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The 2013 Josephine Waters Bennett Lecture: *Machiavelli and History**

by JOHN M. NAJEMY

History is the foundation of Machiavelli's political thought. Dismissing the celebratory traditions of humanist historiography and never fully sharing humanism's idealization of antiquity, Machiavelli sought in history the causes of political failure. He acknowledged the fragmentary and fleeting character of historical knowledge and exposed fashionable philosophies of history (cyclical recurrence, unchanging human passions, celestial influences, laws of nature, fortune) as seductive fictions purveying false consolations for history's adversities and afflictions. Machiavelli proposed instead a critical history focused on how social conflicts shape power and its abuses. His analysis of ancient Roman and more recent Florentine conflicts turns on a crucial distinction between conflicts contained within institutional frameworks and public law and those fought with instruments of private power (political patronage, wealth, and factions) that undermine public authority. Useful history, Machiavelli insists, must show how the constant pursuit, particularly by elites, of privatized power caused both the collapse of the Roman Republic and the failures of modern Italy's ruling classes.

1. INTRODUCTION

A century and more ago, Machiavelli's great biographer Oreste Tommasini (1844–1919) wrote that Machiavelli (1469–1527) was “already a historian in his thinking” before he began writing the *Florentine Histories* (1521–25), his only formal work of history.¹ To assume that thinking like a historian had a clear and obvious meaning was perhaps easier in the late nineteenth century than it is now. But the notion was not straightforwardly obvious in Machiavelli's time either. Despite the centrality of history in the curriculum of the *studia humanitatis*, humanism did not produce a generally accepted theory about writing history, partly because, despite the survival of many ancient works of history, antiquity itself had not bequeathed a solid body of reflections on the

I thank the Renaissance Society of America for inviting me to give the 2013 Josephine Waters Bennett Lecture and, as always, Amy Bloch for reading and critiquing several versions of the lecture and essay. All translations are mine, except where otherwise noted.

¹Tommasini, 2:1.478: “nel pensiero era già storico.” Approaches to Machiavelli's ideas about history include: Anselmi; Cabrini, 1996, 1998, and 2010; Di Maria; Dionisotti; Gilbert; Jurdjevic; Lefort; Marietti, 1974 and 2005; Najemy, 1982 and 2009; Quint; and Sasso, 1984 and 1993.

subject. The only known ancient treatise on historiography is a short work by Lucian (ca. 120–after 180) that warns against flattery;² a Latin translation was printed in 1515, and it is tempting to speculate (but no more) that Machiavelli, who was much concerned with the problem of flattery in historiography, might have taken notice of it. Cicero (106–43 BCE) has one of the speakers in the *De Oratore* opine that writing history requires no special theory and little guidance. Declaring history to be the responsibility of the orator, Antonius says he does “not find anywhere instructions for it in the precepts of the rhetoricians, for its rules are plainly before the eyes of all.” He reduces these rules to two: the “first law of history” is that one “not dare write anything false”; the second that one “dare to tell the truth. There must be no suspicion of favor [*suspicio gratiae*] or enmity [*simultatis*].”³ Cicero did not ask, as Machiavelli would, whether avoiding “suspicion of favor” might inevitably entail “enmity.”

Machiavelli frequently expressed a sense of distance between his approach to history and those of his predecessors and contemporaries. When he commented in a 1506 letter that “it is not customary to cite [*allegare*] the Romans,”⁴ he was alluding to the reluctance within Florence’s elite class to look to ancient Rome for guidance in political matters — an early hint of his polemic against the critics and detractors of Rome.⁵ His younger contemporary Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540) sharply criticized Machiavelli’s constant attention to the Romans: “How greatly,” he wrote in the *Ricordi* (1530), “do they deceive themselves who cite [*allegano*] the Romans at every word”; in order to make such comparisons, “it would be necessary to have a city organized like theirs and then to be governed by their example; if the conditions are different, the comparison would be as distorted as having a donkey race against a horse.”⁶

Machiavelli’s and Guicciardini’s opposing views about the utility of “citing” the Romans are reflected in their differing historical explanations of contemporary Italy’s catastrophic experience of foreign invasion, war, occupation, and loss of independence. For Machiavelli this inquiry begins with antiquity: the *Discourses on Livy* (1515–18) reach back to ancient Rome for critical comparisons, and the *Florentine Histories* take the fifth-century invasions that destroyed the Roman Empire as the starting point for exploring the roots of modern dilemmas. Guicciardini’s *History of Italy*

²Lucian, 181–202.

³Black, 1987, 128; Cicero, 73.

⁴Machiavelli, 1997–2005, 2:136.

⁵On the detractors of Rome, see Sasso, 1987–97, 1:401–536; and Pedullà, 519–63.

⁶Guicciardini, 1951, 121 (*Ricordi* C 110).

(1537–40), by contrast, traces the origins of Italy’s calamities no further back than the late fifteenth century.⁷ The polemic over Rome bursts into the open in Machiavelli’s *Discourses* 1.4, where he rejects the “opinion of many who say that Rome was a republic so engulfed in strife and internal conflict that, if good fortune and military *virtù* had not neutralized these defects, it would have been inferior to any other republic.”⁸ Guicciardini was among those who held this critical view of Rome, and he echoed this passage in the *Dialogo del Reggimento di Firenze* (1521–24), where his spokesman Bernardo del Nero embraces precisely the argument Machiavelli rejected: that Rome’s greatness rested on its military strength and discipline, but that “its internal governance was tumultuous and replete with insurrections, such that, if its military *virtù* had not been so strong, internal conflicts would have caused the collapse of the republic.”⁹ Machiavelli devotes many pages of the *Discourses* to refuting the common perception of Rome as a factious polity too beset by wars within to have survived without superior military force and good fortune.¹⁰

In 1521 Guicciardini and Machiavelli exchanged humorous, but quite serious, letters that shed light on their contrasting approaches to history. Partly rehabilitated after years in the political wilderness, Machiavelli was in Carpi to represent the Florentine government at the chapter general of the Franciscans. Guicciardini, then papal governor of nearby Modena, teased Machiavelli about the comical incongruity of this modest mission for one who had formerly negotiated with “kings, dukes, and princes” and was now sent to listen to friars. Mockingly, even maliciously, suggesting that the humble appointment could serve Machiavelli well in writing the history of Florence, for which he had received a formal commission six months before, Guicciardini commented that only the most prudent observers can see through the changes in the names and outward features of things to perceive their underlying sameness: “therefore history is good and useful because it places before you and makes you recognize and see again that which you have never known or seen. From which there follows a friar-like syllogism [*un sillogismo fratesco*]” — which, given the reputation of the friars, we are to understand as being faulty — “that those who commissioned you to write

⁷Sasso, 1984, provides a stimulating analysis of their intellectual dialogue.

⁸Machiavelli, 1984, 70–71. Some editions of Machiavelli’s works have *virtù* with a grave accent, others with an acute accent. In quoting passages I have followed the practice of each edition.

⁹Guicciardini, 1932, 150; for the passage in an English edition, see Guicciardini, 1994, 145.

¹⁰For the best recent treatment of these issues, see Pedullà.

history are much to be commended and that you should be encouraged to carry out with diligence the task entrusted to you. I don't believe this mission will be completely useless to you [in writing the history] because in three leisurely days you will absorb everything about the republic of wooden clogs" — Guicciardini's derisive moniker for the Franciscans — "and make use of this model for some purpose, comparing or relating it to one of those forms of yours."¹¹ In calling them "those forms of yours," Guicciardini took skeptical distance from Machiavelli's conviction that comparisons can and must be made in the study of history and politics, that antiquity is relevant to the modern age, and that one must know the "forms" and structures of things in order to grasp the significance of particulars. Machiavelli kept his reply to the challenge brief, maintaining the validity of his method and his experience: "About the histories and the republic of wooden clogs, I don't think I've lost anything by coming here, because I've seen much of the friars' organization and institutions [*costituzioni et ordini*], which have some good in them, and I believe I can put this to good purpose, especially in making comparisons [*massime nelle comparazioni*], for, if I have to discuss silence, I'll be able to say: they were as silent as friars when they eat. And I'll be able to adduce many others things that this little bit of experience has taught me."¹² A modest mission, to be sure, but Machiavelli would not for that reason abandon his confidence in the utility of comparisons.

In the *proemio* to the *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli criticized his illustrious humanist predecessors, the fifteenth-century historians and chancellors Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) and Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459). He had intended, so he says, to write Florence's history only from the beginning of the Medici domination in 1434, because he assumed that Bruni and Poggio had sufficiently narrated the city's earlier history. But in reading their histories he came to see that, although they wrote "very diligently" about Florence's wars, they were either silent concerning "civil discord and domestic conflicts"¹³ or discussed them so briefly that readers derive neither profit nor pleasure from their treatment of them. Machiavelli speculates that they slighted these themes either because "they thought them unimportant and unworthy to be entrusted to the memory of letters," or "because they feared offending the descendants of

¹¹Machiavelli, 1997–2005, 2:377: "vi varrete di quel modello, comparandolo o ragguagliandolo a qualcuna di quelle vostre forme."

¹²*Ibid.*, 2:379.

