

Jo Ann Cavallo

On Political Power and Personal Liberty in *The Prince* and *The Discourses*

ALTHOUGH LIBERTY IS A RECURRING CONCERN IN MACHIAVELLI'S WRITINGS, THERE IS NO consensus regarding either the definition of the concept or its relevance for his overall political thought. One direction of Machiavellian interpretation that has gained prominence in recent decades has focused on the concept of "*libertas*" in relation to a republican mode of government, even though Machiavelli's use of liberty cannot be simply equated with republicanism.¹ In tracing the various occurrences of the term in Machiavelli's political works, Marcia Colish has pointed out that in the context of internal affairs "Machiavelli often connects *libertà* with certain personal rights and community benefits that characterize free states regardless of their constitutions." She specifies, in fact, that "he clearly identifies freedom with the protection of private rights" (1971, 345–6).²

Following up on Colish's findings, this essay focuses on liberty in *The Prince* and *The Discourses* as it relates to freedom from government infringement on one's person and rightful property. The theoretical backing for this approach can be found in Murray N. Rothbard's understanding of freedom as "a condition in which a person's ownership rights in his own body and his legitimate material property are *not* invaded, are not aggressed against" (2011, 50; emphasis in the original). In this definition, "the invasion of another's person or property" occurs through "the use or threat of physical violence" (Rothbard 1982, 223).³ I also suggest that Machiavelli's considerations

of personal liberty in opposition to state power have relevance for our contemporary political milieu.

In *The Discourses* Machiavelli posits two theoretical scenarios for the origin of cities: voluntary internal accord and external aggression.⁴ Considering Venice as an example of the first, he explains that “without any particular person or prince to give them a constitution,” those who reached the site that would become Venice “began to live as a community under laws which seemed to them appropriate for their maintenance” (*Discourses* 1.1, 101). In the second scenario, a foreign predatory group (*genti forestiere*) takes over a territory and builds a city that is not free and that consequently does not have the same chance to achieve greatness.⁵ This latter case, Machiavelli points out, corresponds to the origin of Florence under the Roman empire.

When Machiavelli composed *The Prince*, Florence had recently been taken over once again. In September 1512 the Medici faction seized power when the threat of invasion by a Spanish army—fresh from its sack of nearby Prato—led to a coup in the city.⁶ Nor does it appear there was any scope for freedom under the new regime. Machiavelli, following his dismissal, was barred from Palazzo Vecchio, prohibited from travelling beyond the boundaries of Florentine territory for one year, and ordered to pay a bond of a thousand florins. He was subsequently arrested on a charge of conspiracy against the state and subjected to physical and mental torture.⁷ Although he was innocent of the charges, only the election of a Medici as pope in March of 1513 brought an end to his imprisonment as part of a general amnesty.

If prudence consists, as Machiavelli maintained, “in being able to assess the nature of the particular threat and in accepting the lesser evil” (*The Prince* xxi, 73), what would be considered the “lesser evil” if someone who valued liberty were to offer advice to a prince in power? His objective would have to be—to borrow Rothbard’s phrasing—“to confine any existing State to as small a degree of invasion of person and property as possible” (1982, 193).⁸ And this, I would argue, is exactly what we find in *The Prince*, albeit presented as precepts designed to help the ruler retain power.⁹ Given the reality of both local predators

and foreign invaders with huge armies at their disposal, Machiavelli was not offering a utopian vision of how the world should be, but proposing measures that could safeguard some level of freedom from aggression by political power. Let us first address two of Machiavelli's recommendations that would directly counter the prince's predatory tendencies with respect to the population: to restrain taxation and to respect people's property.

Through taxation the state deprives its subjects of the fruits of their labors. Not surprisingly, as Lauro Martines notes in his classic *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy*, "nothing stirred the public passions of citizens more deeply than taxes" (1988, 110). As he explains in a later publication: "The great expenses of government were for armies and wars; but the dowries, jeweled objects, costly hangings, cloth of gold, and *objets d'art* of princes were also paid for out of taxes – namely, out of varieties of indirect levies that lay heaviest on petty merchants, artisans, small farmers, and the rural poor" (1998, 195). Thus court intellectuals who routinely treated a ruler's magnificence as virtue were actually encouraging a situation in which "the structures of public finance . . . petted the wealthy and burdened the humble" (1998, 198).

When in *The Prince* Machiavelli alerts the reader that he will re-examine traditional vices and virtues as he seeks the "real truth" (*verità effettuale*) of things, the very first definition he overturns is that of liberality (*liberalitate*) and miserliness (*parsimonia*). Working against the celebration of magnificence in the "Mirror for Princes" genre popular at the time, Machiavelli exposes a prince's so-called generosity as nothing other than robbing from the entire population in order to shower lavish gifts on a privileged elite. Although a ruler who avoids this common practice will initially be called stingy (*misero*), he will eventually be recognized as the only one worthy of the label of liberality since in time "he proves himself generous to all those from whom he takes nothing, and they are innumerable, and miserly towards all those to whom he gives nothing, and they are few" (*The Prince* xvi, 52).¹⁰ Machiavelli's advice on the matter is unambiguous: "So a prince must think

little of it, if he incurs the name of miser, so as not to rob his subjects, to be able to defend himself, not to become poor and despicable, not to be forced to grow rapacious” (xvi, 52).

