

## Introduction

“For thou art weak to sing such tumult dire.”

John Keats, *Hyperion*

The publication of Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*, composed in the 1510s but only appearing in print in 1531, four years after the author’s death, is undoubtedly one of the most significant moments in the history of political thought. One reason Machiavelli’s treatise is so important is its unprecedented attack on 2,000 years of Greek, Roman, and humanistic reflections on the value of civic concord. This attack – its premises, its significance, its influence in the western political tradition, its relevance for contemporary theory – is the subject of the following pages.

Machiavelli does not hesitate in confronting the problem. The thesis destined to create scandal – namely, that “the disunion between the plebs and the Roman senate made that republic free and powerful” (*Disc.* 1.4) – appears almost immediately in the *Discourses*. As we will see, for Machiavelli tumults are a good thing only when they meet certain conditions: they are not violent; they ultimately improve the institutions; they provide a safe “venting” of the “humors” for those hostile toward their rulers and, thanks to the threat they pose, force the rulers to behave more virtuously; they do not take place between organized “sects”; and they are commensurate with their “aim” (someone pushing for a radical redistribution of wealth, for example, would have to resort to much more drastic means, in Machiavelli’s view). These are no minor qualifications. And yet, the decision to look internal conflicts in the eye – instead of shrinking away in horror – signaled an absolute break with the past. Even Machiavelli’s regular interlocutors, figures like Donato Giannotti and Francesco Guicciardini, were utterly astonished.

Their response is understandable. In the *Discourses* Machiavelli is resolute, identifying the problem of tumults – how to avoid them, how to control them,

how to exploit them in the interest of the commonwealth – with that of political order itself (and in regard to this posture it might be helpful to keep in mind one of his famous maxims, confided in a letter to Guicciardini dated May 17, 1521: “I believe that the following would be the true way to go to Heaven: learn the way to Hell in order to steer clear of it”). For Machiavelli, since conflict is always present one must learn to live with it and, hopefully, discipline it – which is exactly what the ancient Romans managed to do. In fact, somewhat surprisingly, he argued, the Romans derived great benefits from the turbulence between the various “humors” that compose every political body. This reinterpretation of the struggles between patricians and plebs resulted, among other things, in a new way of assessing the sickness and health of States – and uprooted the *Discourses* from that humanistic tradition in which Machiavelli was raised.

For this highly original argument, Machiavelli has rightly been called “the crowd’s first real champion at the level of theory.”<sup>1</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that the long history of conflictualism in western political thought begins with the *Discourses*, or that they mark a “new conception of society.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, not everyone embraced this shift. After the initial reactions were calm and reasoned, a series of frontal attacks appeared, beginning in the mid 1570s, when the French Huguenot Innocent Gentillet (1535–88) used the thesis of *Disc.* 1.4 to craft one of the most enduring commonplaces of the anti-Machiavellian tradition. His Machiavelli is the instigator of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre (1572), a friend to tyrants and, precisely for this reason, an advocate of the civil wars that clear the way for despotic regimes.

It would have been nice if Machiavelli and those in his country who considered tumults to be useful and profitable had kept them for themselves, with all the profit and utility they found in them, without sharing them with their neighbors. And as for France, it would have willingly spared itself the Machiavellians coming from Italy, from beyond the mountains, to sow here the tumults and partisan divisions that we see today, the cause of so much bloodshed, so many homes destroyed and so many other miseries and calamities, which everyone feels, sees, and deploras.<sup>3</sup>

Gentillet’s invectives help us today to fully appreciate the originality of the ideas in *Disc.* 1.4. His *Contre-Machiavel* (1576) is laced with a polemic fury that

<sup>1</sup> J.S. McClelland, *The Crowd and the Mob* (Routledge, 2010), p. 62. Early on, John Adams described Machiavelli as the founder of a “plebeian philosophy” (‘Defence of the Constitutions and Government of the United States of America,’ in John Adams, *Works*, ed. C.F. Adams, 10 vols., Little & Brown, 1850–6, VI, p. 396), while Benjamin Constant cast him as the intellectual father of those who “have written in favor of equality, and acted or spoken on behalf of the descendants of the oppressed and against the descendants of the oppressors” (*Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments*, ed. D. O’Keeffe, Liberty Fund, 2003, p. 188). See J. Barthes, ‘Machiavelli in Political Thought from the Age of Revolutions to the Present,’ in *Companion*, pp. 256–73: 265–66.