¹³Machiavelli, 2010, 1:89–90: "delle civili discordie e delle intrinseche nimicizie, e degli effetti che da quelle sono nati."

those they would have to disparage.” Both reasons, he avers, are unworthy of “great men.”¹⁴

In *Discourses* 2.1 Machiavelli had already taken historians to task (without naming anyone in particular) for being “so deferential to the good fortune of the victors that, in order to make their victories more glorious,” they inflate their virtues and exaggerate the deeds of their enemies.¹⁵ In *Discourses* 1.10 he warns that “no one should be deceived by the glory of Caesar [100–44 BCE], seeing him celebrated by writers, because those who praise him are corrupted by his success and intimidated by the long life of the empire” ruled under his name (all subsequent emperors being called Caesar), which “did not allow these writers to speak freely of him.” Audaciously implying that Julius Caesar should be judged no more favorably than Rome’s most infamous conspirator, Machiavelli says that anyone “wanting to know what free writers [*scrittori liberi*] would say about him should look at what they say about Catiline [108–62 BCE].” Historians have heaped praise on Brutus (85–42 BCE) because, being “unable to criticize Caesar on account of his power, they have extolled his enemy.”¹⁶ In Machiavelli’s eyes, the challenge for historians is how to write critically about power. Because he grieved over the woes of early sixteenth-century Italy and assigned responsibility for Italy’s decline to its princes and ruling classes, for Machiavelli history could be neither celebratory in the manner of Bruni, nor elegiac in the style of Guicciardini, but only critical. Critical history is necessarily polemical, a feature of Machiavelli’s thought that has never endeared him to purists who demand neutrality and objectivity as the historian’s highest virtues.

2. THE MEMORY ABYSS

Machiavelli’s education was immersed in the humanist curriculum of Roman historians and poets that accepted as axiomatic the superiority

¹⁴Ibid., 1:90: “o perché temessero di non offendere i discesi di coloro i quali, per quelle narrazioni, si avessero a calunniare. Le quali due cagioni (sia detto con loro pace) mi paiono al tutto indegne di uomini grandi.” On Bruni as an historian, see Ianziti.

¹⁵Machiavelli, 1984, 289: “Perché il più degli scrittori in modo alla fortuna de’ vincitori ubbidiscano che, per fare le loro vittorie gloriose, non solamente accrescano quello che da loro è virtuosamente operato, ma ancora le azioni de’ nimici.”

¹⁶Ibid., 89: “Né sia alcuno che s’inganni per la gloria di Cesare, sentendolo massime celebrare dagli scrittori; perché quegli che lo laudano sono corrotti dalla fortuna sua e spauriti dalla lunghezza dello imperio, il quale reggendosi sotto quel nome, non permetteva che gli scrittori parlassono liberamente di lui. . . . Vegga ancora con quante laude ei celebrano Bruto, talché non potendo biasimare quello per la sua potenza, ei celebravano il nimico suo.”

and exemplarity of antiquity. Yet, despite these early studies and his conviction that valuable lessons could be gleaned from ancient history, his attitude toward the Renaissance idealization of antiquity was ambivalent. Deeply cognizant of its seductive power, he experienced this idealization as a source of both inspiration and frustration and gave memorable expression to both sides of his ambivalence. His most famous representation of the lure of antiquity is the letter of 10 December 1513 to Francesco Vettori (1474–1539), in which his typical day in the rural isolation of a postpolitical existence culminates “on the coming of evening,” when he sheds dusty everyday garments for “regal and courtly” robes more appropriate for solemn occasions and enters the “ancient courts of the men of antiquity,” is “received warmly” by them, and “feeds on that food that alone is mine and for which I was born.” This quasi-Eucharistic spiritual nourishment is imagined conversation with the ancients, “in which I am not ashamed to speak with them and ask the reasons for their actions, and they, out of their humanity, answer me. And for four hours I feel no worry, I forget all troubles, I do not fear poverty, death does not frighten me. I completely transfer myself into them [*tutto mi trasferisco in loro*].”¹⁷ The metaphor of conversation is a poetic translation of the act of reading into the Renaissance’s fondest, and most unrealizable, desire — direct dialogue with antiquity. Here is the dream of unmediated contact at its most lyrical, a mystical encounter with ancient sages, men of action and wisdom, who return to life speaking and generously sharing their knowledge with a devoted disciple. In “completely transferring” himself “into them,” Machiavelli figures himself transcending the temporal abyss that separates him from antiquity. That he knew he was writing out an impossible desire did not diminish the compelling force of imagining the reading of ancient texts as a dialogue open across the centuries to an unimpeded flow of questions and answers from which, so he tells Vettori, *The Prince* (1513–14) was born.¹⁸

But Machiavelli also lamented the reluctance or inability of his contemporaries to learn from these generous ancients, and he attributed Italy’s failure to react more effectively to the crises of the age to its neglect of antiquity’s lessons. He worried that the brilliant culture of the Renaissance — even as it recovered the memory of ancient virtues in an Italy that “seems born,” as he wrote in the *Art of War* (ca. 1519), “to revive dead things”¹⁹ — had failed to instill those virtues into the practice of politics, statecraft, and

¹⁷Machiavelli, 1997–2005, 2:295–96.

¹⁸For a reading of the entire letter, see Najemy, 1993a, 215–40; and Najemy, 1993b.

¹⁹Machiavelli, 2001, 289: “questa provincia pare nata per risuscitare le cose morte.”

war. The Roman virtues that Machiavelli merged into his concept of *virtù* — military valor; duty to family, country, and the gods; respect for law; morality grounded in religious piety; and, above all, love of liberty — became a standing reproach to a fallen modern world. To Machiavelli it often seemed that modernity, far from drawing closer to admired antiquity, was instead racing away and that antiquity's excellence was less a beacon illuminating the way to a better future than a harshly interrogating light on a degraded present. This too he dramatized, literally, in *Mandragola* (ca. 1518), the play that scathingly, if humorously, exposes the moral corruption of all its characters, including the initially virtuous Lucrezia, who yields to the sinister persuasions of husband, mother, and confessor and acquiesces in a phony but evil plot whose purpose is to get the infatuated Callimaco into her bed. Lucrezia's very name evokes the legend of virtuous Roman Lucretia and establishes an implicit contrast between ancient virtue and modern corruption.²⁰ Raped by the king's son, blameless Lucretia prefers suicide to the involuntary stain on her honor. Her self-sacrifice emboldens the men of Rome to overthrow the monarchy and establish the republic; she thus founds a new polity that embodies early republican Rome's stern morality and virtue. In bitterly comical contrast, Machiavelli's Lucrezia makes her peace with deceit and accepts the adulterous relationship; she too creates a new community, but one built on duplicity and immorality. The speaker who introduces the play tells the audience that its sarcastic snickering at what it will see shows without doubt why "the current age has completely degenerated from ancient *virtú*."²¹

The theme of modern corruption dominates the first book of the *Art of War*, set in the gardens of the Rucellai family, where friends gather to welcome the renowned military captain Fabrizio Colonna, who, in the fiction of the dialogue, is in Florence to visit Lorenzo de' Medici the younger (1492–1519) and certain "gentlemen [*gentili uomini*]" with whom he was acquainted. The historical Colonna (ca. 1455–1520) was one of the mercenaries Machiavelli routinely castigates, but in the *Art of War* Fabrizio praises Roman military practices and citizen armies and denounces soldiers who make war a full-time profession (an "arte," hence the irony of the title). When Fabrizio does not recognize certain trees in the gardens, the host of the gathering, Cosimo Rucellai (1494–1519), explains that they were better known in antiquity and that his grandfather Bernardo (1448–1514) planted

²⁰For an illuminating analysis of the "specific parallels" between *Mandragola* and Livy's account of the legend of Lucretia, see Martinez.

²¹Machiavelli, 1997–2005, 3:142: "che per tutto traligna / da l'antica virtù el secol presente."

them in imitation of ancient gardens. But Fabrizio is not pleased: how much better it would have been “to be like the ancients in difficult and arduous matters, not in soft and easy things,”²² better to “emulate the customs of the true and perfect, rather than the false and corrupt, antiquity; for once pursuits of this sort began to please my Romans, my native land went to ruin.”²³ Cosimo defends his grandfather, claiming that no man ever detested the “soft life” or loved the “arduous life” as much as Bernardo, but that he realized he could not actually live such a life because he had been born “into a time of such great corruption” that “anyone who tried to live differently from others,” enduring hardships of heat and cold and snow as the Spartans once did, “would have been reviled and mocked . . . ridiculed and considered a wild animal.”²⁴

Cosimo’s point is that over time customs change and people have little choice but to live according to the standards of their time. Unable to imitate the ancients in arduous things, Bernardo could only do so in his gardens. Bernardo was a brother-in-law of the elder Lorenzo de’ Medici (1449–92), and contemporary readers knew that Cosimo’s defense of Bernardo was also a critique of Lorenzo’s Florence. Moreover, the parable of the gardens anticipates Fabrizio’s defense of himself against Cosimo’s accusation that he has never instituted a citizen militia or implemented the Roman military methods he praises. Implicit in Fabrizio’s explanation that “no opportunity [*occasione*] has ever come to allow me to show the preparations I have made for restoring soldiery to its ancient orders”²⁵ is, again, that times change, leaving nothing unchanged and rendering the past ever more remote and unreachable. The inexorable and cumulative transformations wrought by history make the imitation of the past ever less likely.

In *Florentine Histories* 1.5 Machiavelli emphasizes just how quickly a receding past can become remote and alien, when, with the narrative still in the fifth century, he pauses to contemplate the sweeping cultural transformations brought by the “barbari” (“barbarians”). These were the most miserable of times, he says, “considering how much Italy and the other

²²Machiavelli, 2001, 35: “somiagliare gli antichi nelle cose forti e aspre, non nelle delicate e molli, e in quelle che facevano sotto il sole, non sotto l’ombra.”

²³Ibid., 35–36: “pigliare i modi della antichità vera e perfetta, non quegli della falsa e corrotta; perché poi che questi studii piacquerò ai miei Romani, la mia patria rovinò.”