Although Machiavelli does not directly bring up the issue of taxation with respect to Federigo da Montefeltro, William R. Albury points out that “Federigo da Montefeltro and his father . . . were able to maintain their popularity with their subjects because their income from military *condotte* allowed them to tax their subjects at a relatively low rate” (2014). Thus, Machiavelli’s assertion that the people of Urbino loved their duke may not be unrelated to the fact that he financed the construction and decoration of his palaces and patronized the arts through his military income and not through high taxation.

Similarly, in *The Discourses*, Machiavelli singles out for praise a system of taxation that he attributes to free German cities: when the authorities decide they require funding for a public project, they impose a property tax of 1 or 2 percent. Each person, after taking an oath to pay the appropriate sum, “throws into a chest provided for the purpose the amount which he conscientiously thinks that he ought to pay; but of this payment there is no witness save the man who pays” (*Discourses* 1.55, 244–5). The example is purportedly meant to demonstrate the goodness of a people who merit such trust, but it likewise posits a scenario in which the authorities can request only as much as the inhabitants will voluntarily contribute without any supervision. The scenario is one of popular consent rather than authoritarian coercion.

Regarding the issue of property, both ancient Roman law and canon law protected private property from invasion on the part of the state.¹¹ In the reality of medieval and Renaissance Italy, however, private property rights were routinely trampled upon by those in power: “Political defeat and forfeiture of property were joined like the two sides of a coin. The new *signore* won supporters and loyalty by doling out the houses and lands of the defeated, or by selling these to adherents for derisory sums” (Martines 1988, 100). Indeed, it may be the ruling factions’ proverbial disregard for private property rights that prompts Machiavelli’s insistence that the prince keep his hands off the

people's property. Not only will the prince always avoid being hated "if he abstains from the property of his subjects and citizens and from their women" (*The Prince* xvii, 54–5), but he will actually gain their favor: "As long as he does not rob the great majority of their property or their honor, they remain content" (*The Prince* xix, 58–9). In order to hammer home this point to any prince reluctant to take his advice seriously, Machiavelli again warns that "above all a prince must abstain from the property of others; because men sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony" (*The Prince* xvii, 55). This jarring assertion, rather than a cynical statement about a lack of filial piety, is a dramatic way to caution the prince that men will never forget the confiscation of their property.¹² The comparison, moreover, sets up his culminating point that princes have a great temptation to grab property precisely because it is so easy to invent an excuse: "It is always possible to find pretexts for confiscating someone's property; and a prince who starts to live by rapine always finds pretexts for seizing what belongs to others. On the other hand, pretexts for executing someone are harder to find and they are sooner gone" (*The Prince* xvii, 55).

The most extreme form of aggression on private property is that upon one's own person, negating the most basic right of self-ownership. In *The Discourses*, for example, uprooting men from their land is considered an act so horrendous that it is metaphorically equated with treating humans like animals. Commenting that Philip of Macedon "moved men from province to province as shepherds move their sheep," Machiavelli remarks that this inhuman cruelty goes against universal law: "Such methods are exceedingly cruel, and are repugnant to any community, not only to a Christian one, but to any composed of men." Indeed, in an uncompromising espousal of ethics over exigency, Machiavelli declares that not even the power of kingship can justify infringing upon human freedom in this way: "It behooves, therefore, every man to shun them, and to prefer rather to live as a private citizen than as a king with such ruination of men to his score" (*Discourses* 1.26, 177).

While rightful property owners must be free from aggression, this does not pertain to idle titleholders who are said to continually aggress against the peasants who are engaged in working the land. In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli pointedly condemns the unproductive gentlemen (*gentiluomini*) “who live in idleness on the abundant revenue derived from their estates, without having anything to do either with their cultivation or with other forms of labor essential to life.”¹³ The underlying assumption is that the idle gentry (or their ancestors) gained their property through violent expropriation or illegitimate privilege, not through rightful means of acquisition; indeed, such exploitation was widespread in the Italian peninsula. Milan’s feudal nobility, for example, preferred to live under a *signore*, “expecting to benefit from his government,” and gained their wealth by living “off lands [as well as] off paid military activity, sinecures, church posts, castellanies, and public offices” (Martines 1988, 96). It is clear that Machiavelli is critiquing a system of exploitation and not the wealthy per se when he contrasts this group with the “gentlemen” (*gentiluomini*) of Venice: “Their great wealth is based on merchandise and movable goods. Moreover, none of them have castles, nor have they any jurisdiction over men” (*Discourses* 1.55, 247–8). He thus distinguishes unearned wealth enabled by political power from wealth legitimately earned through one’s own labor, whether through production or commerce.