<sup>2</sup> N. Wood, ‘The Value of Asocial Sociability: Contributions of Machiavelli, Sidney, and Montesquieu,’ *Bucknell Review*, 16 (1968), pp. 1–22: 20.

<sup>3</sup> Innocent Gentillet, *Contre-Machiavel*, eds. A. D’Andrea and P.D. Stewart (Casalini, 1974), III.31, p. 544.

## Introduction

3

distorts its target's words to the point that they are unrecognizable. And yet, even after one shows the extent to which Gentillet's condemnation relies on a misreading of Machiavelli's text, some questions remain. What is the meaning of the *Discourses*' rupture with the past? How did it take shape? What does it have to teach us, in general, about Machiavelli? And what is the relationship between the *Discourses*' conflictualism and the new conflictualist theories that emerged during the nineteenth century? These are the kinds of questions this book seeks to answer, while keeping in mind that reconstructing Machiavelli's analysis of Roman and Florentine tumults is not aimed so much at focusing on a particular theme as it is an opportunity to interrogate the entire project of the *Discourses*. After all, his highly original reflections on the best form of government, on the value of fear, on the politics of citizenship, on conquest, on the art of war, and even on religion all pass through this critical node.

As one expert recently wrote, Machiavelli's rehabilitation of conflict "is not only one of the most striking and original theses of his political thought, but also one of the most controversial in the whole history of western political thought."<sup>4</sup> And yet, curiously, in the twentieth century the *Discourses*' perspective on tumults has received little scholarly attention, apart from a handful of essays.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, for quite some time, entire monographs on Machiavelli could be written without mentioning it or doing so only in passing. Marxist thinkers merely presented him as a predecessor to the theory of class struggle; liberals only drew arguments from him to promote a form of conflict regulated by law; and those nostalgic for the classical tradition, like Leo Strauss, simply viewed the Florentine's thesis as further confirmation of his immorality.<sup>6</sup> Even John Pocock and Quentin Skinner were careful not to emphasize this issue, focusing instead on aspects that allowed them to place the *Discourses* under the umbrella of ancient and Renaissance republicanism – and this despite describing the *Discourses*' appreciation of the conflicts between patricians and

<sup>4</sup> F. Del Lucchese, *The Political Philosophy of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Wood, 'Asocial Sociability'; C. Lefort, *Le travail de l'oeuvre Machiavel* (Gallimard, 1972), pp. 467–87, 510–14; A. Bonadeo, *Corruption, Conflict and Power in the Works and Times of Niccolò Machiavelli* (University of California Press, 1973), pp. 37–71; G. Cadoni, 'Machiavelli teorico dei conflitti sociali,' *Storia e politica*, 17 (1978), pp. 197–220; G. Sasso, *Machiavelli e i detrattori antichi e nuovi di Roma. Per l'interpretazione di "Discorsi"* 1.4 (Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1978); R. Esposito, *La politica e la storia. Machiavelli e Vico* (Liguori, 1983), pp. 45–74; R. Esposito, 'Ordine e conflitto in Machiavelli e Hobbes,' in R. Esposito, *Ordine e conflitto* (Liguori, 1984), pp. 179–220; K.M. Brudney, 'Machiavelli on Social Classes and Class Conflict,' *Political Theory*, 12 (1984), pp. 507–19; V. Kahn, 'Reduction and the praise of disunion in Machiavelli's "Discourses",' *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 19 (1988), pp. 1–19; G. Bock, 'Civil Discord in Machiavelli's "Istorie fiorentine",' in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, pp. 181–202; M. Senellart, 'La crise de l'idée de concorde chez Machiavel,' *Les Cahiers Philosophiques de Strasbourg*, 4 (1996), pp. 117–33; T. Ménissier, 'Ordini et tumulti selon Machiavel,' *Archives de philosophie*, 62 (1999), pp. 221–39.