²⁴Ibid., 37: “nondimeno e’ conosceva non potere nella persona sua . . . usarla, essendo nato in tanta corruttela di secolo, dove uno che si volesse partire dal comune uso sarebbe infame e vilipeso da ciascheduno . . . sarebbe schernito e tenuto più tosto una fiera che uno uomo.”

²⁵Ibid., 39: “a me non è venuta occasione alcuna di potere mostrare i preparamenti da me fatti per potere ridurre la milizia negli antichi suoi ordini.”

Roman provinces suffered, as not only governments changed, but also laws, customs, ways of living, religion, language, dress, and names.”²⁶ Old cities fell into ruin as new ones arose. New languages appeared from the mix of Latin and the invaders’ speech. The names of lakes, rivers, and seas changed, and men, once called Caesar and Pompey, were now named Piero, Giovanni, and Matteo. The splintering of the new Christian religion into rival churches generated confusion and left those seeking refuge in God amid so many terrifying vexations and changes bewildered and uncertain about which God to pray to.²⁷ Machiavelli’s purpose here (which may explain why he implies a much too early dating for some of these changes) is to depict a rapidly disintegrating Roman world, lost and perhaps already beyond comprehension at a very early moment.

In the *Discourses* Machiavelli envisions an even more radical scenario of historical rupture. Observing in 2.4 that the “power” and “glory” of the Etruscans were “extinguished” by the Romans and that scarcely any “memory” of them “now” remains, he wonders “whence comes this loss of the memory of things [*questa oblivione delle cose*].”²⁸ In 2.5 he raises in this connection the debated question of the eternity of the world, adducing — but not accepting — an argument he says could be used by those who deny the world’s eternity: “To those philosophers who assert that the world is eternal, I believe one could reply that, if the world were really so old, it would stand to reason that we would have memory of more than the 5,000 years” of known history. Machiavelli rejects this argument, declaring that it would be valid “if we did not see how the memory of times past is extinguished by various causes”²⁹ — two or three times, he estimates, every five or six thousand years. The lack of more than 5,000 years of historical memory is not therefore the consequence of a finite and recently created world, but rather of these recurring memory extinctions, some caused by plagues, famines, and floods, others by new religions and languages that periodically eradicate older ones. Each new religion seeks to cancel the memory of its predecessor by eliminating its institutions, rituals, and beliefs. If the founders of a new religion also introduce a new language, he adds, the obliteration will be complete; and only because Christianity preserved Latin

²⁶Machiavelli, 2010, 1:107.

²⁷Ibid., 108–09.

²⁸Machiavelli, 1984, 307.

²⁹Ibid.: “A quegli filosofi che hanno voluto che il mondo sia stato eterno, credo che si potesse replicare che se tanta antichità fusse vera e’ sarebbe ragionevole che ci fussi memoria di più che cinquemila anni; quando e’ non si vedesse come queste memorie de’ tempi per diverse cagioni si spengano.” On this chapter and the debate over the eternity of the world, see Sasso, 1987–97, 1:167–399; and Connell.

did all knowledge of antiquity not disappear. Machiavelli cites Pope Gregory's determination to expunge pre-Christian historical memory by "burning the works of poets and historians, destroying images and wrecking anything else that gave any evidence of antiquity."³⁰ He no doubt exaggerated the Christian effort to destroy all memory of pagan antiquity, and he may not have actually believed either the scenario of an infinite succession of memory obliterations or the theory of the world's eternity (although, if he did, this would have implied both the eventual replacement of Christianity and the displacement of Rome from its privileged status in the humanist construction of history to just one among countless civilizations, destined like the others to be forgotten in time³¹). But the overarching point is that our knowledge of antiquity is fragmentary, precarious, and limited to what survived Christianity's attempt to obliterate it. Since we cannot know how much of antiquity's history and literature was lost, we can have no secure knowledge of it.

3. SEDUCTIVE CONSOLATIONS

Machiavelli's repeated emphasis on a remote and barely knowable past, catastrophic ruptures, the abyss between antiquity and modernity, the loss of much of antiquity's cultural patrimony, and the fragmentary nature of historical memory raises the question of how to interpret the presence in his writings of a considerable number of theories purporting to explain the overall structure of history. The curious thing is that none of them actually shapes his interpretation of Roman or Florentine or Italian history. Why does he include them? Machiavelli often wrote in a heuristic mode to test ideas, and he may have wanted to engage readers in a critical examination of such theories, especially because he recognized their appeal in a time when history seemed irrational and inexplicable. In the twentieth century, the popularity of metahistorians in the aftermath of the world wars — Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), whose *Decline of the West* appeared in 1918–22; Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), who completed *A Study of History* after the second war; and Fernand Braudel (1902–85), who published *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* in 1949 — suggests that the appeal of grand-historical theory grows in proportion to the fear that history has erupted beyond reason and comprehension. Similar fears and consolatory recourse to theories

³⁰Machiavelli, 1984, 307–08: "ardendo le opere de' poeti e degli istorici, ruinando le imagini e guastando ogni altra cosa che rendesse alcun segno della antichità."

³¹Lefort, 289–92.

claiming to explicate history's direction, and sometimes its meaning, and to see outcomes as inevitable or predictable were also popular in the generation in Italy that experienced the invasions, wars, massacres, and collapse of states beginning in 1494.

Machiavelli addresses at least eight theories of history, depending on how one distinguishes or combines them. They can be sorted into two groups, each defined by a basic idea: that there is a discernible and repeating pattern, structure, or rhythm in history, on the basis of which the outline of future events can be foreseen; and, alternatively, that human events are determined by an external power or force and that the only certain thing about history is its uncertainty and randomness. In terms of predictability and foresight, the two ideas are at opposite poles. But both assumptions preclude or limit the possibility that political action or intervention can turn history in a particular direction, and both thus underscore the inevitability of historical outcomes. The theories offering intelligibility, but with only narrow possibilities of intervention, are the permanence and universality of human nature and desires, the naturalism of political bodies, the cycle of constitutions, sociocultural cycles, and complete ruin as the necessary condition for redemptive rescue. As the following brief review suggests, Machiavelli actually embraced none of them.

The *proemio* to the first book of the *Discourses on Livy* asserts the permanence and universality of human desires and motives, and hence the allegedly repetitive dimension of history, as the basis for useful comparisons between modernity and antiquity. Machiavelli laments the failure of readers to gain a "true understanding of works of history [*vera cognizione delle storie*]" because they wrongly consider the imitation of antiquity impossible, "as if the heavens, the sun, the elements and men had varied in motion, order, and power from what they were in antiquity."³² In *Discourses* 1.39 he writes that "the same desires and same humors exist as they have always existed in all cities and peoples," and that "it is [therefore] easy, for those who diligently examine past events, to foresee future ones in any country and to apply the solutions used by the ancients . . . because of the similarity of events."³³ The allegedly unchanging nature of people throughout history, as fixed in their properties as the heavens, the sun, and the elements, opens theoretical space for imitation and prediction. Affirming identical desires,

³²Machiavelli, 1984, 56 (*Proemio* A), 60 (*Proemio* B).

³³*Ibid.*, 145: "E' si conosce facilmente . . . come in tutte le città e in tutti i popoli sono quegli medesimi desideri e quelli medesimi omori, e come vi furono sempre. In modo ch'egli è facil cosa a chi esamina con diligenza le cose passate, prevedere in ogni repubblica le future . . . per la similitudine degli accidenti."

actions, and even outcomes over the ages can also compensate for incomplete knowledge of history.

Yet Machiavelli calls this idea into question in several ways. The *proemio* of book 2 of the *Discourses* warns that our opinions about the past (presumably including the one expressed in the first *proemio*) cannot be trusted, among other reasons, because judgment varies with age: what seems tolerable and good when one is young will of necessity appear intolerable and bad later in life.³⁴ The reader wonders how we can know that human nature has not varied in history if individual natures are so variable. In *Discourses* 3.43 Machiavelli revisits the idea, this time alleging that “prudent men usually say, and not without merit, that anyone who wishes to see what will be should consider what has been, because everything in the world in every age has its counterpart in ancient times.” People “have, and have always had, the same desires, and thus their actions necessarily have the same results.”³⁵ But he immediately reframes the issue by pointing to the diversity of “desires” and “humors” in different peoples: “actions display more or less *virtù* in this or that country according to the kind of *educazione* from which different peoples have derived their way of life.”³⁶ Calling attention to varieties of *educazione*, which for Machiavelli carried the meaning of upbringing shaped by customs, culture, religion, and collective behavior, disrupts the notion of universally identical desires and restores difference, contingency, and temporality. All people are evidently not the same, and the differences can be accounted for.

Machiavelli’s discussion of a natural life cycle of political bodies in *Discourses* 3.1 has prompted some to conclude that he built his theory of history on naturalism.³⁷ “It is certainly true that all things in this world have an end to their life,” the chapter begins, “but only those live out the full course of their life as decreed for them by heaven that do not disorder their bodies [*che non disordinano il corpo loro*], but instead keep their bodies ordered in such a way that either they do not change, or, if they do, the change brings health and not harm.” If we assume, at first read, that this is

³⁴Ibid., 289–91.

³⁵Ibid., 564–65: “Sogliono dire gli uomini prudenti, e non a caso né immeritamente, che chi vuole vedere, quello che ha a essere, consideri quello che è stato: perché tutte le cose del mondo in ogni tempo hanno il proprio riscontro con gli antichi tempi. Il che nasce perché essendo quelle operate dagli uomini, che hanno ed ebbono sempre le medesime passioni, conviene di necessità che le sortischino il medesimo effetto.”

³⁶Ibid., 565: “Vero è che le sono le opere loro ora in questa provincia più virtuose che in quella e in quella più che in questa, secondo la forma della educazione nella quale quegli popoli hanno preso il modo del vivere loro.”

