. public, pagan vs. Christian, etc.).[11] With these considerations, we cannot contain Machiavelli in a tight and single frame because he is the one who provided us with the defining characteristics of political modernity itself.[12] He is, as Harvey Mansfield puts it, our commander—the first who tried to walk through a path that veers away from the ancients.[13]

Despite these, his works remain vulnerable to appropriations for the sake of specific and conflicting political projects. Bluntly, it is quite easy to make Machiavelli say something on anything about politics, and the current compendium of popularizations through isolated quotes is a downright burden. Ultimately, this is because we can never know the whole and absolute truth behind Machiavelli's struggle with the effectual truth at the core of politics.[14] As is true for all artifacts of the psyche being embedded in human history, we could neither perfectly reconstruct Machiavelli's thought. He is dead and incapable of clarifying the contradictions he left behind. Rather, we are left with the long shadow he casts over us. Should we build a dogma upon his works, or take advantage of the corrosive nature of the effectual truth he presents?[15]

For this essay, I place weight on the latter option. Hence, my task is neither to present a final reading of Machiavelli nor to use him, brazenly or subtly, as a mouthpiece for a specific political project. Rather, I will elaborate a portrayal of Machiavelli as a thinker who, in trying to intervene in the very thing he is trying to analyze, employed an approach that exposes nuances, complexities, and possibilities while deploying generalizations through comparison.[16] In other words, I will analyze Machiavelli's works for politics

---

[10] Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 33–52.

[11] Berlin, "Originality of Machiavelli," 50–54, 74–79.

[12] See Harvey Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Effectual Truth: Creating the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[13] See Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Effectual Truth*, 1–70 and Harvey Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 109–122.

[14] I am reluctant to utilize the term "politics" since Machiavelli referred to it differently from how we understand it now. To an extent, this is my first act of appropriating Machiavelli to our times by making him speak of politics as we understand it now after his contributions to our collective thought.

[15] See Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trans. by Charles Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

[16] Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, 5–52.

in general—for its movements and complexities beyond any specific project.[17] From this, can we conceive of a Machiavellian approach to both the analysis of politics and the pursuit of a political life? If so, is such an approach conducive to democratic politics as an assertion of and a struggle to realize popular sovereignty?

To address these, I am confronting the recent democratic turn in Machiavelli scholarship,[18] specifically the recent works of John McCormick.[19] However, I note that I will not provide an extensive assessment[20] since Catherine Zuckert already provides an insightful and scathing critique of McCormick and other radical democratic interpretations. She illustrates that they have bent the stick the other way by warping Machiavelli into a populist—an advocate of aggressive class conflict against elites.[21] Zuckert illustrates that McCormick's work is guilty of selective reading that gravitates around the role of class conflict and the supposed orientation of the People (*popolo*) towards freedom vis-à-vis the repressive tendency of the nobility. Alongside this, McCormick downplays non-democratic or even anti-democratic ideas within Machiavelli's primary corpus of works.

Thus, my goal is to reassert an image of Machiavelli as one who problematized politics in a manner that both defies yet invites multiple and even contradictory appropriations for more specific political projects. In addition, I will illustrate that McCormick gives a narrow interpretation of Machiavelli in order to appropriate him for a specific democratic project. Consequently, his reductionism serves as an obstacle between us and Machiavelli's approach to politics itself. Thus, facilitating a conversation along Gadamerian lines[22] that I will elaborate in the next section, I ask the following questions to both McCormick and Machiavelli: What is the relationship between popular sovereignty and statecraft? And what is the relationship between class conflict and statecraft?

---

[17] As Harvey Mansfield illustrates, Machiavelli himself uses (i.e., adapts and integrates) the ancients and Christian doctrines to create a more general approach to politics itself as statecraft and power. See Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Effectual Truth*, 48–61.

[18] Katherine Robiadek, "For the People: Deepening the Democratic Turn in Machiavelli Studies," in *Political Theory*, 49 (2021).

[19] See McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*; McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli.*

[20] Nevertheless, as the succeeding sections will show, I build upon the following critiques: Catherine Zuckert, "Machiavelli: Radical Democratic Political Theorist?," in *The Review of Politics*, 81 (2019); Max Morris, "The Wisdom of the People and the Elite: John McCormick and Leo Strauss on Machiavelli," in *Theoria*, 70 (2023); and Ryan Balot and Stephen Trochimchuk, "The Many and the Few: On Machiavelli's "Democratic Moment"," in *The Review of Politics*, 74 (2012).

[21] Zuckert, "Machiavelli: Radical Democratic Political Theorist?," 499–502.

[22] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

We can use these two questions to crack open McCormick's works by revisiting Machiavelli's understanding of class conflict and popular power vis-à-vis the formation and maintenance of a republic. Through this, we can place Machiavelli back into the flux of politics by preventing any attempt to democratize his works in absolute terms. Overall, my primary objective is to facilitate a conversation for the sake of our own understanding of key issues on politics, democracy, and popular power. It is unfortunate that this must be at the expense of McCormick's analysis because it was an attempt to close down the conversation in favor of democratic politics.[23] Thus, we are now left with the task to reopen the conversation on Machiavelli and politics by avoiding the pitfalls of McCormick's reading without an absolute dismissal of his insights. To this end, I also intend to confront McCormick's idea of a Machiavellian democracy by interrogating Machiavelli's supposed affiliation with populist and democratic politics.

The ensuing sections will flesh out the following premises that will frame this conversation. First, according to Gadamer, understanding involves the fusion of horizons through application while being driven by both the primacy of questions and openness and a recognition of traditions mediating our relationship with those from the past. Thus, if it appears that I am trying to provide a seemingly more authentic reading of Machiavelli, then it is due to placing him in a conversation with us instead of trying to democratize him or even render him as a mere mouthpiece. Second, factional relationship (i.e., conflict, cooperation, cooptation, etc.) rather than a binary opposition between the *popolo* and the *grandi* is the key challenge that statecraft must face, may it be for principalities or republics. This goes against any reading that reduces Machiavelli's analysis to that of class conflict as familiarized to us through populist and Marxist lenses. Lastly, populist democracy entails, not only anti-elitism, the moral superiority of the People and its empowerment, but more importantly, a claim to its sovereignty. This allows the current conversation to recognize the current body of works on popular identity and sovereignty whose own set of problems prevent any haphazard appeal to democratic politics.

---

[23] Now, am I providing a critique of McCormick or a reading of Machiavelli? I can say both since either objective requires the other. A critique of McCormick requires another reading of Machiavelli while the latter objective could not ignore the insights from attempts to democratize Machiavelli.

Through these premises, I argue that Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* (*Discourses*)[24] and *The History of Florence* (*Histories*)[25] do not contain any notion of popular sovereignty along populist or even democratic lines. Instead, these works expose the strengths and limitations of the People in relation to the life of the republic and the sectors within it. In turn, these insights from Machiavelli can defy or support McCormick's reading. However, given the extant literature on contemporary populism and its ambivalent relationship with democratic politics,[26] and the troubled relationship between liberal institutionalism and democratic politics,[27] Machiavelli's impact is better felt as an act of suspension. In other words, his works show that neither populism nor institutionalism are necessarily democratic, something already shared by contemporary political theory.