Machiavelli imagines, moreover, how a condition of entitlement can be set into place *ex nihilo* through sheer political and military force:

Where considerable equality prevails, no one who proposes to set up a kingdom or principality, will ever be able to do it unless from that equality he selects many of the more ambitious and restless minds and makes of them gentry in fact and not in name, by giving them castles and possessions and making of them a privileged class with respect both to property and subjects; so that around him will be those with whose support he may maintain himself in power, and whose ambitions, thanks to him, may be realized. As to the

rest they will be compelled to bear a yoke which nothing but force will ever be able to make them endure. (*Discourses* 1.55, 247)

In this scenario, political power both creates and feeds off of a system of privilege and parasitism. Citing Marc Bloch's seminal *Feudal Society*, Rothbard defines feudalism as "the seizure of land by conquest and the continuing assertion and enforcement of ownership over that land and the extraction of rent from peasants continuing to till the soil" (1982, 67n). In agreement with Locke's ideas on the origin of rightful property ownership, Rothbard states: "It should be clear that here, just as in the case of slavery, we have a case of *continuing* aggression against the true owners—the true possessors—of the land, the tillers, or peasants, by the illegitimate owner, the man whose original and continuing claim to the land and its fruits has come from coercion and violence" (1982, 65).¹⁴ Feudalism is thus one of the classic ways in which "the State provides a legal, orderly, systematic channel for predation on the property of the producers; it makes certain, secure, and relatively 'peaceful' the lifeline of the parasitic caste in society" (Rothbard 2011, 62).

I would contend, moreover, that Machiavelli goes beyond the specific issues related to taxation and private property to dissuade the prince from intervening in civil society (*il vivere civile*) more generally as well. During this period, it was not uncommon to find collusion between political and economic forces in society. Renaissance princes "pledged mining and trade monopolies" (Martines 1998, 195), while privileged families were "concerned about controlling the political situation in order to profit from the *monti* (public funds), to be able to obtain reductions on taxes and forced loans, to establish international relationships of privilege, or even to set up monopolies via official missions and with the backing of popes and kings" (Branca 1999, xi). The Medici family was particularly notorious for using political power for economic advantage (and vice versa). Tim Parks revisits one glaring and disastrous example of this practice in which, following a deal with Pope Paul II and the King of Naples, the Medici family had a total

monopoly over all sales of the vital mineral alum throughout Christendom even though monopolies were illegal under Church law.¹⁵ To protect his interests, Lorenzo de' Medici sent an army to Volterra that sacked, raped, and massacred the town's inhabitants when a conflict arose between a mining consortium and that town's ruling faction (Parks 2005, 201–3).¹⁶

In contrast to the various forms of state corporatism operating in his day and continuing in our own, Machiavelli separates economic endeavors from political activity. As he wrote in a letter to his friend Francesco Vettori, “Fortune has seen to it that, since I do not know how to talk about either the silk or the wool trade, or profits or losses, I have to talk about the state” (Najemy 1993, 225). In pointing to his own limitations, Machiavelli is also envisioning economics and politics as two independent spheres, each requiring a different kind of expertise.¹⁷ In fact, in his political writing, he makes a point to assert that civil society can best flourish in the absence of government intrusion.¹⁸ In *The Discourses* he states that the common utility (*comune utilità*) of a free state (*vivere libero*) is “the possibility of enjoying what one has, freely and without incurring suspicion . . . , the assurance that one’s wife and children will be respected, [and] the absence of fear for oneself” (*Discourses* 1.16, 154). Machiavelli returns to this point in a later passage, linking freedom to the prosperity that ensues when a man has children in the confidence that he “can rear them and feels sure that his patrimony will not be taken away.” Indeed, in such a society, he muses, one’s children could even become rulers (*principi*) through their virtue (*virtù*) (*Discourses* 2.2, 280).

Machiavelli goes on to maintain that the right to acquire and own property through production and commerce benefits the entire community: “One observes, too, how riches multiply and abound there, alike those that come from agriculture and those that are produced by the trades. For everybody is eager to acquire such things and to obtain property, provided he be convinced that he will enjoy it when it has been acquired. It thus comes about that, in competition one with the other, men look both to their own advantage and to that of the

public; so that in both respects wonderful progress is made” (*Discourses* 2.2, 280). In other words, those who acquire wealth through their labor will continually exchange with other producers and merchants, leading to greater overall prosperity. Characteristically, he goes on to offer the opposing scenario as well: “The contrary of this happens in countries that live in servitude; and the harder the servitude the more does the well-being to which they are accustomed, dwindle.” That is, when the state intervenes to hinder economic activity or confiscate rightfully earned profits, producers will logically be discouraged from working, resulting in diminished production and a loss of well-being. Here we can see that although Machiavelli professed ignorance of economics in his letter, he is nevertheless able to describe the basic principles and advantages of a free-market economy.