<sup>6</sup> L. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 259.

plebes as “daring,” “arresting,” “shocking,” even “incredible to minds which identified union with stability and virtue, conflict with innovation and decay,”<sup>7</sup> and noting the “radical nature of Machiavelli’s attack on the prevailing orthodoxy.”<sup>8</sup> Essentially, the only political thinkers in whose work Machiavellian conflictualism played a major role are Claude Lefort and Neal Wood, both in anti-bureaucratic and anti-totalitarian keys.<sup>9</sup>

Then, more or less at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the subject of tumults began to receive increasing attention, to the point that in just a few years it turned out to be one of the most hotly debated topics in Machiavelli studies. Indeed, between the time when this research was defended as a doctoral dissertation (in January 2002) and came out as a monograph in Italian (in Fall 2011), the resolute stance taken up by the *Discourses* had become a trendy object of exploration. And the trend has shown no signs of waning.<sup>10</sup>

In the plethora of studies on Machiavelli’s conflictualism that have appeared in recent years, two readings have dominated: for convenience one can call them “constituent” and “populist.”

At the crossroads between the Spinozism of Louis Althusser and the *operaismo* (or workerism) of Toni Negri, the constituent interpretation was formulated mainly by Filippo Del Lucchese in *Conflict, Power and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza*, originally published in Italian in 2004 and then translated into English (Continuum, 2009), French (2010), and Turkish (2016). As an Althusserian, Del Lucchese is interested in the so-called tradition of “aleatory materialism”: the line of thought that, running from Epicurus to Marx, passes through Lucretius, Machiavelli, and Spinoza. The relationship between the latter two is Del Lucchese’s focal point, even if in his book Machiavelli sometimes serves principally as a “preamble” for the *Tractatus theologicus-politicus* (not surprisingly, the monograph was published in Italy in a series on Spinoza). *Conflict, Power and Multitude* interprets Machiavelli’s theory on tumults, especially in light of the binary constituent power/constituted power, with which Negri surveyed modern political philosophy in

<sup>7</sup> J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1978), I, p. 182. Maurizio Viroli’s denial is even stronger: “In recommending the tumultuous but powerful Roman republic,” Machiavelli “was simply pointing out to his contemporaries that politics must face the additional task of handling civic discord as a fact of life in the city” (*From Politics to Reason of State*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 161).

<sup>9</sup> It should however be noted that, in the dispute between consensualist (Talcott Parsons) and conflictualist sociologists (Lewis Coser, Ralf Dahrendorf, Randall Collins), Machiavelli was often placed among the ranks of the latter (whereas Aristotle was considered the head of the former). See D. Martindale, *The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory* (Routledge, 1961), p. 142; T.J. Bernard, *The Consensus-Conflict Debate* (Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Very likely, Machiavellian theory of conflict also benefited from the increasing interest of social scientists and intellectual historians in civil war. See i.e. S.N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), and D. Armitage, *Civil Wars. A History in Ideas* (Yale University Press, 2017).