We cannot cast aside Machiavelli's sensitivity to the internal problems facing a democratic, or at least a populist project. His is an understanding of the weaknesses of the *popolo* and *volgo* (the people and the ordinary) and the complexities of factional conflict beyond binary oppositions and in relation to statecraft. The same logic applies if one reduces Machiavelli to either an elitist or a supporter of authoritarian rule, or even a proponent of rule through law and institutions. Bending the stick the other way, one can end up ignoring the weaknesses of individual leaders, authoritarian rule, and even laws and institutions. In other words, his works manifest a tendency to see both the underbelly and the shadows haunting political systems; shadows that can eventually overturn, corrupt, and destroy principalities and republics alike. Sensitivity to such problems and the paradoxically hackneyed yet thoroughly relevant "gray area" of politics is what Machiavelli had given to us as part of his legacy.

By pushing Machiavelli to the realm of ideology via the well-meaning route of normative theorizing, we can end up abandoning his pursuit of effectual truth as something that no religious or political doctrine can contain. By crystallizing Machiavelli into an ideologue rather than keeping him as a theorist—an agnostic activist and defender of principles who can very well doubt with the same intensity—we will end up underappreciating the complex contributions of his works and deeds. We can

---

[24] See Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy,* trans. by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) and Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses,* trans. by Leslie Walker, ed. by Bernard Crick (London: Penguin, 1984).

[25] See Niccolò Machiavelli, "The History of Florence," in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, trans. by Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

[26] See Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation (*Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," in *Government and Opposition*, 39 (2004); and Chantal Mouffe, *For A Left Populism* (London: Verso. 2019).

[27] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

end up in a utopian ditch instead of running with a complex and moving reality. The succeeding section elaborates on this through Gadamer's dialectical hermeneutics as a form of open-ended and question-driven approach to interpretation, history, and the transmission of meaning.

Between McCormick and Machiavelli: A Gadamerian Approach

At the risk of appearing as if I am taking a detour, I note that since I am facilitating a form of triadic conversation between us, Machiavelli, and McCormick, I could not spare readers from hermeneutics as a discipline concerned with the transmission of meaning. Nonetheless, without being burdensome with this massive sub-discipline, I will focus on the Gadamerian approach that I deem capable of helping us avoid a reductionist reading of Machiavelli and even McCormick himself.

Thus, based on a dialectical model for hermeneutics that I derive from Gadamer's key work *Truth and Method*, we can approach McCormick and Machiavelli without trying to derive a final reading of the latter. This is founded on the considerations drawn from Gadamer, foremost of which is that hermeneutics is the process of bringing out the tension between the present and the past as embodied by a text. This is achieved through a fusion of horizons by a historically effected consciousness (i.e., a consciousness that is made aware of its own limits and relationship with history). Though a noble endeavor as Gadamer recognizes,[28] empathy in historical analysis can only go as far as an incomplete reconstruction of the author's horizon. In other words, there is no point outside of history that we can place ourselves to judge a text and expose its supposed essence under completely objective terms. Keith Jenkins further emphasizes this in a later work on the philosophy of history, illustrating that the past could not be recovered absolutely due to the simple passage of both time and the myriad perspectives that confronted the past when it was still present. Thus, history remains incomplete—it is a growing part of a simultaneously growing whole that could not be comprehended in its totality.[29]

Consequently, we are left with the task of aligning our interpretations with the movements of history. Hermeneutics thus becomes a matter of horizons and the fusion of horizons. For Gadamer, the notion of horizon allows us to recognize the finite determinacy of our thoughts and our engagement with the past. It is what we can see and think of vis-à-vis the past that we are also a part of and possible futures exposed by the passage of the present. This may sound mundane, but Gadamer elaborates on the nature of

---

[28] See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 184–218.

[29] Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 6–24.

horizons and their fusion in such a way that we as interpreters can end up being more sensitive to the historicity of ourselves and of the objects we are analyzing. This fusion is, as Gadamer states, a condition wherein we "regain the concepts of a historical past in such a way that they also include our own comprehension of them."[30]

What constitutes such a sensitivity and what are its implications? I point to the dynamics of application and questioning in generating knowledge for the present, through both itself and its past.[31] Understanding is application itself. It is not understanding a text before applying it to a concrete case. Rather, a text is understood in applying it, in trying to make sense of a concrete case through it. In relation to history, application brings the past under the light of present conditions (i.e., establishing the interpretation of a text upon the concrete substance of the present) in order to bridge temporal distance between a text and its interpreter. This allows the latter to see the inevitable yet meaningful tension between a historical object and the changing context wherein it must be understood (i.e., historically effected consciousness). In other words, the text, made within a different historical horizon, will never be completely aligned with the present even if applying it to the latter is necessary for interpretation. It is this tension that renders application as the core problem of hermeneutics for Gadamer.

Nonetheless, this tension is not a license for free interpretation. Gadamer states that "the meaning to be understood is concretized and fully realized only in interpretation, but the interpretive activity considers itself wholly bound by the meaning of the text."[32] Moreover, application entails that in reading a text, we become part of the meaning that we apprehend given that we read through our own horizons. We end up belonging to the text itself, as Gadamer puts it with our engagement always ending in open indeterminacy.[33]

Concerning hermeneutics as a dialogue driven by the primacy of questions, Gadamer argues that interpretation always involves a question.[34] A text becomes subject to interpretation, not only by asking it questions but by allowing it to put a question on the interpreter. In other words, hermeneutics involves extracting questions from the text itself as a way of

---

[30] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 382.

[31] I must note that I am excluding the role of traditions from this essay since this involves a much larger review of the extant literature on Machiavelli and democratic politics. Nonetheless, I cannot avoid referring to earlier interpretations and for this reason, I am offering such references as my own limited attempt to be faithful to Gadamer's approach. For more details on the nature and value of tradition, see *Ibid.*, 289–293 and 322–387.

[32] *Ibid.,* 341.

[33] *Ibid.,* 349.

[34] *Ibid.,* 370–387.

letting it speak for itself. But how can hermeneutics proceed through questions and questioning?

Gadamer emphasizes openness as a way to reveal the meaning/s within a text while giving due weight to the reality of indeterminacy—a manifestation of the aforementioned tension between the interpreter and the text. Openness is characteristic of an authentic dialogue because it is based on a sincere need to learn and understand the text. It is open because it does not preclude any answer. For this reason, it is something based on and driven by indeterminacy.