Machiavelli’s correlation between property rights protection and general prosperity, whether or not it can be said to anticipate Adam Smith’s invisible hand or Friedrich Hayek’s spontaneous order, is corroborated by global studies undertaken by contemporary organizations such as the Fraser Institute in Canada and the Heritage Foundation in the United States. Noting that “the absence of property rights protection is a major cause of world poverty,” Thomas DiLorenzo cites a number of annual economic freedom indices which “show a strong correlation between the degree of economic freedom in a country and economic growth” (2004, 19, 24–7).¹⁹

As Colish points out, Machiavelli includes monarchies, along with republics, among those states capable of internal freedom when “he advises those who want to set up a new and free polity (*uno vivere nuovo e libero*), whether it be a republic or a monarchy (*o per via di repubblica o di regno*), to preserve some of its ancient customs” (1971, 337; *Discourses* 1.25). In relating freedom to a new regime’s noninterference with a people’s ancient customs, Machiavelli is distinguishing between the voluntary interactions of people and the institution of force. Although the concepts of “society” and “state” are sometimes confused or intentionally merged in our current discourse, Albert Jay Nock shows that the opposition between “social power” and “state

power” is an essential one: “Every assumption of State power, whether by gift or seizure, leaves society with so much less power; there is never, nor can be, any strengthening of State power without a corresponding and roughly equivalent depletion of social power” (2009, 4). Randolph Bourne expresses the contrast in a similar way: “Our idea of Country concerns itself with the nonpolitical aspects of a people, its way of living, its personal traits, its literature and art, its characteristic attitudes toward life” while State is “armed power, culminating in a single head, bent on one primary object, the reducing to subjection, to unconditional and unqualified loyalty of all the people of a certain territory” (1998, 41, 28). Robert Nesbit reminds us, moreover, that prior to the onset of the nation-state in Europe, the division between political regimes and networks of social groups with their own established customs, traditions, and authorities, was more clearly delineated (2010, 69–89). Machiavelli not only underscores the distinction in the passage cited above, but presupposes that an autonomously functioning civil society can be harmed to a greater or lesser extent by state interference.

If the prince is, therefore, to leave the daily business of civil society to proceed unimpeded, how should he spend his time? His task, according to Machiavelli, is to busy himself with military exercises: “He must always be out hunting, so accustoming his body to hardships and also learning some practical geography” (*The Prince* xiv, 47–8). Machiavelli maintains, moreover, that in time of war the prince must “assume personal command and captain his troops himself” (*The Prince* xii, 41). Thus, while recent Italian history had provided numerous examples of *condottieri* becoming rulers through force, Machiavelli envisions the prince’s main occupation as none other than that of the *condottiere*, defending the territory he has “acquired” against attacks by outside aggressors.²⁰ One might wonder what would happen if the requirement to captain the troops were imposed upon today’s political leaders – might this discourage them from waging war arbitrarily at the expense of their own people?

A ruler could expect to face threats to his sovereignty from both foreign invasion and domestic conspiracy. To avoid the latter danger, a political treatise on statecraft sometimes compared to *The Prince*, the ancient Indian *Artha Shastra* (c. 350–283 BCE), strongly advises an extensive and complex network of spying. Rather than advocate a surveillance state, however, Machiavelli asserts that a prince can adequately guard against conspiracies “if he avoids being hated or scorned and keeps the people satisfied” (*The Prince* xix, 59). Machiavelli may have imagined the prince reluctant to absorb this simple lesson since he underscores it again: “One of the most powerful safeguards a prince can have against conspiracies is to avoid being hated by the populace.” And just in case the prince were really obtuse, he presents both scenarios with their consequences: “I conclude, therefore, that when a prince has the goodwill of the people he must not worry about conspiracies; but when the people are hostile and regard him with hatred he must go in fear of everything and everyone” (*The Prince* xix, 60–1). This strategy does not stem from the fact that surveillance measures were lacking in early sixteenth-century Italy. Although Machiavelli could probably not have imagined the widespread invasive surveillance techniques used by governments today, he would have no doubt been aware that spying was a common practice in his time. Rulers not only employed professional spies, but also relied on secret viewing and listening devices designed by contemporary architects (Albury 2014).

The essence of Machiavelli’s advice on conspiracies carries over into his discussion of fortresses. The military control exercised by signorial government “was often represented by a fortress within the urban space, especially in subject cities” (Martines 1988, 108). Machiavelli puts into question the usefulness of fortresses, even dissolving the physical structure into a metaphor when declaring that “the best fortress that exists is to avoid being hated by the people” (*The Prince* xx, 70). By way of example, he cites Duke Guidobaldo of Urbino who, “after he returned to the dominion from which Cesare Borgia had chased him, razed to the ground all the fortresses in his province, in the belief that by doing so it would be more difficult for

him to lose the state again” (*The Prince* xx, 70). When asserting that “in our own time, there is no instance of a fortress proving its worth to any ruler,” Machiavelli initially makes an exception for the countess of Forlì. Nevertheless, he then goes on to recount how Cesare Borgia was ultimately successful in taking over Forlì despite its fortresses because the countess’s own subjects had grown hostile to her. Having thus invalidated his only exception, he concludes as though stating the obvious: “It would have been safer for her to have avoided the enmity of the people than to have had fortresses.”²¹

Yet Machiavelli would not only take fortresses away from the ruler, he would arm the population as well. This is contrary to the established praxis of princes throughout history. Discussing the rise of professional armies beginning in the second half of the fourteenth century, Martines notes that “governments were anxiously concerned to keep arms out of the homes and hands of citizens. Once citizens were disarmed, most cities could be held militarily by a few score knights and several hundred crossbowmen” (1988, 108).²² Machiavelli proclaims, to the contrary, that “no new prince has ever at any time disarmed his subjects; rather, when he has found them unarmed he has always given them arms” (*The Prince* xx, 67). His reasoning is simple: “Those who were suspect become loyal, and those who were loyal not only remain so but are changed from being merely your subjects to being your partisans.” He then moves from the carrot to the stick to drive home the point: “But as soon as you disarm your subjects you start to offend them, showing whether through cowardice or suspicion that you mistrust them; and on either score hatred is aroused against you” (*The Prince* xx, 68).