³⁷Anselmi, 103–09.

about natural bodies, the idea of a finite natural life is contradicted by the notion of preserving bodies unchanged. But Machiavelli tells us he is speaking not of natural bodies but of “mixed bodies [*corpi misti*], as are republics and religious communities,” in which the changes that redound to their “health” periodically “return them to their beginnings [*le riducano inverso i principii loro*].” The beginnings of all religious communities, republics, and kingdoms “necessarily contain some goodness,” but “in time that goodness is corrupted and will kill the body if something does not cause it to return” to its good beginnings. Machiavelli then likens these “mixed bodies” to human bodies and applies to both a dictum he attributes to “doctors of medicine,” who “say, speaking of human bodies, that every day something is added that at some point requires a cure.”³⁸

This appeal to medical science reintroduces the notion of natural cycles in the life of what now seem to be political organisms. But the means by which Machiavelli imagines republics and churches enacting the restorative return to beginnings turn out to be neither medical nor natural: “It is necessary that men who live together [in a state] often gain cognizance of the need to reform themselves, either through external or internal events.”³⁹ His example of “external events” is the attack on Rome by the Gauls in 390 BCE, which shocked the Romans into reviving their old religion and good customs. Renewal from “internal prudence” comes either from good laws, like the institution of the tribunes of the plebs in Rome, or the actions of virtuous individuals, among whom Machiavelli gives the example of Saints Francis (1181/82–1226) and Dominic (1170–1221), who rescued the Church by bringing it back to the precepts of Christ, in the process dissuading the faithful from criticizing the evil deeds of prelates⁴⁰ — a restorative return to beginnings that, ironically, had the effect of exacerbating and concealing the Church’s corruption. The naturalism seemingly promised in the analogy of human and political bodies is quietly forgotten as the chapter recovers the contingencies of power and corruption.

The theory of the cycle of constitutions came to Machiavelli chiefly from Polybius (ca. 200–120 BCE). In *Discourses* 1.2 he summarizes the ancient classification of three good governments (princely, aristocratic, and popular), and their corresponding corruptions (tyrannical, oligarchic, and licentious), and paraphrases at length Polybius’s theory of the

³⁸Machiavelli, 1984, 461.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 462: “È necessario adunque . . . che gli uomini che vivono insieme in qualunque ordine, spesso si riconoschino, o per questi accidenti estrinseci o per gl’intrinseci.”

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 464.

anacyclosis, through which the good and bad governments succeed each other, each good kind degenerating into its evil twin and generating a different form of government: monarchy descends into tyranny, which gives rise to aristocratic government; aristocracy degenerates into oligarchy and gives way to government by the people, which falls into license, causing a return to monarchy and the repetition of the cycle.⁴¹ Machiavelli's lengthy account of the Polybian theory near the beginning of the *Discourses* has persuaded some readers that cyclical recurrence (with or without Polybius's naturalism) was Machiavelli's preferred theory of history.⁴² But he actually subverts it at the outset, commenting that these "variations of government" occur "by chance [*a caso*],"⁴³ which undermines the necessity, order, and logic of the cycle. Even apparently confirming that "this is the cycle [*cerchio*] in which, as they go round, all states have been governed and are governed," Machiavelli adds that "rarely do they return to the same forms of government," because no republic lasts long enough:⁴⁴ their mortality relegates the theoretically perpetual cycle to the realm of the purely hypothetical. Moreover, Machiavelli does not interpret the history of any state — neither the ancient republics of Rome or Sparta, nor modern Florence or Venice — within the conceptual framework of Polybian *anacyclosis*.⁴⁵

Another kind of cycle appears in *Florentine Histories* 5.1: a continuous and purportedly inescapable alternation, not between forms of government but between "order" and "disorder," in which peace brings the enervating "idleness" of philosophical pursuits and subsequently "disorder," with "ruin" generating a renewal back to "order": "in the changes they undergo countries normally proceed from order [*ordine*] to disorder [*disordine*], and then from disorder to order; because, since nature does not permit the things of this world to stand still, when they reach the height of perfection, unable to climb higher, they must descend; and similarly once they have declined and through disorder reached the lowest point, unable to fall further, they must of necessity begin climbing again; and thus continuously they go from good to bad and from bad to good: because *virtú* generates peace, peace produces idleness [*ozio*], idleness disorder, and

⁴¹Ibid., 65–67.

⁴²Trompf, 250–74.

⁴³Machiavelli, 1984, 65.

⁴⁴Ibid., 67.

⁴⁵The important differences between Machiavelli and Polybius have been analyzed by Sasso, 1987–97, 1:3–118; and Inglese, 109–14.

disorder ruin; similarly from ruin comes order, from order *virtú*, and from *virtú* glory and good fortune.” This, the passage continues, is why “prudent men” have “observed that letters come after arms” and “generals before philosophers.”⁴⁶ Despite seeming similarities, this is not the Polybian cycle of constitutions. This cycle ignores political forms and focuses on sociocultural changes, particularly those resulting from the presence or lack of good military orders. It sketches a regular, almost mechanical, recurrence that combines “nature” with necessity, and both with the unexplained notion that disorder and ruin somehow generate a return to order and *virtù*.

But once again Machiavelli immediately undermines the theory: quite apart from the sardonic remark — unnecessary for the theory, and polemically aimed at Italy’s military weakness — that “the strength of armed spirits cannot be corrupted by a more honorable idleness than that of literary pursuits,”⁴⁷ Machiavelli’s example of Cato the Elder (234–149 BCE) and the Greek philosophers subverts the cycle. Recognizing a great danger to Rome in the wide-eyed admiration of Roman youth for the philosophers Diogenes (240–152 BCE) and Carneades (214–129 BCE), who had been sent as ambassadors of Athens, Cato “prohibited any other philosophers from coming to Rome,” thus allegedly saving Rome from the contagion of Greek philosophy.⁴⁸ The story is an example, not of natural necessity or cyclical inevitability, but of an intervention, a political decision, an act of prudence that prevented Rome from descending into the disorder and ruin predicted by the cycle.⁴⁹

Total ruin as the essential precondition of rebirth similarly underlies the redemptive mission of the “new prince” in *The Prince*’s last chapter, the “Exhortation to Take Hold of Italy and Liberate It from the Barbarians.” Precisely because Italy had reached the nadir of its history, no time was ever better than this, says Machiavelli, for the appearance of a “redentore” (“redeemer”). Just as it was “necessary” that the Hebrews be enslaved in Egypt for the *virtú* of Moses to become visible, that the Persians be oppressed by the Medes for the “greatness of spirit” of Cyrus (d. 528 BCE) to be recognized, and that the Athenians be dispersed for the excellence of Theseus to emerge, so too was it “necessary that Italy be reduced to its current condition . . . beaten, despoiled, lacerated, overrun, and having

⁴⁶Machiavelli, 2010, 2:449.

⁴⁷Ibid.: “non si può la fortezza degli armati animi con il piú onesto ozio che con quello delle lettere corrompere.”

⁴⁸Ibid., 2:450.

⁴⁹As noted by Sasso, 1987–97, 1:53–54.

endured every kind of ruin” for the “*virtú* of an Italian spirit to be recognized.”⁵⁰ Necessity is the operative concept here: the redeemer’s salvific mission — to free Italy from the yoke of the invaders, to arm the Italian people, and to establish the political and military institutions (the “*ordini*” in Machiavelli’s lexicon) that Italy desperately needed — is made possible only by these direst of conditions.⁵¹ Descent to complete ruin does not guarantee success: hence the need to exhort the redeemer to seize the “*occasione*” to do what can be done only in this exceptional moment. This is a prophetic, providential vision of history that gives meaning to Italy’s agonies and afflictions, a vision inspired by myths of “*rari e maravigliosi*” (“exceptional and marvelous”) men who redeemed the suffering of their peoples.⁵² Endless interpretation and debate have produced no consensus about whether the “Exhortation” represents sincerity born of desperation (and whether Machiavelli momentarily believed the Medici, whom the “Exhortation” addresses, capable of fulfilling the role of redeemer princes) or dissimulating irony.⁵³ It is not so clear in this case that Machiavelli was writing out an idea with the immediate intention of subverting it. The transformative task to which the “Exhortation” summons the redeemer-prince reflects a moment of high passion, the conclusion and culmination of a work bearing lessons he says he learned, at much cost, as he told Vettori in the great letter, in fifteen years of loyal and honest government service: “if it [*The Prince*] were read, one would see that I have neither slept nor played away the fifteen years that I have been studying the art of government.”⁵⁴

But the theory of history that gives the “Exhortation” its dramatic force is an odd and isolated moment in Machiavelli’s writings. He never again exhorted rescue from the ashes by a redeemer. If anything, he later declared it impossible. In *Discourses* 1.18 he ponders whether and how the institutions of a completely corrupt city can be reformed. Because reorganization cannot be achieved through corrupted *ordini*, “it is necessary to go beyond the *ordini* [*venire allo straordinario*] to violence and arms and before all else become prince [*principe*] of that city, in order to be able to reorganize it as one wishes.”⁵⁵ The seeming similarity between this passage (even as it lacks the language of redemption and the “just” recourse to arms of

⁵⁰Machiavelli, 1995, 168–69.

⁵¹The point is incisively explicated by Sasso, 1987–97, 2:197–349.

⁵²Machiavelli, 1995, 170.

⁵³Benner, 2013, 305–12.

⁵⁴Machiavelli, 1997–2005, 2:297: “quando la fussi letta, si vedrebbe che quindici anni che io sono stato a studio all’arte dello stato, non gl’ho né dormiti né giuocati.”

⁵⁵Machiavelli, 1984, 111.