Moreover, these questions embody the respective horizons of the text and the interpreter. What we ask a text and what we think the text asks reflect the historical conditions wherein such questions are located. The text and we as interpreters are trying to make sense of our own conditions. While the text speaks to us through our application of it, we speak with the text through lenses formed by our own histories. Concerning this mutual questioning, Gadamer states that:

> The voice that speaks to us from the past … itself poses a question and places our meaning in openness. In order to answer the question put to us, we the interrogated must ourselves begin to ask questions. We must attempt to reconstruct the question to which the traditionary text is the answer. But we will be unable to do so without going beyond the historical horizon it presents us. Reconstructing the question to which the text is presumed to be the answer itself takes place within a process of questioning through which we try to answer the question that the text asks us. A reconstructed question can never stand within its original horizon: for the historical horizon that circumscribed the reconstruction is not a truly comprehensive one. It is, rather, included within the horizon that embraces us as the questioners.[35]

It seems that this approach fosters a cacophony of meaning. However, Gadamer illustrates that this is not a process bereft of any goal or center of gravity. In trying to interpret a text, our historically effected consciousness allows us to be a part of the life of the text itself. It is a dance between two processes. On one hand, we recognize, respond, and interpret

---

[35] *Ibid.,* 382.

previous readings of a text. On the other, we subject these and the text itself to the corrosive force of questions and the creative force of open dialogue.

Overall, Gadamer states that in an open dialogue between the text and the interpreter, what "emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mine nor yours."[36] We arrive at knowledge that transcends those involved, thus, bringing all parties and their partial ideas (i.e., their respective horizons) under a more comprehensive whole. This more comprehensive whole, in turn, serves as a base for future dialogues under changed conditions—a new fusion of new horizons.

From these points, I assert that it is in dialogue that Gadamer draws the line between a misreading and an authentic fusion of horizons, with the former referring to closing a discussion on a text at the expense of both the text's complexity and the openness of present realities. Simply put, misreading is a forced closure while fusion of horizons facilitates the linking of the past with the movements of the present and the possibilities offered by the future. We will see how McCormick is guilty of misreading.

Applying the aforementioned considerations for the topic at hand requires a fusion of at least three horizons. First, we have Machiavelli's horizon via the traditions bridging him to the present. He is a product of his time and the readings of his works are products of their respective historical contexts. McCormick's horizon, upon which his reading of Machiavelli is based on, is characterized by frustrations over contemporary American politics. This is embodied by his recommendations for a Machiavellian democracy that seeks to bring back popular power via institutional reforms in the American political system. Contrary to McCormick, my horizon is based on both exposure to non-Western and non-American political issues tied with engagement with the two previous horizons. I note further that at the back of my head is the experience of Filipino politics that I deem as something resembling oligarchic and factional politics during Machiavelli's time while sharing McCormick's own frustrations over the dire conditions facing contemporary democratic politics. This schema is massive enough to extend beyond this essay and you can consider this as an invitation to add your own horizon to this conversation. Thus, Gadamer's emphasis on the primacy of the question and the value of application can serve as both the driving force and a frame for both the current analysis and future inquiries.

To this end I ask the following: What is the relationship between popular sovereignty and statecraft? And what is the relationship between class conflict and statecraft? These are supposed to crack open McCormick's attempt to close a dialogue between us and Machiavelli. And by asking these questions vis-à-vis matters of populist and democratic politics, we can try to

---

[36] *Ibid.*, 376.

make sense of our own political horizons. Moreover, these questions allow us to recognize the contemporary literature on populism as means to eventually apply Machiavelli and McCormick's reading on contemporary conditions—something that McCormick does by applying Machiavelli, primarily on the cases of American politics and more generally upon Western democracies, and something we can do for future inquiries on non-Western cases.

Machiavelli as a Populist Democrat?

McCormick argues that Machiavelli should be understood as a democrat because his works are fundamentally populist (i.e., citizen-empowering)[37] and anti-elitist. These are manifested in his endorsement of popular offices (i.e., tribunes), non-electoral modes of appointing and punishing public officials, and popular assemblies that can directly decide public policy. McCormick insists that through these, Machiavelli allows us to rethink the institutional and cultural foundations of political participation and accountability in popular government.[38]

Underpinning this populist democratization of Machiavelli is the primacy of class conflict. For McCormick, the conflict between the *popolo* and the *grandi* lies at the center of Machiavelli's thought, rendering him as a sort of populist democrat by supposedly upholding popular power vis-à-vis the People's need for freedom and recognizing that class conflict can contribute to institution-building in favor of the *popolo* or People and at the expense of the *grandi* or elite.[39] This summarizes McCormick's attempt to cast Machiavelli as the father of a form of democracy in his movement from hermeneutics to normative theorizing; the latter for the sake of contemporary democracies and the issue of elite accountability.[40]

At first, such an argument appears impressive given that it emphasizes an innovation in the face of incumbent liberal democratic systems burdened by the problems of political inequality and lack of elite accountability. In its strongest form, McCormick's reading provides us with a glimpse of Machiavelli's sensitivity to the power of ordinary citizens and their capacity to contribute to the development of a republic and the liberties in it. Contemporary critics of liberal democracy and advocates for

---

[37] I am using the term popular power moving forward in order to nail down McCormick's loose usage of the *popolo–grandi* dichotomy.

[38] McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 1–35.

[39] *Ibid*., viii, 65–90 and McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli*.

[40] McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 141–188.

participatory democracy echoes such observations[41] and for this reason, we can see how McCormick's works traces the pedigree of these advocacies back to the old Florentine.

Despite these, there are two main problems with his works. On one hand, to say that Machiavelli endorsed popular power is both an overstatement and a simplification that ignores other issues that Machiavelli was more explicitly concerned about. On the other, McCormick's reduction of populism to popular power and anti-elitism is an injustice to recent advancements in populist literature, thus preventing a more nuanced and holistic conversation between Machiavelli's works and contemporary populism.

To elaborate, I will show that populism entails more than mere popular power and anti-elitism, and that the idea of a republic that Machiavelli explicitly anchored his work in is irreducible to popular government as McCormick wants to portray it. Moreover, Machiavelli's works provide a more nuanced and complicated picture of class conflict beyond the mere binary of people–nobility that McCormick highlights. As I will show later, Machiavelli was more concerned with managing factional and class politics rather than advocating for a popular government.

If one takes these into account, then Machiavelli appears less of a populist, and far less of a democrat and more of a student and acute analyst of power, statecraft, and politics. Consequently, McCormick's two major works can be construed as fragile and narrow bridges between contemporary scholarship on populism and democracy, and Machiavelli's own contributions to the study of politics. The succeeding sections elaborate on the considerations stated above.

Statecraft and Popular Sovereignty

What is the relationship between popular sovereignty and statecraft? A Gadamerian approach entails pinpointing key questions and concepts. In a fusion of horizons, concepts serve as a point of convergence between ourselves and the past while questions keep discussions open and aligned with the movements and complexities of reality. Hence, between Machiavelli, McCormick, and us, the first set of concepts that we must grapple with are populism, popular power, popular sovereignty, and democracy. We shall also turn to key questions on who the People is, what are the manifestations

---

[41] See Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Carole Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); and Green, *Shadow of Unfairness*.

of popular power and sovereignty, and what Machiavelli can say about democratization itself.