## Introduction

5

*Insurgencies*.<sup>11</sup> For Del Lucchese, Machiavelli is the first writer to go beyond the tradition of civic concord but also the first to dispose of the concept of the “common good,” opening the way for modern class struggle (especially in the *Florentine Histories*). Above all, the *Discourses* are said to theorize the need to periodically give the people back its voice through riots, understood as tools for promoting “good laws” (*Disc.* 1.4). The impossibility of completely separating constituted power from constituent power is therefore used by Del Lucchese to replace the State-Revolution binary with that of Institutions-Tumults. In doing so Machiavelli and Spinoza are called upon to provide an antidote to a version of Hegel that Althusserians and post-workerists consider to be a sort of forerunner to Soviet totalitarianism. In the *Discourses*, then, *Conflict, Power and Multitude* seeks an alternative route to radical political transformation, which (unlike classic Marxism, and the Leninist tradition in particular) no longer calls for the storming of the Winter Palace but happens instead through a series of insurrectionary rifts that continuously reshape political life in a kind of dialectic without synthesis.<sup>12</sup>

The interpretation of John McCormick is quite different. Succinctly put, if Del Lucchese reads the *Discourses* through Spinoza, on more than one point McCormick is indebted to Rousseau (especially for his unassailable faith in popular virtues, whereas on other issues McCormick has much less sympathy for the French philosopher’s ideas).<sup>13</sup> *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) presents a radical Machiavelli (“populist,” “citizen-empowering,” and “anti-elitist”) as remote from Pocock and Skinner’s republican version as it is from that of Strauss’ disciples. Yet, contrary to Del Lucchese, McCormick does not place Machiavelli in Marx’s shadow. Moreover, while in his tumults-institutions binary Del Lucchese focuses almost exclusively on the first term, McCormick emphasizes the second. He is especially interested in the powers assigned to the tribunes in the *Discourses* to counteract the “ambition of the mighty” (*Disc.* 1.37): the popular trials against anyone appearing to undermine the “free life,” and the right of veto against any laws potentially harmful to the “common good.” Rightly concerned

<sup>11</sup> T. Negri, *Insurgencies* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999). For a criticism of Negri’s position (deeply rooted in his categories, though) see M. Vatter, ‘Resistance and Legality: Arendt and Negri on Constituent Power,’ *Kairos*, 20 (2002), pp. 191–230, and the reply to Vatter by Del Lucchese: ‘Machiavelli and Constituent Power,’ *European Journal of Political Theory*, 16 (2017), pp. 1–21. Blending Negri with Arendt, Vatter developed his own interpretation in *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli’s Theory of Political Freedom* (Fordham University Press, 2014 – originally published in 2000).

<sup>12</sup> The positions of Roberto Esposito (*Living Thought*, Stanford University Press, 2012, pp. 52–57), and Fabio Raimondi (*Constituting Freedom: Machiavelli and Florence*, Oxford University Press, 2018) are not far from those of Del Lucchese.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, McCormick reads the *Social Contract*’s refusal for class-specific institution like the tribunes as a conscious rebuttal to Machiavelli’s radical approach: ‘Rousseau’s Rome and the Repudiation of Populist Republicanism,’ *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 10 (2007), pp. 3–27.

about growing social inequality and the crisis of representative democracy, McCormick goes so far as to propose an amendment to the United States constitution, introducing a college of 51 tribunes, elected on an annual basis by lot from citizens with households earning under \$345,000. This means that, of all the possible Machiavellis, McCormick chooses the theorist of unprecedented constitutional alchemies whose ideas left lasting traces in the pages of French Enlightenment philosophers and in the work of the Founding Fathers. More recently, McCormick has highlighted another (no less relevant) aspect of Machiavellian “populism,” valorizing the extra-legal moment that was missing from *Machiavellian Democracy*: the Florentine’s affection for Greek social reformers who resorted to violence, like the Spartan Cleomenes. As far as the *Discourses* are concerned, this second tenet of McCormick’s analysis is especially relevant also for a correct interpretation of Machiavelli’s judgment on the Gracchi.<sup>14</sup>

*Machiavelli in Tumult* proposes yet another reading, which for simplicity’s sake might be defined as “expansive.” The adjective is meant to emphasize Machiavelli’s identification of a relationship between the territorial expansion of the Republic and the expansion of the people’s power in the city. The significance given to war and to foreign policy in general is certainly not surprising from a man with Machiavelli’s military and diplomatic curriculum. However, rarely have the scholars interested in the *Discourses*’ conflictualism underscored the connection between the two aspects, even if Machiavelli explicitly spoke of Rome military’s strength as a main benefit of the tumults. In fact Machiavelli’s approval of civil conflict should be considered *the* axis around which the two wheels of his biography (and work) turn: his efforts to reform the Florentine army through the creation of a popular militia, and his struggle to limit the power of the Florentine aristocracy.