Prince 26⁵⁶) and the rescue in exceptionally bleak circumstances augured by the “Exhortation” has led some readers to conclude that Machiavelli wrote this part of the *Discourses* first, and that, having, as it were, discovered the concept of the redeemer-prince, interrupted the *Discourses* to write *The Prince*. This is not the place to review the reasons for not accepting this hypothesis concerning the dating of the two works.⁵⁷ But if this were the actual order of their composition, one would have to wonder why, when he returned to the *Discourses*, Machiavelli would not have modified the next sentence, in which he says that the renovation of a corrupt city by one who makes himself prince through violence is improbable to the point of impossibility on what we might call psychological grounds: “because reorganizing a city for republican government [*al vivere politico*] presupposes a good man [*uomo buono*], and becoming prince of a republic through violence presupposes a bad man [*uomo cattivo*], one finds that it happens only rarely that a good man will want to become prince through bad means [*per vie cattive*] even if his purpose is good; and [equally rare] that a bad man [*uno reo*], having become prince, would want to do good [*operare bene*] or that it would ever fall into his thoughts to use well the power he has acquired by evil means [*male acquistata*].”⁵⁸ Raising the question of how “good men” would react to the necessity of acquiring power “through bad means” and whether “bad men” would ever use their power for the good — issues completely ignored in *Prince* 26 — undermines the fantasy of heroic rescue.

Among the theories of history that relinquish intelligibility are two that appear together in the *proemio* to the second book of the *Discourses*. The questions the *proemio* addresses are whether antiquity was actually superior to the present and how such judgments can be made. Machiavelli first casts doubt on the common belief in antiquity’s superiority, on the grounds that historians exaggerate the glories of the past and people are more emotionally invested in the present and aware of its faults. Yet the perception of antiquity’s superiority is not always wrong. How past and present should be assessed depends on whether one’s own country is rising or declining: “The world, I judge, has always been the same [*a uno medesimo modo*], with the same amount of good [*buono*] and bad [*cattivo*], except that the good and

⁵⁶In the last chapter of *The Prince* Machiavelli wrote: “Here there is great justice: for war is just to those for whom it is necessary, and arms are sacred where there is no hope except in arms” (“Qui è iustitia grande: iustum enim est bellum quibus necessarium et pia arma ubi nulla nisi in armis spes est”) — a slightly inexact quotation from a speech to the Samnites by their general in book 9, chapter 1 of Livy: see Livy, 4:164–65.

⁵⁷For some of my reasons, see Najemy, 1993a, 335–36. Black, 2013, 89–96, 130–38, provides a thorough analysis of the evidence for the dating of both works.

⁵⁸Machiavelli, 1984, 111.

bad move about [*variare*] from country to country.”⁵⁹ The idea of good and bad shifting about within an overall stable universe comes from Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE), one of Machiavelli’s favorite poets.⁶⁰ In book 15 of the *Metamorphoses*, a mythical Pythagoras says that “nothing retains its own form,” but also that “nothing perishes in the whole universe; it does but vary [*variat*] and renew its form . . . still do all things in their sum total remain unchanged.”⁶¹ Within this unchanging totality “we see times changing, and some nations putting on new strength and others falling into weakness.” Pythagoras speaks an elegiac lament for cities, once great, now nothing but names — “quid sunt, nisi nomina?” — and prophesies the rise of Rome to be, one day, the “capital of the boundless world.”⁶² The Ovidian-Pythagorean myth of changing forms offers no reason for why some cities rise and others decline, no overall pattern of change: it is simply in the nature of things to change their form. Its role in the *proemio* of book 2 of the *Discourses* is literally that of a poetic interlude, an aside inspired by poetry. Even the connection to Rome is mediated by poetry. In Ovid’s telling, Numa hears Pythagoras’s speech, goes to Rome, becomes its king, and, “blessed with the guidance of the Camenae” (goddesses identified with the Muses and endowed with the spirit of prophecy, among them Numa’s consort Egeria), teaches the warlike Romans “holy rites” and leads them “to the arts of peace [*pacis traduxit ad artes*].”⁶³ In *Discourses* 1.11, Machiavelli echoes this passage, describing Numa as “desirous of bringing [the Roman people] to civil obedience with the arts of peace [*le arti della pace*],”⁶⁴ and alludes to the myth’s poetic and fictional origins in recounting that Numa “pretended” (“simulò”) that he received instructions and inspiration from a “nymph,”⁶⁵ who, although unnamed, Machiavelli knew from Livy and Ovid to be the Camena Egeria.⁶⁶

Machiavelli elides the theory of changing forms and rising and falling nations into another kind of myth-history, the old idea of *translatio imperii*, or transfer of empire, according to which an orderly transmission of universal authority proceeded from one empire to another — a construction of history that came to him from many sources,⁶⁷ among them Augustine (354–430), who, in the *City of God*, delineates a providentially ordained *translatio* from

⁵⁹Ibid., 290.

⁶⁰As I tried to show: Najemy, 1993a, 231–32, 267, 274–75, 293–95, 322–28, 342–45.

⁶¹Latin text and English translation from Ovid, 2:382–83 (book 15, vv. 252–58).

⁶²Ibid., 2:394–95 (book 15, vv. 420–35).

⁶³Ibid., 2:398–99 (book 15, vv. 479–84; translation slightly modified).

⁶⁴Machiavelli, 1984, 91.

⁶⁵Ibid., 93.

⁶⁶Livy, 1:68–69, 74–75 (book 1, chaps. 19 and 21).

⁶⁷For an in-depth inquiry, see Cervelli.

Assyria to Rome,⁶⁸ the *De fortuna Romanorum* of Plutarch (ca. 50–120),⁶⁹ and, as recently shown, possibly the *Esposizioni sopra la Comedia* of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–75).⁷⁰ The movement of good and bad from place to place can be seen, Machiavelli says, from what is known of “those ancient kingdoms that varied [*variavano*] one from another through the variation [*variazione*] of their customs, although the world always remained as it was” in its totality. He makes the transition to the *translatio* of empire by asserting that “there was only this difference, that whereas the world first located its *virtù* in Assyria, it then placed it in Media, later in Persia, until finally it came to Italy and Rome.” Up to this point *translatio imperii* is potentially compatible with the Ovidian-Pythagorean myth of changing forms. But Machiavelli adds a post-Roman twist: when Rome fell, its *virtù* was fragmented among many peoples and countries — the Franks, Turks, the Mameluke kingdom of Egypt, the peoples of Germany, and the “Saracens” who “did so many great things and occupied so much of the world.” Each of these has (or had) some fragment of the dispersed *virtù*, and Machiavelli opines that one born in any of these countries who praises the past over the present is deceived. But anyone born in either Greece or Italy, neither of which shares in the fragmented *virtù* of the modern world, has good reason to denigrate the present and praise the past.⁷¹

The post-Roman pulverization of *virtù* destroys both its orderly migration and the succession of empires and leaves history after Rome directionless and motionless, halting the process of continual variation of good and bad from place to place, freezing fragments of good in certain countries, and permanently depriving Italy of the *virtù* that was once concentrated in Rome. In the *Art of War* Machiavelli further undermines the myth by having Fabrizio Colonna maintain that Europe has had more men of military valor than Africa or Asia because of its greater number of states, particularly republics (which contradicts the theory of virtuous empires), and that, when Rome concentrated the world’s *virtù* in itself, it extinguished all other republics and principalities, leaving no path to *virtù* except Rome (hence no migration of *virtù*); when Rome became corrupt and lost its *virtù*, “almost all the world came to be corrupted,”⁷² which also implies that the world was no longer the same in its totality.⁷³

⁶⁸ Augustine, 201–02 (5.13), 762–63 (18.2), 787 (18.21), 794–95 (18.27).

⁶⁹ Plutarch, 331.

⁷⁰ Bausi, 93–94.

⁷¹ Machiavelli, 1984, 290–91.

⁷² Machiavelli, 2001, 119–23, quoted passage at 122.

⁷³ On Machiavelli’s notions of East and West, see Najemy, 2009.

Machiavelli often gathers the irrationality and unpredictability of history under the rubric of fortune. In *Prince* 25 he personifies fortune and endows it with agency, even malice, to give a name to the otherwise unfathomable. But his avowed purpose is to bring history's apparent randomness under control by limiting fortune's power. He concedes the appeal of an omnipotent Fortune in the face of bewildering change: "in our times the great variations in things that have been seen and are still seen every day, beyond all human intelligibility" have drawn many into the "opinion that the affairs of the world are so completely governed by Fortune and by God that men with their prudence cannot rectify them, indeed have no remedy against them and may therefore conclude that they need not sweat much over them and instead let themselves be governed by chance."⁷⁴ Machiavelli wants to refute this "opinion" in order that "our free will not be extinguished."⁷⁵ His acknowledgment in the same passage that he himself has "sometimes" been "inclined" to accept fortune's dominance may allude to the characterization of fortune as an omnipotent goddess in his poem *On Fortune* and to his puzzlement, in the 1506 letter cited earlier, over why the risky and seemingly irrational actions of Pope Julius II (r. 1503–13) were all inexplicably successful. Unable to resolve such enigmas in any logic of means and ends, Machiavelli speculated that nature gives to each person "diverso ingegno e diversa fantasia" (a "different skill-set and imagination"), and that, because "people do not change their *fantasia* or way of doing things,"⁷⁶ success depends on whether one's *ingegno* and *fantasia* happen to match the circumstances of the moment — pure chance, in other words. In *On Fortune* he wrote that when Fortune changes the direction of the wheel you are on, she abandons you, because "you cannot change your persona or the disposition with which Heaven endows you."⁷⁷ In *Prince* 25, despite the stated intention to safeguard "our free will," Machiavelli surprisingly arrives at the same conclusion, again citing Pope Julius, who was simply fortunate that his "impetuous" way of proceeding was what the times required. The

⁷⁴Machiavelli, 1995, 161–62: "molti hanno avuto e hanno opinione che le cose del mondo sieno in modo governate, da la fortuna e da Dio, che li uomini con la prudenza loro non possino correggerle, anzi non vi abbino remedio alcuno; e per questo potrebbono iudicare che non fussi da insudare molto nelle cose, ma lasciarsi governare alla sorte. Questa opinione è suta piú creduta ne' nostri tempi per le variazione grande delle cose che si sono viste e veggonsi ogni dí, fuora di ogni umana coniettura."