It is telling that Machiavelli’s most important piece of advice on how the prince should protect himself from both internal conspiracies and foreign invasion was exactly the same: to not be hated by the people. And lest the prince forget what will make him hated, Machiavelli reiterates: “He will be hated above all if, as I said, he is rapacious and aggressive with regard to the property and the women of his subjects” (*The Prince* xix, 58–9).

While acknowledging that the Roman emperors were less concerned about the hatred of the people as long as they had the support of the military, Machiavelli warns that presently the situation is exactly the reverse because now the people have greater power, at least in Europe: “In our own times it is necessary for all rulers, except the Turk and the Sultan, to conciliate the people rather than the soldiers, because the people are the more powerful” (*The Prince* xix, 66). Nonetheless, he singles out a number of “extremely cruel and rapacious” (*crudelissimi e rapacissimi*) emperors who met an “unhappy end” (*triste fine*) and concludes by stating that “the downfall of the emperors . . . was caused by either hatred or scorn” (*The Prince* xix, 63, 66–7). This implicit warning that a ruler retains his power only by consent may be a ploy to restrain the predatory impulses of the prince, yet it is also an insight that would be eloquently expressed a few decades later in France by Etienne de la Boétie:

The more tyrants pillage, the more they crave, the more they ruin and destroy; the more one yields to them, and obeys them, by that much do they become mightier and more formidable, the readier to annihilate and destroy. But if not one thing is yielded to them, if, without any violence they are simply not obeyed, they become naked and undone and as nothing, just as, when the root receives no nourishment, the branch withers and dies (2008, 45).

Therefore, despite declarations of power or threats of violence, those in power cannot rule if the governed remove their consent.

The success of both monarchical and republican governments is dependent in large part upon just laws, which result in the happiness of the people and consequently in the stability of the regime in power.²³ And paramount among just laws are those designed for the protection of liberty. Indeed, Machiavelli offers the following recipe for freedom in a principality: “[The prince] will find that a small section of the populace desires to be free in order to obtain authority over

others, but that the vast bulk of those who demand freedom, desire but to live in security. . . . As for [the latter group], who demand but to live in security, they can easily be satisfied by introducing such institutions and laws as shall, in conjunction with the power of the prince, make for the security of the public as a whole” (*Discourses* 1.16, 156). Liberty is so essential in a state and yet so continually under threat that Machiavelli calls for legally instituted “guardians of liberty.” In outlining their jurisdiction, moreover, he specifies that they should have the authority to indict “such citizens as have committed any offense prejudicial to the freedom of the state” (*Discourses* 1.7, 124). No enemy of liberty, regardless of his position, would be exempt from such prosecution (see McCormick 2011 for an elaboration of how this process might be instituted in modern democracy).

Republics are generally compared favorably to principalities and even referred to as “free states.” Nonetheless, when explaining why they can sometimes be less free than principalities, Machiavelli describes them as a parasitic institution feeding off of civil society:

Of all forms of servitude, too, that is the hardest which subjects you to a republic. First because it is more lasting, and there is no hope of escape; secondly because the aim of a republic is to deprive all other corporations of their vitality and to weaken them, to the end that its own body corporate may increase. A prince who makes you his subject, does not do this unless he be a barbarian who devastates the country and destroys all that man has done for civilization, as oriental princes do. On the contrary, if his institutions be humane and he behave constitutionally, he will more often than not be equally fond of all the cities that are subject to him, and will leave them in possession of all their trades and all their ancient institutions (*Discourses* 2.2, 280–1).

Similarly, Hans-Hermann Hoppe, in arguing that “the deterioration of liberty is a structural feature of constitutional republics,” offers

a comparison of monarchical and democratic rule that echoes and further develops Machiavelli's comment. While considering both forms of government as deficient systems, Hoppe notes that the monarch nevertheless has a greater incentive to care for "his" state: "If the government is privately owned (under monarchical rule), the incentive structure facing the ruler is such that it is in his self-interest to be relatively farsighted and to engage only in moderate taxation and warfare" (2001, 39).²⁴ Publicly owned governments, according to Hoppe, are not subject to the same incentives and controls. On the contrary, since the democratic ruler owns the current use of resources, but not their capital value, public-government ownership results in continual capital consumption. Moreover, since "anyone, in theory, can become a member of the ruling class[,] the distinction between the rulers and the ruled is blurred [and] resistance against government power is systematically weakened" (2001, 25–6). Accordingly, "democratic republicanism has led to permanently rising taxes, debts, and public employment" as well as "a systematic increase in the intensity and extension of government power" (2001, 42 and 24).²⁵

John McCormick has likewise asserted that "electoral democracies appear to permit and perhaps even encourage political and economic elites to enrich themselves at the public's expense and encroach upon the liberty of ordinary citizens" (2011, vii). Yet whereas McCormick emphasizes class division based on wealth, I would draw attention instead to the basic distinction between the power elite and the ruled, that is, between those who, in Franz Oppenheimer's words, satisfy their desires by "political means" or "the unrequited appropriation of the labor of others" and the rest of the population, who live by labor and exchange (2012, 24–7; for a bibliographical outline of power elite analysis, especially in relation to United States history, see Burris 2012).