The present study distances itself from others on the *Discourses*’ conflictualism along five fundamental lines:

(1) It takes classical and humanist theory on concord (in general, quickly dismissed) very seriously, reconstructing its logic, its intellectual roots, its enormous success and its implications in a number of fields (a preference for certain forms of government, a particular attitude toward pedagogy, a special appreciation for balance, etc.). Only by comparing Machiavelli’s work with this tradition is it possible to fully appreciate the *Discourses*’ originality and their open polemic with Dante’s “master of those who know” (*Inferno* IV.131): Aristotle. To elucidate this context, *Machiavelli in Tumult* casts a wide net, looking at texts not normally considered by historians of political thought: less known and often forgotten treatises but also sermons, medieval romances, legal tracts,

<sup>14</sup> Other populist readings of Machiavelli have been proposed by Martin Breaugh (*The Plebeian Experience*, Columbia University Press, 2013, pp. 46–52) and Jeffrey Green (*The Shadow of Unfairness*, Oxford University Press, 2016).



## Introduction

7

*novelle*, iconographic materials, local chronicles, antiquarian collections, even pornographic dialogues... This is Michel Foucault's great methodological lesson: to pull out the philosophical implications of works traditionally excluded from the philosophical canon.

(2) It traces the origins of Machiavelli's thesis, revealing the importance of the too-often neglected *Roman Antiquities* by the Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60–7 BCE). Machiavelli took at least four of the *Discourses*' main ideas directly from him: (a) the theory of mixed constitution; (b) the favorable assessment of dictatorship; (c) the argument that Rome's policy of openness toward new citizens and peoples defeated in war contributed to the city's success and, most significantly, (d) the positive appraisal of social conflicts. However, while the discovery of Dionysius' contribution to the project of the *Discourses* is invaluable for a better understanding of Machiavelli's cultural formation, it also poses a larger historiographical problem: if the recognition that conflict is natural marks the origins of an alternative to classical political thought, how are we to judge the fact that this shift took place as a result of Machiavelli's encounter with an author from the first century BCE? In response to this dilemma, *Machiavelli in Tumult* introduces the concept of *political classicism*: an (intrinsically modern) attitude toward the Greco-Roman past which no longer reflects that of the humanists – because instead of simply drawing on Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Cicero, and Seneca, it aims to recover the actual political prudence of the Romans through a hermeneutics of the ancient historical narratives (beginning with Livy). The conflictualism of the *Discourses* must be framed, then, within a complete repositioning of political theory with respect to philosophy and history.

(3) For the first time ever, this book documents the lasting success of Machiavelli's idea on the positive effects of tumults in Italy (Francesco Sansovino, Antonio Ciccarelli, Virgilio Malvezzi, Tommaso Campanella, Vittorio Alfieri); France (Louis Machon, Montesquieu, Claude-Adrien Hélyvétius, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Mably); the United Kingdom (Marchamont Nedham, John Milton, Lord Halifax, Algernon Sidney, Walter Moyle, Thomas Gordon, John Trenchard, Adam Ferguson); Spain (Diego de Saavedra Fajardo); Poland (Joachim Pastorius); and the United States (John Adams). Clearly, such diverse authors do not make up a uniform tradition (at most one might speak of a “constellation”); all the same, the European diffusion of Machiavellian conflictualism is highly significant because it shows that his was not an isolated position. On the contrary, by opening a breach in the deeply rooted ideology of civic concord, the *Discourses* created the possibility of a new way of speaking about politics. From that moment, and for virtually all of the three centuries that followed, the conflictualist paradigm clashed on almost equal footing with Aristotelian consensualism (rooted in nature) and Hobbesian consensualism (founded on the artificial machine of the State), in a sort of three-way match in which

Machiavelli remained less visible only because, after being placed on the Index of Prohibited Books (1559), his name could not be safely uttered in any Catholic country.