⁷⁵Ibid., 162: "perché il nostro libero arbitrio non sia spento."

⁷⁶Machiavelli, 1997–2005, 2:137: "li uomini non mutono le loro fantasie né e loro modi di procedere."

⁷⁷Machiavelli, 1981, 119: "non potendo tu cangiar persona / né lasciar l'ordin di che 'l Ciel ti dota."

conundrum is that fixed predispositions preclude free will and reinforce the dominance of fortune. The assertion, at the chapter's end, of greater likelihood of success for those who confront fortune with impetuosity contradicts the surrounding argument.⁷⁸ It remains an open question whether Machiavelli wrote himself into a contradiction, or whether he intended to show that fortune, as a way of conceptualizing that which cannot be conceptualized, was a dead end, thus preparing the reader for the turn in chapter 26 to redemption governed by historical necessity.

Machiavelli sometimes links fortune and "heaven" in ways that have suggested that he accepted astrological determinism.⁷⁹ In *Discourses* 2.29 he characterizes the sack of Rome by the Gauls as "very noteworthy in demonstrating the power of heaven over human affairs." He reports Livy's view that "because heaven for some purpose wanted the Romans to recognize its power"⁸⁰ it incited the Gauls to attack. He quotes Livy's judgment that "fortune blinds the minds of men when it does not want its looming force to be checked," commenting that "this could not be truer," and drawing the conclusion that "in great adversity and prosperity men therefore deserve less praise and less blame, because most of the time they are led to ruin or greatness by an irresistible disposition given to them by the heavens, which extend or withhold the opportunity to act *virtuosamente*."⁸¹ These are ideas that, as will presently be shown, Machiavelli elsewhere explicitly rejects. But even this chapter concludes on a different note, confirmed, he says, by "all the works of history," namely, that "men can follow [*secondare*] fortune, not oppose it; they can weave the warp of her designs [*tessere gli orditi suoi*] but not break it; indeed, they must never resign themselves, because, not knowing fortune's purpose and because fortune goes down winding and little known paths, they must always have hope, and with this hope never give in, no matter in what misfortune or travail they find themselves."⁸²

In *Discourses* 1.56 Machiavelli addresses the popular belief that celestial signs and prophecies precede great events: "What the cause of this may be, I do not know, but it can be seen from ancient and modern examples that never did any great event happen in a city or country that had not been foretold by soothsayers or revelations or miracles or celestial signs." "Everyone knows," he says, that Savonarola (1452–98) predicted the

⁷⁸Machiavelli, 1995, 164–67. Cf. Vatter, 167–93.

⁷⁹Parel, 1992 and 1996.

⁸⁰Machiavelli, 1984, 372.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 373.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 374.

French invasion of 1494, which was also foretold by celestial visions of battle; “everyone knows” that lightning bolts struck the Cathedral before the death of Lorenzo de’ Medici and hit the government palace before the expulsion in 1512 of Piero Soderini (1451–1522).⁸³ But Machiavelli quickly takes his distance from such ideas: “I believe the reason for this must be discussed and interpreted by one who has knowledge of natural and supernatural things, which we do not have.”⁸⁴ He nonetheless reports as possible the speculation of “certain philosophers . . . that the air is filled with intelligences” that have “natural powers [*naturali virtù*] to foresee the future” and that, “having compassion for men, warn them by such signs so that they can prepare their defenses.”⁸⁵ There must be some bitter humor here, given that the alleged warnings of the French invasion were not heeded and the defenses left unprepared. In any case, Machiavelli’s statement that he lacks the necessary knowledge to decide such matters and his attribution of the theory of “intelligences” to “certain philosophers” point to his skepticism.

Machiavelli’s rejection of astrological determinism becomes explicit in the *Asino* (ca. 1517), the poem in which the protagonist — Machiavelli calls him “I” — falls into the realm of Circe, “an enemy to men,”⁸⁶ and is befriended and protected by a beautiful young woman, one of Circe’s lieutenants, who reassures him that this happened through no fault of his own. It was “chance,” she explains, “that was opposed to his good efforts.”⁸⁷ Everything is determined, she tells him, from above: “You see the stars and the heavens, you see the moon, you see the other planets ceaselessly wandering high and low, without repose. . . . From them come peace and war, from them the hatreds of those enclosed within the same walls and moat. This was the cause of your first suffering; this was entirely the cause of your toils without respite. Not yet has heaven changed its opinion, nor will it change, while the fates maintain their harsh resolve toward you.”⁸⁸ Her

⁸³Ibid., 177–78.

⁸⁴Ibid., 178: “La cagione di questo credo sia da essere discorsa e interpretata da uomo che abbi notizia delle cose naturali e soprannaturali, il che non abbiamo noi.”

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Machiavelli, 1997–2005, 3:57 (chap. 2, v. 110).

⁸⁷Ibid., 3:60 (chap. 3, vv. 80–81): “perché sorte / al tuo ben operar contraria venne.”

⁸⁸Ibid. (chap. 3, vv. 88–102): “Vedi le stelle e ’l ciel, vedi la luna, / vedi gli altri pianeti andare errando / or alto or basso senza requie alcuna / . . . / Di quivi nasce la pace e la guerra, / di qui dipendon gli odi tra coloro / ch’ un muro insieme e una fossa serra. / Da questo venne il tuo primo martoro; / da questo nacque al tutto la cagione / de le fatiche tue senza ristoro. / Non ha cangiato il cielo opinione / ancor, né cangerà mentre che i fati / tengon ver te la lor dura intenzione.”

explanation of the protagonist's fate is astrological determinism in its starkest, but also most consolatory, form: the dominance of the heavens releases him and all humankind from guilt and responsibility, both moral and practical. Her speech dramatizes the seductive lure of philosophies of history that place adversities, failures, and catastrophes beyond human agency and control. She assures the errant pilgrim of an ultimately happy outcome: "When the heavens show themselves compassionate, happier times than ever shall return; so joyous and blissful will they be, that you will find pleasure in the memory of both past and future affliction. You will perhaps even take pride in recounting to peoples near and far the long history of your toils."⁸⁹ As a reward for accepting her explanation and relinquishing responsibility for his fate, the comely bearer of this seductive message gives him comfort, dinner, wine, and a night of love.

The next morning, however, after Circe's assistant leaves to tend her flock, Machiavelli's protagonist returns, we might say, to himself and to the pain of history: "As soon as I was away from her, the arrow of reflection filled once more the wound I had healed through her."⁹⁰ Reflection leads instantly to meditations on history: "my mind raced to things past that time does not yet hide from us; it wandered here and there pondering again how fortune sometimes favored and sometimes injured worthy and renowned ancient peoples; and so astonishing did all this seem to me that I wished to reflect within myself on the cause of changes in earthly things."⁹¹ Machiavelli's protagonist thus insists that the reasons for change in earthly things are not in the stars; they must be searched for in history, specifically in the never-satisfied thirst for power of the already powerful and in the contingent choices that produce and preserve good laws, institutions, and customs — or fail to do so.

Attempts to find Machiavelli's philosophy of history in any of these metahistorical narratives are frustrated by their collective incompatibility. Machiavelli does not elaborate, apply, or test them in depth; he does not reconcile them or give priority to one over others. He abandons or even contradicts most of them. Several are associated with other voices — unnamed "prudent" or "wise" men, "certain philosophers," Livy, Ovid, or

⁸⁹Ibid. (chap. 3, vv. 107–14).

⁹⁰Ibid., 3:65 (chap. 5, vv. 22–24): "Come prima da lei mi discostai, / mi riempì di pensar la saetta / quella ferita che per lei sanai."

⁹¹Ibid. (chap. 5, vv. 29–36): "la mente a le passate cose corse, / che 'l tempo per ancor non ci nasconde: / e qua e là ripensando discorse / come l'antiche genti, alte e famose, / fortuna spesso or carezzò e or morse: e tanto a me parver maravigliose / che meco la cagion discorrer volli / del variar de le mondane cose."

the presumed general consensus of “everyone knows.” So why does he introduce them? An answer has been suggested above. He knew that, for many of his contemporaries, as for the protagonist of the *Asino*, such theories took the sting and bewilderment out of the malice of history. He saw these ideas as fashionable fictions that appealed to those seeking escape from the intellectual and political responsibility of understanding — and correcting — events they felt powerless to control, a history of which they felt themselves only victims. Perhaps not the least of Machiavelli’s purposes was to liberate contemporaries from the false consolation of inevitability, which denies history itself.

4. DEMYSTIFYING HISTORY AND POWER

Still fearing he might fall into the same self-deception of which he accuses those who wrongly or excessively praise the past, Machiavelli nonetheless accepts, in the *proemio* to book 2 of the *Discourses*, that Italy’s present is inferior to its ancient past. Much of the polemical force of the *Discourses* lies in the bitter insistence that “the *virtù* that reigned then” and “the vice that prevails now” are “clearer than the sun,” for “many things make those times marvelous, whereas these times have nothing that redeems [*ricomperi*] their extreme misery, infamy, and shame, lacking observance of religion, law, and military organization and stained by every sort of degradation. And these vices are all the more detestable insofar as they are found in greater measure in those who sit in judgment, who exercise command and expect to be worshipped.”⁹² This angry outburst, directed against Italy’s secular and ecclesiastical rulers, emerges not from the contemplation of impersonal cycles of rise and decline, transhistorical migrations of *virtù*, or the power of fortune or heaven, but from historical inquiry into the failures of those responsible for the catastrophe.