Machiavelli did not entertain populism itself as we understand it now despite recognizing popular leaders and representatives. Nonetheless, can we derive an understanding of populism from his works? To address this, I note some important points. First, McCormick construes populism as civic empowerment. He then equates this with a notion of a Machiavellian democracy by adding Machiavelli's anti-elitism into the picture. Second, the contemporary literature in populism gravitates towards the idea that populism "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people."[42] Lastly, between McCormick and contemporary works on populism, it appears that the latter refers more to popular empowerment at the expense of elites instead of populism itself, the latter referring to more extreme conditions, namely, Manichean politics (good vs. evil, pure vs. corrupt) and the primacy of popular will. In other words, McCormick's analysis is qualified, not only by contemporary works on populism but also by certain limits emanating from Machiavelli's own works.

For the latter point, Machiavelli's supposed commitment to popular government is at best mixed or contingent on the more general issues of a republic's stability and greatness. Even his definition of a republic involves the integration of three different forms of government (i.e., monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy),[43] and the balancing of factional and class interests through a dynamic relationship between personal leadership and institutions. Furthermore, if we consider the lifecycle of republics in the *Discourses*—its foundation, sustenance, collapse or reestablishment—popular government only takes a more important role in the preservation of a republic, especially the institutions securing liberty within it. Machiavelli was explicit in stating that while the foundation of a republic is better achieved by sole and absolute leadership,[44] its reestablishment as a response to degradation must also go back to its beginnings; that is, back to an absolute leader.[45] Simply put, even if we admit that popular government is important in sustaining or even expanding a republic, Machiavelli insisted that its foundation and reestablishment is for a monarchical form of government.

Given this, Machiavelli did consistently recognize the power of the People in shaping political affairs and institutions—this is beyond dispute.

---

[42] Mudde, "Populist Zeitgeist," 543.

[43] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 13.

[44] *Ibid.*, 28–33.

[45] *Ibid.*, 209–212.

The *popolo* is an effective political power that can influence the life of a state and the trajectory of its development. However, did Machiavelli posit a Manichean conflict between a "good" People and an "evil" elite? Did he entertain the possibility of popular power along populist or democratic lines? McCormick seems to think so, and his sentiment is anchored in Machiavelli's argument that the People, unlike the nobility, only wants liberty despite their flaws, vulnerabilities, and corruptibility.[46]

Machiavelli did make himself vulnerable to such interpretations because of his generalizations, especially with the psyche and nature of humans.[47] However, his more nuanced descriptions and analyses of political relations qualify such generalizations if one pays more attention to them. For one, his treatment of the Ciompi (wool-workers/carders) Revolt showed that while the People want equality, dignity, and liberty (i.e., freedom from oppression), they ended up relying on leaders while being preoccupied with short-term goals at the expense of long-term stability and order—an instance of voluntary disempowerment. In other words, despite recognizing the impact of popular will made manifest either through mobs or institutional arrangements, Machiavelli did not consider it as the supreme basis of a republic.

The next section fleshes these out through the issue of class conflict but for now, I note that Machiavelli's works portrayed the People, in less than rosy terms by showing that their desire for liberty is not tantamount to a need for self-government. Even if we recognize and even highlight their constant antagonisms with the nobility, such is not tantamount to a rejection of elites. At most, Machiavelli noted that their political effectiveness is dependent on leadership because as a mob they contribute nothing to statecraft at least or end up being outright destructive at most. Simply put, their desire for equality, dignity, and liberty need not lead to democratic self-government, and if it does lead to institutional development, it is through the act of leaders.

One can only make this circle fit a square by employing reductionist definitions of populism and democracy, something that McCormick's works have done with impunity. By trying to democratize Machiavelli, his works rely on a narrow reading of Machiavelli tied to an equally narrow conceptualization of populism. Consequently, any conversation between us and the works of Machiavelli and McCormick might end up in an ideological ditch if we fail to consider the complications that Machiavelli exposed alongside his assessments and generalizations. Two examples of such nuances are concerned with the identity of the People itself and the nature of

---

[46] *Ibid.*, 17–19, 44–51.

[47] See Markus Fischer, "Machiavelli's Political Psychology," in *The Review of Politics*, 59 (1997).

conflicts that Machiavelli analyzed. The next section elaborates on these twin considerations.

Statecraft and Class Conflict

What is the relationship between class conflict and statecraft? From McCormick's works, the immediate answer to this is that popular power, manifesting itself through class conflict against a ruling elite, can lead to the establishment of new democratizing institutions. These, in turn, can contribute to the development and stability of a state. Alluring in its simplicity, this argument lies at the core of his reading of Machiavelli.

However, what People are we even talking about here? From the multitude, to plebs, to the People, Machiavelli, at first glance, used these interchangeably. Nonetheless, if we are sensitive to the context of his uses, then we can observe that these terms reflect the topics that Machiavelli were concerned with. For example, *popolo* is used not only in relation to the *grandi* but also in relation to a principality or a republic's expansion as *popoli* (i.e., conquering a people who is either used to servitude or to freedom). Another is *a moltidudine* (a multitude or the masses) that Machiavelli used in analyzing the nature of the masses and a prince.[48] Lastly, Machiavelli used *plebe* for his analyses of the Roman Republic, the relationship between wealth and power,[49] and the necessity of leadership for a non-*grandi* collective.[50]

Without going into further details, I note that one could not simply brush away this nuance in the same sleight of hand that McCormick does. These different terms give us access to more general issues beyond class conflict (e.g., the necessity of leadership, the relationship of wealth, power, the republic, etc.). More importantly, this variety links Machiavelli to the contemporary literature on popular identity, peoplehood, and popular sovereignty—a literature driven by a debate on the determinacy of the People and the actual possibility and nature of its sovereignty.[51]

In his failure to give due consideration to contemporary works on both populism and the complexities of peoplehood and popular sovereignty,[52] McCormick utilizes the concept of *popolo* in a very loose sense.

---

[48] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 108, 115–118.

[49] *Ibid.*, 78–89.

[50] *Ibid.*, 114–115.

[51] See Margaret Canovan, *The People* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005); Hans Kelsen, *The Essence and Value of Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers [1920] 2013); Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005); Paulina Ochoa Espejo, *The Time of Popular Sovereignty: Process and The Democratic State* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

[52] See Anthony Lawrence A. Borja, "We, The People, Silent and Powerless: A Critique of Recent Pluralist Conceptualizations of the People," in *Philosophia: International Journal of*

Worse, he utilizes then attributes a simplistic understanding of class conflict to Machiavelli despite the latter presenting a more nuanced framework in the *Discourses* and *Histories*: a picture of class conflict that defies the simplicity of McCormick's *popolo* vs. *grandi*. Unsurprisingly, even McCormick himself concedes that the *Histories* shows more of a tripartite class system in Florence[53] before brushing this off as a result of Machiavelli's analysis of Florence's defective political system vis-à-vis the Roman Republic.