(4) It proposes a new periodization of western political thought, built on the role attributed to conflict by different authors in different epochs. The *Discourses* appear to be *the* decisive turning point in this grand narrative: the single work that opened the door to an original conception of political order breaking with the classical and humanistic tradition of concord. Interestingly enough, when the conflictualist approach became prevalent, with the rise of Liberalism and Marxism, Machiavelli's legacy was somehow clouded by their success and, as a result, he has ever since been read mostly as a precursor to ideas that are very different from his own – even if this new, post-1789 conflictualism could emerge only thanks to the *Discourses*' seminal contribution.

(5) It resists the temptation to connect Machiavelli's theory of conflict with the political traditions established after Rousseau and the French Revolution. Suggesting that some of the concepts employed in the *Discourses* are foreign to contemporary thought does not, however, mean simply taking a stand against anachronism in the name of historical truth. When restored to his proper distance, Machiavelli becomes far more original (and stimulating) from a theoretical point of view than if one tries to force him into the categories and problems most familiar to us. Something a great philologist-philosopher of the last century, Sebastiano Timpanaro, once wrote about the materialism of Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837) in relation to that of Marx can also be said about Machiavelli:

In order to understand our world we need ideas truly of the moment, not myths we have fabricated or “fragments” from the great authors of the past arbitrarily isolated and reinterpreted. We should not think – and no serious Marxists *could* think – of an easy reconciliation between Marxism and the Leopardian *Weltanschauung*. Among the many errors I have committed in my so-called career as a scholar there is one I do not believe I ever committed: that of travestying as “pre-Marxist” authors of a completely different school, or – with an equal and contradictory fraudulence – that of forcing the interpretation of Marx in order to identify it, even partially, with other forms of thought. My passion for Leopardi (and not only Leopardi) depends above all on that *which is not* in Marx and others, yet is true and alive. On the contrary, I think – and this is quite different – it is necessary to continue the reflection and research on the contribution that the pessimistic materialism of Leopardi, precisely insofar as it is *different* from Marxism, can make to the development of Marxism so that the latter avoids, among other things, a regression to anthropocentric positions, to a too providentialist conception of the course of history (even if it is a providentialism entirely immanent to human history), or to the opposite dangers of flat sociology and irrationalism.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> S. Timpanaro, *Antileopardiani e neomoderni nella sinistra italiana* (ETS, 1985), p. 196.



## Introduction

9

Of course, this methodological approach is grounded in a clear preference for history as the discipline that best respects intellectual difference. The superimposition of the present onto the past is, I believe, the main risk one faces in an age that increasingly rewards the catchphrases immediately applicable to current events. Indeed, one of the objectives of this book is to contribute to overcoming the “Great Divide” that still hinders dialogue between political theorists and intellectual historians.

The novelty of Machiavelli can hardly be appreciated through forced baptisms in the name of Karl Marx or Stuart Mill. At the cost of asking the reader to give up any simplistic formulas, the following chapters intend to demonstrate that the ideas on conflict in the *Discourses* are far more complex than they are generally presented to be, and far less easy to understand through the lens of contemporary philosophy. This call to history, however, in no way rules out the possibility that, once his ideas have been interpreted *iuxta propria principia*, Machiavelli’s writings remain extremely relevant today. On the contrary, whether one defends the status quo or contests it, the *Discourses* still have a great deal to teach us – provided that one first comes thoroughly to terms with their bewildering otherness.