Although Machiavelli offers advice to both would-be princes and rulers of republics, his vision of the political state is fundamentally distrustful and pessimistic. In outlining six forms of government in *The Discourses*, Machiavelli maintains that the principality, aristoc-

racy, and democracy (*Principato*, *Ottimati*, and *Popolare*), while good in themselves, are all ultimately “pernicious” (*perniziosi*) and pestiferous (*pestiferi*) because of the ease with which they degenerate into the three “very bad” (*pessimi*) forms of government: tyranny, oligarchy, and licentiousness (*tirannico*, *di pochi*, and *licenzioso*), respectively. And as Machiavelli immediately warns,

if anyone who is organizing a commonwealth sets up one of the three first forms of government, he sets up what will last but for a while, since there are no means whereby to prevent it passing into its contrary, on account of the likeness which in such a case virtue has to vice (*Discourses* 1.2, 106).²⁶

Indeed, the likeness between the good and bad version of each form of government is such that it is not always possible for the reader to guess which is under discussion, especially with regard to principalities and tyrannies. Although Machiavelli consistently uses the term “prince” rather than “tyrant,” the unadorned portrait of the *principe* that emerges from the pages of his works is that of a rapacious predator. This view is captured perhaps most strikingly in a simile—which he attributes to King Ferdinand of Naples—likening men to “certain little birds of prey in whom so strong is the desire to catch the prey which nature incites them to pursue, that they do not notice another and a greater bird of prey which hovers over them ready to pounce and kill” (*Discourses* 1.40, 216). The historical moment evoked by the mentioning of the Neapolitan king, who lost his reign with the French invasion of 1494, would be that of the little Italian princes who, while intent on capturing each other’s territory, were blind to the danger posed by powerful European monarchs. In this context, the rulers are distinguished not by their qualities, since all are equally predatory, but by the extent of their power.

In *The Golden Ass*, Machiavelli openly laments that “the powerful with their power are never sated” (5.38–9; 762). The result is both dire and inevitable: “This appetite destroys our states, and the greater wonder is that all recognize this transgression, but not one flees from

it” (5.46–8; 762). He goes on to condemn the aggrandizing tendencies of rulers in both republics and principalities that lead them to attempt to enlarge their states. Various political thinkers, both before and after Machiavelli, have attempted to account for the destructive tendencies of rulers. Hayek, who prefaces a chapter entitled “How the Worst Get on Top” with Lord Acton’s famous dictum on the corrupting influence of power, argued that collectivist or totalitarian systems offer special opportunities for the ruthless and unscrupulous to attain power (2007, 157–70). The Hungarian political theorist Anthony de Jasay has broadened Hayek’s argument by removing the personality of rulers from the equation and treating the state as an actor. Positing that since it is in the nature of the state to seek to maximize its power, he predicts that “by relentlessly expanding the collective at the expense of the private sphere the state-as-drudge always strives to become the state-as-totalitarian-master” (1998, xii). In outlining the steps leading from a “minimal state” with self-imposed limits to a “plantation state” with complete mastery over civil society, De Jasay argues, moreover, that “there is in competitive, democratic politics, always a latent propensity for totalitarian transformation” (1998, 273).

Recognizing these tendencies, American libertarian authors have long been sounding the alarm that the United States has traveled quite far down the road to statism, combining elements of left-wing socialism and right-wing fascism (see Rockwell 2013, especially “The Reality of American Fascism,” 1–49). Similarly, against any complacent assumption that participatory politics can guarantee a free state, Machiavelli warns about the tendency of any regime, regardless of its form, to take ever more power unto itself as it takes freedom away from the ruled:

Almost all men, deceived by the false semblance of good and the false semblance of renown, allow themselves either willfully or ignorantly to slip into the ranks of those who deserve blame rather than praise; and, when they might have founded a republic or a kingdom to their immortal honor, turn their thoughts to tyranny (*Discourses* 1.10, 88).

In conclusion, Machiavelli has often been considered by politicians and political scientists as the proponent of a wide range of political ideas relevant to the respective reader's contemporary context. Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini opened his "Preludio al *Principe*" asserting the text's usefulness to modern statesmen and the timeliness of its political system (1929, 473). The neoconservative Michael Ledeen echoes this view in his 1999 book, *Machiavelli on Modern Leadership: Why Machiavelli's Iron Rules Are as Timely and Important Today as Five Centuries Ago*.²⁷ At the same time, approaching Machiavelli from the other side of the ideological spectrum, scholars associated with the "Cambridge School" of intellectual history have downplayed or dismissed those aspects of his work most appealing to totalitarians in order to celebrate the Florentine chancellor as an early proponent of modern-day North Atlantic republicanism. Most recently, McCormick has presented a more radically democratic Machiavelli whose endorsement of plebian tribunes in ancient Rome could serve as inspiration for institutional reforms mandating the inclusion of nonwealthy citizens in government today. Diverse as these interpretations are, each finds concrete, sometimes indisputable evidence in Machiavelli's works to support a particular vision of governance. And given Machiavelli's attention to political states in their various manifestations through time and space, seeking a greater understanding of his ideas on this subject is a logical undertaking.