Such a concession, unfortunately limited as it is, points to the core problem of his reading of *Discourses* and *Histories*, namely, his assumption that Machiavelli's primary problematique is concerned with class conflict. The difference between McCormick and Machiavelli is that while the former insists on analyzing class conflict, Machiavelli explicitly stated in the prefaces of the *Discourses*[54] and the *Histories*[55] that his goals were to analyze the life cycle of a republic[56] and factionalism as the root of disorder and collapse, respectively.

As political units, factions can encompass different economic classes, thus serving as an appropriate concept in analyzing the relationship between partisanship and unity (factions being mere parts of the republic as a whole). Furthermore, contrary to McCormick, Machiavelli utilized the concept of factions to show that the Florentine class system is not dichotomous. Rather, there is also a complicated middle class constituted by entities like the various guilds of Florence. It is not, as we would say in political scientific terms, a mere independent variable affecting the life of state institutions.

Instead, class conflict is something that is interdependent with the relationship between government and factionalism,[57] the latter being irreducible to classes. From his analysis of the Ciompi Revolt to the general analytical thrust he presented in the introduction of the *Histories*, Machiavelli saw class conflict as but one dimension of the dynamics between factional conflict and statecraft. His comparison of the People of Ancient Rome and the People of Florence was not directed at the analysis of class conflict[58] but rather at the analysis of the relationship between conflict, resolution, and government vis-à-vis the problem of factionalism.

Philosophy, 24 (2023); Rogers Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[53] McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli*, 99–101.

[54] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 5–6, 209–212.

[55] Machiavelli, "History of Florence," 1029–1033.

[56] I refer to the foundation, maintenance, expansion, degradation, and reestablishment of a republic.

[57] Machiavelli, "History of Florence," 1145–1148.

[58] *Ibid.,* 1031, 1140–1141.

To illustrate, we shall reexamine chapters that McCormick draws from in the *Histories* as evidence for his claims about the superiority of the People despite Machiavelli's brief praise for the military prowess and generosity of the nobility.[59] These chapters are as follows: (1) Chapters II.39–42 concerning the 1343 Revolt and eventual ruin of the Florentine nobility; (2) Chapter II.14 showing the capacity of the People to compromise with the nobility; (3) Chapters III.12–15 regarding class conflict and the Ciompi Revolt. But instead of reading these from the lenses of class conflict, I will inspect them from the vantage point of factionalism and its impact on statecraft (i.e., in line with Machiavelli's explicit object of analysis in the *Histories*). I will also consider proximate chapters as means to elaborate on certain key observations.

We must note the following points. First, Machiavelli recognized other classes beyond the People and the nobility, namely, this middle class constituted by the wealthier members of the non-nobility (i.e., mercantile class). These classes, in turn, can form larger factions that can temporarily transcend economic differences. An example is the case of Andrea Strozzi's failed attempt to seize power in 1343. As a merchant, Strozzi was in a position to gain popular support by selling his grains cheap during a shortage. He did gain popular support, but it was neither stable nor substantial enough to resist the Florentine government's crackdown. In this chain of events, the contrary was true for the Medici and Rondinegli's successful armed intervention on the side of the lower classes.[60]

We can also consider Machiavelli's treatment of the Ciompi Revolt as an illustration, not only of popular revolt affecting the government (something that McCormick repeatedly highlights) but also popular revolt being shaped by factional conflict among the ruling elites and the middle classes (i.e., the guilds). If one is tempted to conflate the middle classes with the People, then Machiavelli will show the case of Michele di Lando. Di Lando, lifted up by his fellow *ciompi* into a position of high leadership[61] ended up being sandwiched between radical factions, his own moderate faction, and the Florentine guilds.[62] Such an observation proves Machiavelli's sensitivity to complex class relations by recognizing both the asymmetric relationship among the guilds themselves,[63] and the impact of factional loyalties on class relations.[64]

---

[59] *Ibid.,* 1141.

[60] *Ibid.,* 1136–1137.

[61] The Gonfalonier of Justice (*Gonfaloniere di Giustizia*) is one of the primary executive offices in the Florentine Republic concerned with public order and internal security.

[62] Machiavelli, "History of Florence," 1165–1175.

[63] *Ibid.,* 1158–1159.

[64] *Ibid.,* 1145–1177.

Another and a more definitive example is the speech in an assembly at San Piero Scheraggio by an unnamed citizen (a possible example of Machiavelli's creative license) who despaired over disunity and argued against the factionalism that took over after the fall of the Florentine nobility.[65] One can brush this off as a speech against new elites replacing an old one. However, given that disunity and partisanship were the targets of the speech rather than the nobility or the wealthy as was the case of the infamous speech of an anonymous woolworker during the eve of the Ciompi Revolt,[66] we must admit that the issues of factionalism and disunity holds, at the very least, an equal weight along with class conflict. Thus, even if we admit, that recognizing the wealthy non-nobility will not negate the *popolo–grandi* split that McCormick puts up, how Machiavelli analyzed this wealthy non-nobility points to the more general issues of factions, the fluidity of class lines, and the impact of factional conflicts on the life of a republic.

In relation to the latter point, Machiavelli portrayed the life of a republic as a struggle to maintain an integrated system constituted by representatives from all classes.[67] To illustrate, before the 1343 Revolt, Machiavelli noted that the Florentine government includes representatives from both the nobility and the People. After the uprising and reflective of the aforementioned nuance in the number of classes in Florence, Machiavelli noted that "the people reorganized the government, and because there were three sorts of people, the powerful, the average, and the lowly,"[68] the significant offices were distributed accordingly (i.e., more seats in the Signoria for the average and the lowly). The same is true for the aftermath of the Ciompi Revolt wherein the newly established government was based on a tenuous power sharing between the lower and higher guilds.[69]

Through all these, for Machiavelli recognized that leadership plays a mediating role in the relationship between class or factional conflict and the life of a republic.[70] He illustrated this through positive (i.e., successful and contributing to the stability and/or greatness of a republic) and negative (i.e., failures in leadership that contributes to the corruption, instability, and

---

[65] *Ibid.,* 1145–1148.

[66] *Ibid.,* 1159–1161.

[67] For a more detailed account of Machiavelli's vision for a republic that integrates the lower, middle, and upper classes, see Niccolò Machiavelli, "A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence," in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, trans. by Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

[68] Machiavelli, "History of Florence," 1138. I note Machiavelli's split of the People as a category in the original Italian quotation as follows: "riordinò *il popolo* lo stato; e perché gli era di *tre sorte popolo*, potente, mediocre e basso." Italics mine.

[69] *Ibid.,* 1168–1175.