Machiavelli approaches this inquiry through the conflicts, ambitions, and interests — varying in place and time and not reducible to formulas, cycles, or external causes — of the historical actors who produced this result. In the same introductory chapter of the fifth book of the *Histories* that outlines the cycle of arms and letters and then recounts the episode of Cato and the Athenian philosophers that contradicts it, Machiavelli disrupts the cycle in yet another way, noting that, whereas in other countries lengthy peace may have extinguished *virtù* (as the cycle would have it), in Italy cowardly military practices did so, “as can clearly be seen by our account of

⁹²Machiavelli, 1984, 291: “E tanto sono questi vizi più detestabili, quanto ei sono più in coloro che seggono pro tribunali, comandano a ciascuno e vogliono essere adorati.”

the years from 1434 to 1494” (even as the *Histories* actually stop with Lorenzo’s death in 1492). Although this span of years might suggest that Machiavelli had the Medici regime in mind, the target is more generally Italy’s princes and ruling classes and their dependence on mercenaries in the decades up to the French invasion of 1494, a period “at whose end, as will be seen, the way was once again opened to the barbarians and Italy put itself in bondage to them.”⁹³ Machiavelli is about to expand the narrative’s horizons from the Florentine focus of books 2 through 4 to the wider Italian theater in books 5 and 6, and his indictment of Italy’s princes and military captains is unequivocal: readers will see with “great astonishment how many noble peoples were subjugated by such weak and poorly administered arms.”⁹⁴ The implication is that Italy’s rulers not only failed to protect the peninsula from foreign invaders, but also deprived their peoples of liberty and arms.⁹⁵ Machiavelli considers the history of their misdeeds just as important as tales of ancient valor: “If, in the description of the events of this broken world [*questo guasto mondo*], there are no stories of soldiers’ bravery or military commanders’ skill or citizens’ love of country,” readers will instead “see with what deceptions, cunning, and artifice princes, soldiers, and leaders of republics conducted themselves in order to maintain reputations they did not deserve. This is, perhaps, no less useful than learning of ancient deeds; for if ancient deeds inspire noble-minded spirits to emulation,” an account of the wicked deeds of “this broken world” will inspire the same spirits “to shun and extinguish them.”⁹⁶

Machiavelli thus calls for a critical history of power that can illuminate its origins, effects, and failings.⁹⁷ His analytical point of departure is that the forms and dynamics of power emerge from the ambitions, interests, and fears of social classes and therefore from social conflicts whose configuration, intensity, modalities, and outcomes depend on variable conditions. This is why Machiavelli says different things about different phases of Roman and Florentine conflicts. He wants to teach his readers to recognize and evaluate changing circumstances and conditions, to assess the variety and mutability of the interests and ambitions that shape conflicts, and to understand the

⁹³Machiavelli, 2010, 2:451: “come chiaramente si potrà cognoscere per quello che da noi sarà da il 1434 al ’94 descritto, dove si vedrà come alla fine si aperse di nuovo la via a’ barbari e riposesi la Italia nella servitù di quelli.”

⁹⁴Ibid., 2:451–52: “con non minore ammirazione . . . vedendo come tanti nobilissimi popoli da sí deboli e male amministrate armi fussino tenuti in freno.”

⁹⁵On Machiavelli’s ideas about the people in arms, see Barthas.

⁹⁶Machiavelli, 2010, 2:452.

⁹⁷On the concept of critical history, see Benner, 2009, 30–37, 101–02, 111–16, 124–32.

reasons for the diversity of outcomes. Patterns and tendencies can be discerned amid the variations because interests and ambitions tend to be shared within social groups, and the essence of his method is to find both the variations and the recurring tendencies through historical comparisons.

Both the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories* begin with comparisons and conflicts. Machiavelli's most revolutionary idea is his defense of social conflicts as beneficial under certain circumstances.⁹⁸ In *Discourses* 1.4, as already noted, he faults those who criticize Rome's "tumults": "I say that those who condemn the tumults between the Nobles and the Plebs seem to me to find fault with the chief cause that kept Rome free . . . and fail to consider that in every republic there are two opposing classes, the people and the nobles, and that all the laws made in favor of liberty emerge from their discord."⁹⁹ In the critique of the humanist historians Bruni and Poggio in the *proemio* of the *Histories*, allegedly for neglecting internal conflicts, Machiavelli says that nothing is more useful to governors of republics than knowing the causes of such divisions, and no inquiry is more important for historians, especially in the case of Florence, which, he contends, has had more complex divisions than other republics. Machiavelli's assessment of Florentine conflicts, unlike his view of early Roman "disunion," is apparently negative, even damning, in emphasizing the many deaths, banishments, and destroyed families.¹⁰⁰ Yet he affirms that "nothing, according to my judgment, so demonstrates the power of our city" as do "these divisions, which would have had the strength [*forza*] to destroy any great and powerful city. Nonetheless, it seemed that ours always became greater from these divisions [*ne diventasse maggiore*]"¹⁰¹ — the "ne" referring to the conflicts themselves. This often neglected or underestimated "judgment" parallels the argument about Rome in *Discourses* 1.4 and casts doubt on the view that Machiavelli saw nothing but dysfunction in Florentine "divisions."

The introductory chapter of book 3 of the *Histories* contrasts Roman and Florentine conflicts, seemingly entirely in favor of Rome and severely critical of Florence, except on this crucial point: while "Rome's conflicts led

⁹⁸Pedullà provides the most searching analysis. See also Bock; Jurđjević; and McCormick.

⁹⁹Machiavelli, 1984, 71: "Io dico che coloro che dannono i tumulti intra i Nobili e la Plebe mi pare che biasimino quelle cose che furono prima causa del tenere libera Roma . . . e che e' non considerino come e' sono in ogni republica due umori diversi, quello del popolo e quello de' grandi; e come tutte le leggi che si fanno in favore della libertà, nascono dalla disunione loro."

¹⁰⁰See Cabrini, 1998.

¹⁰¹Machiavelli, 2010, 1:91–92.

that city from equality among the citizens to a very great inequality, those in Florence brought it from inequality to a marvelous equality [*una mirabile uguagliatà*].”¹⁰² “Equality” here means legal equality and the absence in the elite class of titles, formal jurisdiction, or privileges. A few sentences later Machiavelli reveals the significance of this “mirabile” equality: “whereas Rome, its *virtù* having been converted to arrogance [*superbia*], was reduced to the condition of being unable to maintain itself without a prince, Florence has come to a situation in which a wise lawgiver could institute any form of government.”¹⁰³ In his memorandum of 1520–21 on reforming Florentine government, the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs after the Death of the Younger Lorenzo*, Machiavelli adduces the “equality” of citizens as the condition that makes a republic the only viable form of government for Florence.¹⁰⁴ Rome’s conflicts first resulted in liberty and only later generated tyranny and the destruction of the republic in the civil wars, whereas Florence’s divisions, for all their negative aspects, instituted the equality that, in contrast to late republican Rome, still made a republic feasible. The difference is that in Florence the “nobles” (Machiavelli here means the old magnate families who unsuccessfully opposed the republican constitution) were thoroughly defeated, deprived of office-holding rights, and forced to adopt the way of life of the “people.”¹⁰⁵

Machiavelli saw the early conflicts of both cities, which pitted nobles, or *grandi*, against the *plebe* in Rome and the *popolo* in Florence as indispensable to bringing the nobles under the rule of public law and institutions that he called *ordini*. The Roman plebs was successful for several centuries, chiefly through the institution of the tribunes, the popular magistracy that Machiavelli says in *Discourses* 1.2 made Rome “*una republica perfetta*”;¹⁰⁶ in Florence, the *popolo* created the republic beginning with the first popular government of 1250 (about which Machiavelli comments, in *Histories* 2.6, that “with these military and civic *ordini* the Florentines laid the foundations of their liberty”¹⁰⁷) and continuing through the popular government of the 1290s (whose signature legislation, the *Ordinamenti di giustizia*, or Ordinances of Justice, he mentions in *Histories* 2.13¹⁰⁸) until what he considered the final defeat of the nobility in 1343. In both republics the

¹⁰²Ibid., 1:293. “Mirabile” also carries meanings that range from “admirable” to “astounding.”

¹⁰³Ibid., 1:294. On this chapter, see Sasso, 1993, 190–203.

¹⁰⁴Machiavelli, 2001, 624–41, quoted passage at 631–32.

¹⁰⁵Machiavelli, 2010, 1:294.

¹⁰⁶Machiavelli, 1984, 69.

¹⁰⁷Machiavelli, 2010, 1:202.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 1:217.

conflicts restrained the wealthy elites from becoming a law unto themselves through instruments of private power — political patronage and clientage, factions, and private armies — with which elites typically sought not only to defeat rival factions but also to weaken public authority, law, magistracies, and courts. In Machiavelli's political language, such private power — the essence of what he means by "corruption" — is outside the *ordini* and therefore extra-ordinary in the sense of extralegal or extraconstitutional. He was, to be sure, often critical of the people as well for their sometimes excessive antagonism against the nobles.¹⁰⁹ But he considered the nobles the more dangerous class, because, as he says in *Discourses* 1.5, those who have much and fear losing it never believe they possess securely what they have unless they acquire still more. In the *Asino*, the first of the protagonist's reflections after the departure of Circe's assistant is that "more than anything, what causes states to fall from the heights is that the powerful are never satisfied with their power. . . . He who has prospered is forever consumed by yet more ambition and by fear. It is this craving that destroys states."¹¹⁰ This is not simply a moralizing denunciation of ambition. It identifies a more specific danger in the limitless thirst on the part of the wealthy and powerful for more wealth and power, desires relentlessly pursued at the expense of law and public authority. "Because they possess much," *Discourses* 1.5 continues, the wealthy "can, with greater power and impact, *fare alterazione*,"¹¹¹ by which Machiavelli means not merely causing disruptions but subverting the *ordini* and transforming what is left of the state into the privatized instrument of their own ambitions.