At the same time, however, this focus on the state as protagonist tends to obscure instances in which political power, regardless of its form, is viewed and judged by Machiavelli as the ultimate antagonist pitted against the positive value of personal liberty. Llewellyn H. Rockwell, Jr., has spelled out the opposing perspectives in this way:

There are two, and only two, versions of the story of liberty and power. One looks to power, as manifested in the state, as the source of progress, prosperity, and order. The other credits liberty with these good things, along with commerce, invention, prosperity, the arts and sciences, the conquering of disease and destitution, and much else (2013b).

Since most scholars seem to concentrate on how Machiavelli looks to power, my intention has been to show what happens when we switch the focus to liberty. By drawing attention to moments in which Machiavelli can be observed attempting to curb the power of government rather than advocating one form over another, we can better understand his sage warnings about the tendencies of all political states toward corruption and the extreme difficulty in safeguarding personal liberty both in his time and in our own.

NOTES

1. The writing on the topic of Machiavelli and republicanism by J. G. E. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and other authors affiliated with the “Cambridge School” of the history of political thought, is vast. Bock, Skinner, and Viroli (1993) and Rahe (2006) offer a representative range of essays.
2. As Colish explains: “There are circumstances under which Machiavelli thinks that virtually any kind of political arrangement, from tyranny to principality to aristocracy to popular rule to factions, can be detrimental to liberty. At the same time, there are circumstances under which all of these arrangements, with the exception of tyranny, are conducive to liberty. Free governments, thus, may take a variety of forms. Their parity lies not in their constitutional similarity, but in their objectives, their animating principles, their procedures, and the advantages they hold out to their citizens” (1971, 345).
3. Skinner appraises various theories of liberty (e.g., Bentham, Berlin, Taylor) with respect to Machiavelli, but he does not address Rothbard’s writing on the subject (1993, 293–309). McCormick, linking liberty to class-specific institutions promoting class consciousness, argues primarily against Pettit’s formulation of liberty as nondomination (2011, 145–69).
4. His stated contrast is between cities instituted either by “natives of the place” or by “people from elsewhere,” but his explanation and examples indicate that the distinction is between agreement and aggression. His contemporary, Francesco Guicciardini, remarks, less idealistically, that “all states, if one carefully considers their origin,

are violent” (*Ricordi*, #95). Rothbard agrees with Guicciardini: “Every political State where the facts are available originated by a process of violence, conquest, and exploitation” (1982, 229).

5. Whereas in the above passage the original Venetians were simply said to be governing themselves through laws, it might be noted that when Machiavelli returns to this general model in 1.2, the people have hypothetically wished into existence either a republic or a principality: “I propose to dispense with a discussion of cities which from the outset have been subject to another power, and shall speak only of those which have from the outset been far removed from any kind of external servitude, but, instead, have from the start been governed in accordance with their wishes, whether as republics or principalities” (*Discourses* 1.2, 105).
6. During the August 30, 1512, sack of Prato in which 4,000 people were slaughtered, “the Spaniards literally chopped the Florentines to pieces as they begged for mercy” (Viroli 2000, 129). Medici supporters in Florence immediately thereafter forced a regime change, rendered official through a Medici coup on September 16 (see Viroli 2000, 132–3).
7. Prior to his arrest, Machiavelli was also subjected to a lengthy investigation on the false charge of embezzlement, but “no evidence of malfeasance was found. Even though vast amounts of money had flowed through his hands, Niccolò had served the Republic with complete and impeccable honesty” (Viroli 2000, 135).
8. “Given the existence of States . . . , are there any moral principles that libertarianism can direct as criteria for foreign [and domestic] policy? The answer is . . . to reduce the degree of coercion exercised by States over individual persons as much as possible” (Rothbard 1982, 189).
9. Machiavelli already gives evidence of seeking the lesser evil in his two written communications to the Medici prior to his dismissal in which he advocates moderation and clemency (see Viroli 2000, 134–5). McCormick (2011) has argued that both *The Prince* and *The Discourses* covertly aim to “alleviate the people’s oppression” (2011, 37), but his focus is on the “political empowerment of the plebs” (2011, 60). Of

course, adopting a “prudent” strategy to deal with princes would not have been unique to Machiavelli. In *Utopia* (first published in 1516), Thomas More’s character explains to Rafael Hythloday:

You must not deliver strange and out-of-the-way speeches to people with whom they will carry no weight because they are firmly persuaded the other way. Instead, by an indirect approach, you must strive and struggle as best you can to handle everything tactfully—and thus what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make as little bad as possible (2002, 35).