[70] See Anthony Lawrence A. Borja, "*Virtù, Fortuna,* and Statecraft: A Dialectical Analysis of Machiavelli," in *Kritike*, 10 (June 2016).

collapse of a republic) cases. The key chapters that McCormick analyzes include not only Machiavelli's service to the Medici by citing their involvement in the success of the 1343 uprising but also the negative cases of the Archbishop of Florence and Andrea Strozzi. For the former, Machiavelli noted that the Archbishop's indecisiveness escalated conflict between the People and the nobility. For the latter, Strozzi's ambition and incapacity to gain sustained support from the People provided the nobility with a perceived opportunity to reverse an earlier redistribution of power and deprive the People of their political gains.

Machiavelli also recognized the capacity of the People to create leaders that they cannot control, a capacity embodied by the case of Michele de Lando who first rose up as the champion of the lower classes before turning against them for the sake of restoring peace and stability, and in favor of moderate and conservative factions constituted by members of the lower classes and the Florentine guilds. These cases show that for Machiavelli, the trajectory of class conflict and its relationship with factional conflict is mediated by the actions of leaders.

Most importantly, along with recognizing the impacts of leadership, Machiavelli also showed both the strengths and weaknesses of the People. I will extend the analysis of this point to the succeeding section but for now, as far as the *Histories* is concerned, the case of the 1343 popular uprising that castrated the Florentine nobility is sandwiched between two portraits of class conflict, one in relation to an uprising against the Duke of Athens who ruled over Florence[71] and the other is a comparison between Rome and Florence.[72] The former shows the inconsistent savagery of the People's vindictive rage when it murdered some of the Duke's supporters before losing steam and sparing others including the Duke himself. It also shows the possibility of cooperation between the nobility and the People when faced with a common enemy. The latter comparison between the ancient Roman and Florentine republics is marked by an argument on the relationship between class conflict and the life of a republic. Specifically, Machiavelli noted that conflicts between the People and nobility in Rome and Florence yielded varying results because "while the people of Rome wished to enjoy supreme honors along with the nobles; the people of Florence fought to be alone in the government, without any participation in it by the nobles."[73] This made the nobility more aggressive in defending their privileges, thus causing more chaos and destruction when the classes come to blows against each other in the streets of Florence. Machiavelli then proceeded to flesh out the results of

---

[71] Machiavelli, "History of Florence," 1130–1133.
[72] *Ibid.,* 1140–1141.
[73] *Ibid.,* 1140.

such an imbalance and how it made itself manifest in the conflicts between the higher and lower classes of the People that emerged from the ruin of the nobility.[74]

In relation to the last two points on leadership and the strengths and weaknesses of the People, an important caveat is that the strength of the People (i.e., popular power as the capacity of the non-nobility to influence public affairs) is shaped by leadership and need not contribute to the order, stability, and development of a republic. Moreover, Machiavelli explicitly stated in the *Discourses* that the wisdom of the People, as something that can be superior to that of a Prince, is based on a system of laws and institutions (i.e., a well-ordered people that commands).

Giving due consideration to these nuances while referring to contemporary understandings of populism, Machiavelli would appear as one who was more than a simplistic advocate of populist politics. Rather, he recognized the importance of laws, institutions, and leadership under specific conditions and for specific purposes. He also valued unity, order, and stability despite being both consistently anti-*grandi* and cognizant of the transformative value of conflict. In other words, Machiavelli granted neither the moral superiority of the People nor the primacy of popular will, despite recognizing their strengths, highlighting the corruption and limitations of elites and analyzing the gravity of class conflict. The next section fleshes these out by turning to the *Discourses*.

Machiavelli as a Democrat, a Populist, or Neither?

Is Machiavelli a populist or even a democrat? To reiterate, McCormick asserts that he is a populist and a democrat because of his anti-elitism, his supposed endorsement of civic empowerment, and his conversion of these two into institutional arrangements and developments that can enhance elite accountability. Simply put, there are three components to Machiavelli's alleged democratic leaning, and we will engage with these in turn.

Concerning Machiavelli's anti-elitism and supposed advocacy for civic empowerment, I note three nuances drawn from the *Discourses*. First, leadership is necessary for the effectiveness of popular power. Speaking of the People as a multitude, Machiavelli argued in Chapter I.57 of the *Discourses* that it needs a leader to keep it united and make it think more strategically. This is because despite being bold in criticizing decisions, a multitude breaks in the face of penalties due to distrust among themselves and their natural

---

[74] *Ibid.,* 1141–1173.

tendency to think of their own safety as individuals.[75] Hence, Machiavelli stated that:

> on one side there is nothing more formidable than an unshackled multitude without a head, and, on the other side, there is nothing weaker…For when the spirits of men are cooled a little and each sees he has to return to his home, they begin to doubt themselves and to think of their safety, either by taking flight or by coming to accord.[76]

Furthermore, even Machiavelli's recommendation of making the People as the guardian of freedom in a republic hinges upon leaders as popular representatives. Specifically, popular power makes itself manifest, without endangering the republic itself through positions of leadership in the Roman government (e.g., tribunes, praetors, etc.).

Second, sole and absolute power is necessary in the establishment and reestablishment of a republic. In Chapters I.9–10[77] and III.1[78] of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli asserted that to face the challenges in establishing a new order or reestablishing/reforming an existing one—challenges ranging from external and internal threats to uncertainty and lack of support—power must be decisive, hence, undivided. Machiavelli's recommended roles for an absolute leader at both ends of a republic's life cycle was tied with his recommendation to give the maintenance of the republic to the many. I want to emphasize that these are based on his examination of a republic's corruption and decline through the machinations, conflict, greed, and shortsightedness of the nobility and the People.[79]

Third, the capacity of the People to create leaders is due more to necessity and natural tendencies than a need to control those leaders. In other words, it is based more on the need for order, unity, and even compliance rather than empowerment and accountability. The latter is reflected more in their capacity to unmake leaders. We draw this line in order for us to ask about the relationship between the People, leaders, and leadership. Consequently, it appears that for Machiavelli, the People can lift a person to a position of leadership, not for them to control that leader but rather to rely on them. And if that leader ends up being unreliable, untrustworthy, incapable, etc., then the People can bring him down and replace him with

---

[75] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 114–115.

[76] *Ibid.*, 115.

[77] *Ibid.*, 28–33.

[78] *Ibid.*, 209–212.

[79] *Ibid.*, 31–33, 44–54, 105–113.

another. These are two extreme forms of power founded upon, driven by, and could cause instabilities in a republic. Thus, where can we place the notion of accountability in these extremes if one could not hold a leader accountable if that leader is someone we either rely on without controlling or destroy without scruples? The answer, I think, lies in the power and necessity of laws and institutions that could and should transcend and bind all classes, sectors, and citizens in a republic.