In *Discourses* 1.37 Machiavelli analyzes the effects of the revival of the agrarian law by the Gracchi to explain how the excessive ambition of the nobles turned Rome's once beneficial conflicts into the vehicles of the destruction of liberty. Threatened with loss of property and wealth, the nobles reacted furiously: such was the "hatred between the senate and the plebs that they came to arms and bloodshed." With the "publici magistrati" unable to contain the hatreds, the parties "had recourse to private remedies [*si ricorse ai rimedi privati*], and each side created a leader for itself."¹¹² Machiavelli does not exempt the plebs from his indictment of

¹⁰⁹Cf. Ascoli.

¹¹⁰Machiavelli, 1997–2005, 3:65–66 (chap. 5, vv. 37–46): "Quel che ruina da' più alti colli / più ch'altro i regni, è questo: che i potenti / di lor potenza non son mai satolli. . . . / Onde avien che l'un sorge e l'altro muore; / e quel ch'è surto sempre mai si strugge / per nuova ambizione o per timore. / Questo appetito gli stati distrugge."

¹¹¹Machiavelli, 1984, 74: "possedendo molto, possono con maggiore potenza e maggiore moto fare alterazione."

¹¹²*Ibid.*, 141.

the recourse to “private remedies”: in fact, he says they were the first of the parties to do so. But it was the outraged reaction and unbounded greed of the nobles that set in motion the chain of events that led to the “private remedies” of the armies of Marius and Sulla, subsequently of Caesar and Pompey, and the civil wars that destroyed the republic and made Caesar, in Machiavelli’s words, “the first tyrant in Rome.”¹¹³

Machiavelli pauses here to reflect that some readers might think that, in attributing the destruction of Roman liberty and the onset of tyranny to the conflicts over the revival of the agrarian law, he had contradicted the argument of *Discourses* 1.4, according to which conflicts between nobles and plebeians had enhanced liberty. Yet “I will not retreat from my opinion,” he insists, “because the ambition of the *grandi* is so great that, if it is not beaten back in various ways, it soon brings a city to ruin. For, if the disputes over the agrarian law took three hundred years” to deprive Rome of its liberty, the city “would perhaps have been led into servitude much sooner if the plebs had not constantly checked the ambition of the nobles with this law and other demands.”¹¹⁴ Conflicts in the early republic were resolved within the framework of laws and institutions; but when they became so acute that both sides transgressed the *ordini* and mobilized private armies, the corruption of the republic was beyond repair. Machiavelli attributes this fatal intensification of the conflicts to the nobles’ adamant refusal to accept limitations on their wealth. Controlled disputes between nobles and plebs delayed, but could not ultimately prevent, the republic’s corruption by factions and private power.

In modern Italy too, Machiavelli saw elite classes as the permanent danger. In *Discourses* 1.55 he identifies two categories of “pernicious” nobles — *gentiluomini*, who live from their rents, and *signori di castella*, territorial lords (literally, of walled towns), who exercise jurisdiction over “subjects who obey them” — both groups so hostile to “civiltà” (civic culture and law) that they prevent the formation of republics in regions they dominate. This is how Machiavelli explains the political geography of Italy: the kingdom of Naples, the area around Rome, Lombardy, and Romagna have many such “gentlemen” and “lords” but no republics, whereas Tuscany

¹¹³Ibid., 142.

¹¹⁴Ibid.: “dico come per questo io non mi rimuovo da tale opinione: perché gli è tanta la ambizione de’ grandi, che se per varie vie e in vari modi ella non è, in una città, sbattuta, tosto riduce quella città alla rovina sua. In modo che, se la contenzione della legge agraria però trecento anni a fare Roma serva, si sarebbe condotta per avventura molto più tosto in servitù, quando la plebe, e con questa legge e con altri suoi appetiti, non avesse sempre frenato l’ambizione de’ nobili.”

has few such nobles and several republics.¹¹⁵ Even in established republics, however, the wealth and immoderate ambition of the *grandi* (whom Machiavelli frequently calls “nobles” even when they lack noble titles, as in Florence) constantly threaten republican *ordini*. In *Discourses* 1.33 he discusses the danger of a “young noble” with ambition and “virtù istraordinaria”¹¹⁶ (*virtù* not consonant with the *ordini*) who attracts a following — a faction — among the citizens and quickly acquires great power. The example Machiavelli gives is Cosimo de’ Medici (1389–1464), who “gained such a reputation with the favor he won with his prudence and the ignorance of his fellow citizens that he began to cause fear” within the ruling group. A foolish attempt to banish him after he had acquired this influence backfired, and his “parte” (“faction”) forced the government to rescind the exile and made him “principe della repubblica.” Machiavelli uses *principe* here of course in the sense of leading citizen, but with an unmistakable allusion to long-term Medici ambitions, underscored by the audacious remark that “the same thing happened in Rome with Caesar,” whose elimination by his enemies only “accelerated the ruin of their republic.”¹¹⁷

In *Florentine Histories* 4.26–27, Machiavelli recounts Cosimo’s strategic use of his vast wealth to “make many citizens his *partigiani* [members of his *parte*]” in preparation for a struggle with enemies that might come to “lo straordinario” — to methods and means that violate the *ordini*, in other words, to illegalities.¹¹⁸ In *Histories* 7.1 he explains that divisions in republics are harmful if they involve “factions and *partigiani*” and beneficial when they do not, and he distinguishes between the “vie publiche” (“public ways”) and “modi privati” (“private ways”) of acquiring reputation, exemplified, respectively, in 7.2 by Neri Capponi, who commanded the city’s armies and served on diplomatic missions, and by Cosimo, who had “many friends and *partigiani*.”¹¹⁹ In the draft version of 4.27, Machiavelli described Cosimo’s methods as ones that “propel men flying toward tyranny [*volando a la tirannide*],”¹²⁰ although in the final, revised version he prudently replaced “tyranny” with “principate” [*volando al principato*].¹²¹ Machiavelli even

¹¹⁵Ibid., 175–76.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 132. On *ordini* and *ordinario/straordinario* in Machiavelli, see Benner, 2009, 367–85; Najemy, 1982; and Whitfield.

¹¹⁷Machiavelli, 1984, 133: “Questo medesimo intervenne a Roma con Cesare,” when fearful enemies attempted “rimedi” that “accelerarono la rovina della loro repubblica.”

¹¹⁸Machiavelli, 2010, 1:426–32, quotation on 426–27.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 2:621–25, passage on 624.

¹²⁰Ibid., 2:846.

¹²¹Ibid., 1:430.

suggests a damning comparison between the banishments inflicted by Cosimo and the cruelties of the Roman warlords in the civil wars: “If these proscriptions had been accompanied by bloodshed, they would have approximated those of Octavian and Sulla.” Immediately qualifying the apparently counter-factual hypothetical, he adds that they were in fact tinged by the shedding of blood.¹²²

Rome’s ancient history was finished, but there are no conclusions or foreordained outcomes in the *Florentine Histories*, which can be read either as a warning that Florence’s republic could come to the same unhappy end as Rome’s or as implicitly pointing to alternative outcomes, precisely because its “great equality” still existed, as he wrote in the 1520–21 memorandum.¹²³ Florentines needed to know the history of their republic and its conflicts in order to assess the possibilities. They needed to know how wealthy families created factions that subverted the *ordini* and produced *principi* that too closely resembled Sulla, Caesar, and Octavian. They needed to know the history of Rome — the font of so many of Machiavelli’s comparative examples — to understand the danger of, and avoid recourse to, “private remedies” that beget tyrants. About such tyrants and how they come to power, Machiavelli wanted historians and citizens alike to have no illusions, because they could still do something about them.

It is a massive irony that Machiavelli, who excoriated historians for flattering the powerful and thoroughly demystified and denounced abusers of power, both princes and “fateful families [*famiglie fatali*]” in republics,¹²⁴ should so commonly be associated with the aim of teaching princes to be unscrupulously powerful. Perhaps he had some inkling that he would be misunderstood. In the dedicatory letter of the *Florentine Histories* he tells Pope Clement (r. 1523–34) — who, as Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici, had approved the commission for the *Histories* — that he did his best to obey the pope’s order to avoid adulation and flattery of the Medici. Implying that he may have transgressed this command, he asks forgiveness from Clement and all readers who disapprove of flattering descriptions as false — an apology that strongly hints that any such characterizations of the Medici in the *Histories* are indeed false. But he then reverses himself and declares: “How far I am from flattery can be seen in all parts of my history. . . . No one, therefore, who correctly examines my writings can reprimand me as a flatterer [*adulatore*]. . . . I have tried, Holy Father, without staining the truth [*non maculando la verità*], to satisfy everyone, and perhaps I will have

¹²²Ibid., 2:457.

¹²³Machiavelli, 2001, 632.

¹²⁴Machiavelli, 2010, 1:307 (*Florentine Histories* 3.5).

satisfied no one. And if this proves to be so, I will not be surprised, because I think it impossible, without offending many people, to describe the events of their times.”¹²⁵

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¹²⁵Ibid., 1:87–88.

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