10. Princes who, on the contrary, rob from the populace in order to be liberal with their cronies find themselves in the reverse situation:

If you want to sustain a reputation for generosity, therefore, you have to be ostentatiously lavish; and a prince acting in that fashion will soon squander all his resources, only to be forced in the end, if he wants to maintain his reputation, to lay excessive burdens on the people, to impose extortionate taxes, and to do everything else he can to raise money. This will start to make his subjects hate him, and since he will have impoverished himself, he will be generally despised (*The Prince* xvi, 51).

11. “Roman private law elaborated, for the first time in the West, the idea of property rights as absolute, with each owner having the right to use his property as he saw fit” (Rothbard 2006, 22). According to Colish, “Machiavelli restores the Roman focus on liberty as the enjoyment of private legal rights, a notion present in both the republican and imperial eras of Roman history. With the Romans, he defines liberty as the security of the individual and the protection of hearth and home, and enshrines the law as the greatest guarantee of liberty, a point not emphasized by previous Florentine political writers” (1971, 349). Regarding canon law, Rothbard writes that “from the time of [the twelfth-century canon lawyer] Huguccio [da Pisa], private property was to be considered

a sacrosanct right derived from the natural law. The property of individuals and communities was, at least in principle, supposed to be free from arbitrary invasion on the part of the state” (2006, 38).

12. Nor is Machiavelli implying that it is fine for a prince to kill but not steal, since on the contrary he cautions that “if, even so, it proves necessary to execute someone, this is to be done only when there is a proper justification and a manifest reason for it” (*The Prince* xvii, 55).
13. He goes on to say: “Such men are a pest in any republic and in any province; but still more pernicious are those who, in addition to the aforesaid revenues, have castles under their command and subjects who are under their obedience” (*Discourses* 1.55, 245–6).
14. Rothbard does not argue, of course, that all land rent is illegitimate, but distinguishes “feudal rent” from “legitimate rent” based on whether the origin of the land title is criminal (1982, 66).
15. The reasoning behind the prohibition is as follows: “Denying people liberty and keeping prices artificially high, monopolies were obviously a form of stealing and could lead to perdition” (Parks 2005, 193).
16. Medici intervention in the economy extended to currency manipulation as well. Lorenzo introduced a new coin (the *quattrino bianco*), which had to be used to pay all customs duties, even though incomes continued to be paid in the debased currency (the *picciolo*). This move deceptively increased customs taxes by 25 percent (Parks 2005, 226).
17. Guicciardini explicitly stated that a prince’s involvement in the economy was tyrannical: “I say that the duke of Ferrara’s interests in business are not only shameful but make him a tyrant. For he is usurping what belongs to private citizens, not to him. And with that, he sins as much against the people as they would sin against him if they were to interfere in the affairs of a prince” (*Ricordi*, #94).
18. In tracing the occurrences of “civil” and “civility” in Machiavelli, Tenenti finds positive connotations related to general living in society, order, codes, customs, and, more broadly, civilization (1987, 119–36).
19. The Fraser Institute of Canada, for example, by measuring “the relative security of property rights and the viability of contracts across countries,” finds that “the more stable property rights are, the stronger a nation’s economy will be” (DiLorenzo 2004, 25).

20. Machiavelli notes that military preparation is useful not only for defensive but also aggressive warfare, yet the recurring focus of *The Prince* is on the need for defense in Italy's current situation of enslavement. Even the famous maxim that a prince must know how to act like a lion and a fox is explained in terms of defense: "one must be a fox in order to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves" (*The Prince* xviii, 57).
21. One may think he has sufficiently made his point, yet he repeats it again in the chapter's closing statement: "So, all things considered, I commend those who erect fortresses and those who do not; and I censure anyone who, putting his trust in fortresses, does not mind if he is hated by the people" (*The Prince* xx, 71).
22. As Martines goes on to point out, "The professionalization and business of war in fourteenth-century Italy helped greatly to ensure the survival of signories" (1988, 108).
23. "The law is the means of instituting *libertà*; it is also the bastion of the citizens against arbitrary government, narrow partisan interests, violent breaches of the peace, and internecine strife. Hence the crucial importance for Machiavelli of *buoni ordini* and of the well-ordered state, which he so often associates with *libertà*, and which can manifest itself in a wide number of governmental forms" (Colish 1971, 347).
24. The motivation, of course, is self-interested: "For the lower the degree of taxation, the more productive the subject population will be, and the more productive the population, the higher the value of the ruler's parasitic monopoly of expropriation will be" (Hoppe 2001, 19).
25. Hoppe lists additional negative consequences as well, such as "the destruction of the gold standard, unparalleled paper-money inflation, and increased protectionism and migration controls" (2001, 42).
26. Faced with an ongoing cycle of inevitable degeneration and regime change, Machiavelli proposes the simultaneous existence of all three imperfect forms, each keeping a vigilant eye on the others (*Discourses* 1.2, 109).
27. In his essay "The Truth about Neoconservatism," Ron Paul provides the intellectual and political context for Ledeen's military interventionism. Citing the conclusion from Ledeen's more recent publica-

tion that “They [that is, foreign countries] must attack us in order to survive, just as we must destroy them to advance our historic mission,” Paul remarks: “If those words don’t scare you, nothing will” (2003).

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