To this end, Machiavelli gives much emphasis on the importance of laws and institutions. One clear example is that the People's supposed wisdom and constancy is due more to laws than to some natural tendency and that their empowerment must be tied to laws. Machiavelli states that "everyone who is not regulated by laws would make the same errors as the unshackled multitude" and good kings who are bound by laws must be compared "to a multitude regulated by laws as they are; and the same goodness that we see in them will be found to be in it [the multitude], and it will be seen neither to dominate proudly nor to serve humbly."[80] Overall, "for a people that commands and is well ordered will be stable, prudent, and grateful no otherwise than a prince, or better than a prince, even one esteemed wise."[81]

Fleshing this out, I note that the logic of Chapter I.58[82] moves from an assertion that what the ancients accused the multitude of (i.e., vanity and lack of constancy) is something applicable to anyone unbound by laws towards arguing that the moderating effects of the law are necessary for the longevity of a republic. Machiavelli then raises two observations, namely, that the People, when regulated by laws can be wiser than a prince, and when they are unshackled by laws, they can be less dangerous than a prince—that their spirits can be calmed with more ease while their cruelty is triggered by perceived threats to the public good and contrary for princes and their fixation on self-interest.

Echoing this, Max Morris, in his mediation between Leo Strauss and McCormick, argues that while the latter emphasizes Machiavelli's insistence on the supposed wisdom of the People in order to cast him as a democrat, Strauss derives a different conclusion from the same premise that Machiavelli abandons a teleological view of human nature and the need for a philosophically determined standard for human perfection (i.e., an idealistic-utopian lens for politics).[83] Leo Strauss shows that as a teacher of evil, Machiavelli places the effectual truth of things at the center of his analysis,

---

[80] Machiavelli, *Discourses*, 116.

[81] *Ibid.*, 117.

[82] *Ibid.*, 115–118.

[83] See Morris, "Wisdom of the People and the Elite."

rendering both republics and principalities—democracies and authoritarian regimes—as equally defensible systems depending on due considerations on moving circumstances (*fortuna*) and the quality of human action (*virtù*).[84]

Though I agree with the considerations above, my critique of McCormick's reading is much simpler. Specifically, Machiavelli placed such wisdom and possible superiority over princes in the context of institutions (i.e., establishing a well-ordered system bound by laws). Unless we conflate institutions with democracies while ignoring Machiavelli's own analysis of (re)ordering (i.e., building and rebuilding institutions) through princely rule, then Machiavelli appears more of an institutionalist than a democrat.

Overall, being anti-elitist is not tantamount to being an advocate for civic empowerment (or a populist as McCormick insists). As contemporary definitions suggest, one must also hold that the People and its will must be morally and politically superior. This only works for Machiavelli if we assume that he held a clear-cut dichotomous understanding of class conflict. However, as the previous section shows, not only is Machiavelli's analysis of class conflict more nuanced and colorful, but his primary concern was with factionalism beyond classes and leadership in relation to both the republic and sectoral conflict. McCormick haphazardly shortcuts and disposes these considerations at our expense by appealing to Machiavelli's own broad generalizations on the case of Rome in the *Discourses* while framing the latter's extensive analysis of factionalism in the *Histories* as if it is about classes.

Even if we admit that Machiavelli did not turn conservative in the *Histories* as McCormick aptly asserts,[85] this does not make him into a populist or even a democrat. And even if we also admit that he was anti-elitist (excluding his emphasis on the role of leadership in the foundation and reestablishment of republics), the absence of the supposed primacy of popular will in his works prevents bending the stick the other way and turning him into a democrat of sorts. Now, if Machiavelli is neither populist nor democratic, then what could he be? The concluding section provides some insights on this matter.

Approaching Politics with Machiavelli

Other than the question about his identity as a way for us to appreciate him from a great historical distance, I also ask if there is a Machiavellian way of problematizing politics and its relationship with both

---

[84] See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 174–298.

[85] See McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli*, 69–105.

structures and agency (individual and collective). These are the questions that I am leaving for future inquiries and even for attempts to appropriate him for a specific political project. And to keep these questions open, I propose the following considerations as a way for a conclusion.

First, McCormick's analysis in *Machiavellian Democracy* was limited from the start. His assertion about Machiavelli being essentially populist and democratic could not be derived effectively from his focus on elite accountability—a result of his own horizon that focused on contemporary challenges to Western liberal democracies—for the simple reason that the scope of Machiavelli's analysis is broader than the issue of accountability. McCormick's subsequent appeal to the effectual truth of politics, colored by his earlier assertions, is no more than an appeal to the effectual truth of populist and democratic politics—again too narrow for Machiavelli's concern with the very life of republics, principalities, and their various states.

In its strongest form, McCormick's readings successfully brought out Machiavelli's arguments on holding elites accountable and chained to the public good. Nonetheless, this is something that Jeffrey Green also accomplishes without even trying to argue that Machiavelli was essentially democratic.[86] I note further that Green, instead of insisting that Machiavelli is essentially democratic, adapts the latter's notorious recommendation for princes to learn *how not to be good* into a weapon that ordinary citizens can use to disempower the wealthy and powerful few. Such an approach is way more aligned to Gadamer's understanding of truth.

Second, if we are to speak of expanding our horizons on this matter, then Machiavelli's legacy must be extended to non-Western cases, especially those who are still dancing between democratization and authoritarianism—cases wherein class conflict is intertwined with factionalism and dynastic politics that Machiavelli himself might have considered familiar. Briefly turning to the Philippines as an illustration, recent attempts in political science have already been made.[87] However, being based upon McCormick's works, such attempts ended up sharing the theoretical limitations of McCormick's reading. In political philosophy, other than my own effort to analyze Machiavelli in his own terms (i.e., the dynamics between *virtù* and

---

[86] Green, *Shadow of Unfairness*, 8–12, 101–124.

[87] See Aries A. Arugay and Dan Slater, "Polarization without Poles: Machiavellian Conflicts and the Philippines' Lost Decade of Democracy, 2000–2010," in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681 (2019); Dan Slater and Aries A. Arugay, "Polarizing Figures: Executive Power and Institutional Conflict in Asian Democracies," in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62 (2018).

fortuna) and from multiple levels of analysis,[88] Romualdo Abulad[89] sought to move beyond Machiavelli, and Rhoderick Abellanosa and Regletto Imbong have rehabilitated him through more holistic readings. [90] Though I will no longer comment on their works in detail,[91] I note that an appreciation of the centrality of effectual truth in Machiavelli's thought is necessary instead of simply relying on the usual appeal to Machiavelli's image as a proponent of *realpolitik*—an appeal that usually ends up reducing politics to mere power at all costs. For one, if we analyze the relationship of morality and politics from such a lens, then we can avoid issues of whether this or that political action is justifiably good or bad. Rather, we can consider the impact of morality as something mediated by the actions of the leader and the reactions of the ruled who are more likely to hold such moral standards closer to their hearts. I have done something similar in my previous work when I considered moral flexibility as a component of *virtù* and the morality of others as part of *fortuna*.[92] I have yet to confront the issue of Machiavelli's effectual truth head on, and to this end we can ask: What is the effectual truth in the life cycle of contemporary republics torn between democratic, oligarchic, and autocratic forces and tendencies? What can we learn from Machiavelli regarding establishing republics upon such undemocratic and oligarchic foundations?

Lastly, in line with Mansfield's exposition of Machiavelli's politicization of *virtù*, I open the possibility of letting Machiavelli's treatment of private morality inform our understanding of depoliticization. If one defines depoliticization in its most basic form as a withdrawal of an object from politics—its conversion into a private matter—then from a Machiavellian perspective, we can see such a process as derailing political

---

[88] See Borja, "*Virtù, Fortuna*, and Statecraft."

[89] See Romualdo Abulad, "Philosophy and Politics: Do they Mix?," in *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 8 (2009); Romualdo Abulad, "Martial Law and Religion," in *Scientia: The International Journal on the Liberal Arts*, 6 (2017); and Romualdo Abulad, "Filipino Postmodernity: Quo Vadis?," in *Kritike*, 13 (December 2019).

[90] See Rhoderick Abellanosa, "Niccolo Machiavelli and the Possibility of the Post-political," in *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 18 (2019) and Regletto Imbong, "Abulad's Post-Machiavelli and His Apology for Duterte," in *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 18 (2019).

[91] On one hand, we have Romualdo Abulad's efforts to break a supposedly Machiavellian/modernist paradigm that places power and the self at the center of politics while removing morality from the picture. On the other, and responding to Abulad's reading of Machiavelli, we have Regletto Imbong and Rhoderick Abellanosa separate criticisms of Abulad's notion of post-Machiavelli. For the former, Abulad's anti-Machiavellianism was based on a one-sided image of the Florentine that sees Machiavelli as a mere proponent of tyranny and deceit. For the latter, sharing Imbong's concerns over Abulad's readings, analyzing Machiavelli through a more holistic approach allows a better appreciation of Machiavelli's take on ethics and the relationship between philosophy and politics. Considered together, I note that a better appreciation of Machiavelli's analytical approach is necessary.

[92] See Borja, "*Virtù, Fortuna*, and Statecraft."

agents from the path of power. Future inquiries can then invoke critical theorists to elaborate on how such a disempowerment is partially driven by the alluring illusion of private power—the illusion of self-mastery and self-control in isolation from society and politics. A myriad of self-help books can attest to such, but this is one that I will leave for future inquiries.

In summary, by focusing on the effectual truth of politics, Machiavelli is giving us the keys to the wine cellars of history and politics. It is our choice whether to join him or end up getting sick with vinegar, reducing him to either a democrat or an autocrat.

Department of Political Science and Development Studies
De La Salle University, The Philippines

References

Abellanosa, Rhoderick, "Niccolo Machiavelli and the Possibility of the Post-political," in *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 18 (2019).

Abensour, Miguel, *Democracy against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, trans. by Max Blechman and Martin Breaugh (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

Abulad, Romualdo, "Filipino Postmodernity: Quo Vadis?," in *Kritike*, 13 (December 2019).

_____, "Martial Law and Religion," in *Scientia: The International Journal on the Liberal Arts*, 6 (2017).

_____, "Philosophy and Politics: Do they Mix?," in *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 8 (2009).

Althusser, Louis, *Machiavelli and Us,* trans. by Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 1999).

Arugay, Aries and Dan Slater, "Polarization without Poles: Machiavellian Conflicts and the Philippines' Lost Decade of Democracy, 2000–2010," in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 681 (2019).

Balot, Ryan and Stephen Trochimchuk, "The Many and the Few: On Machiavelli's 'Democratic Moment'," in *The Review of Politics*, 74 (2012).

Barber, Benjamin, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

Berlin, Isaiah, "The Originality of Machiavelli," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas - Second Edition*, ed. by Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Borja, Anthony Lawrence A., "*Virtù, Fortuna,* and Statecraft: A Dialectical Analysis of Machiavelli," in *Kritike*, 10 (June 2016).

_____, "We, the People, Silent and Powerless: A Critique of Recent Pluralist Conceptualizations of the People," in *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy*, 24 (2023).

Canovan, Margaret, *The People* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

Colish, Marcia, "The Idea of Liberty in Machiavelli," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32 (1971).

Femia, Joseph, "Machiavelli and Italian Fascism," in *History of Political Thought*, 25 (2004).

Fischer, Markus, "Machiavelli's Political Psychology," in *The Review of Politics*, 59 (1997).

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Giorgini, Giovanni, "Five Hundred Years of Italian Scholarship on Machiavelli's *Prince*," in *The Review of Politics*, 75 (2013).

Green, Jeffrey Edward, *The Shadow of Unfairness: A Plebeian Theory of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Holman, Christopher, *Machiavelli and the Politics of Democratic Innovation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

Imbong, Regletto, "Abulad's Post-Machiavelli and His Apology for Duterte," in *PHAVISMINDA Journal*, 18 (2019).

Jenkins, Keith, *Re-thinking History* (London: Routledge, 2003).

Kelsen, Hans, *The Essence and Value of democracy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, [1920] 2013).

Kocis, Robert, *Machiavelli Redeemed: Retrieving his Humanist Perspectives on Equality, Power, and Glory* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1998).

Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

Litvin, Boris, "Mapping Rule and Subversion: Perspective and the Democratic Turn in Machiavelli Scholarship," in *European Journal of Political Theory*, 18 (2019).

Niccolò Machiavelli, "A Discourse on Remodeling the Government of Florence," in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, trans. by Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

_____, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

_____, *The Discourses*, trans. by Leslie Walker, ed. by Bernard Crick (London: Penguin, 1984).

_____, "The History of Florence," in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, trans. by Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

Mansfield, Harvey, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

_____, *Machiavelli's Effectual Truth: Creating the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

McCormick, John, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

_____, *Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Moffitt, Benjamin, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

Mouffe, Chantal, *For A Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2019).

_____, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

Mudde, Cas, "The Populist Zeitgeist," in *Government and Opposition*, 39 (2004).

Morris, Max, "The Wisdom of the People and the Elite: John McCormick and Leo Strauss on Machiavelli," in *Theoria*, 70 (2023).

Ochoa Espejo, Paulina, *The Time of Popular Sovereignty: Process and The Democratic State* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

Pateman, Carole, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

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

Rahe, Paul, ed., *Machivelli's Liberal Republican Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Ricoeur, Paul, *History and Truth*, trans. by Charles Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

Robiadek, Katherine, "For the People: Deepening the Democratic Turn in Machiavelli Studies," in *Political Theory*, 49 (2021).

Slater, Dan and Aries A. Arugay, "Polarizing Figures: Executive Power and Institutional Conflict in Asian Democracies," in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62 (2018).

Smith, Rogers, *Stories of Peoplehood: The Politics and Morals of Political Membership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Speer, Ross, "The Machiavellian Marxism of Althusser and Gramsci," in *Décalages*, 2 (2016).

Strauss, Leo, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

Sullivan, Vickie, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Formation of a Liberal Republicanism in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Winter, Yves, "Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising," in *Political Theory*, 40 (2012).

_____, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

_____, "Machiavelli: Radical Democratic Political Theorist?," in *The Review of Politics*, 81 (2019).