



MARK JURDJEVIC

A Great & Wretched City

PROMISE AND
FAILURE IN
MACHIAVELLI'S
FLORENTINE
POLITICAL
THOUGHT

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Machiavelli's
Florentine Political Thought

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A GREAT AND WRETCHED CITY

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Introduction

The Florentine Question

Unlike many of his predecessors, such as Giovanni Villani or Leonardo Bruni, who idealized Florence without compromise, Niccolò Machiavelli's relationship to Florence alternated between love and hate.¹ He frequently wrote witheringly scornful remarks about Florentine political myopia, corruption, and servitude yet also frequently wrote about Florence with pride, patriotism, and cultural chauvinism. As he memorably put it in book 2 of the *Florentine Histories*, Florence was "truly a great and wretched city."² Scholarship on Machiavelli has fully appreciated Florentine wretchedness—the failure of its political culture—in Machiavelli's political thought. But it has not investigated seriously what Machiavelli understood by Florentine greatness—or the promise of its political culture.

This book exposes new aspects of Machiavelli's political thought by adopting the perspective of his writings on Florence. The book's approach contrasts with much of the scholarship on Machiavelli that focuses primarily on the *Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*, texts in which Machiavelli relies heavily on the political culture of classical antiquity and republican Rome. The book is structured around two arguments. First, it makes a general argument that significant and as yet unrecognized aspects of Machiavelli's

political thought were distinctly Florentine in inspiration, content, and purpose. The book then advances the more specific argument that Machiavelli's political and historical writings from the 1520s espouse a more engaged, activist republican agenda than any of his earlier writings. Machiavelli deployed a realist republicanism, specifically informed by Florentine history, in an attempt to stave off the rising autocratic tide that threatened to engulf Florence. Thus, from a new perspective and armed with new arguments, this book reengages the venerable debate about Machiavelli's relationship to Renaissance republicanism. The Machiavelli who emerges from my analysis was willing to take bold risks in pursuit of a republican future for his city.

An argument about the impact of Florence on a Florentine citizen might strike some readers as an unnecessary iteration of the uncontroversial axiom that context always shapes texts and their authors—more a point of departure than of arrival. There are certainly some uncontroversial observations about the relationship between Machiavelli and his Florentine setting. For example, Machiavelli inherited certain aspects of the genre of the *Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* from preexisting Florentine political texts by Brunetto Latini, Leonardo Bruni, and others; his turn to antiquity for guidance and instruction derived from Florence's larger humanist milieu; and his search for effectual truth in politics grew out of his years of active political service, diplomatic and military, as a prominent figure in Soderini's republic. But such observations do not identify with satisfying precision the specifically Florentine dimension of Machiavelli's arguments, nor do they shed light on the genesis and trajectory of his political imagination in general.

In much of the relevant scholarship, Florence and Florentine history seem to have offered Machiavelli only negative lessons, examples of how not to proceed efficaciously—always less interesting and less compelling than Machiavelli's more dynamic and provocative positive lessons. There are legitimate textual reasons for that assessment of Florence's role in Machiavellian political thought. We derive most of our understanding of it from his first two famous works of political analysis, the *Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*. In both works, Machiavelli rarely discussed Florence except occasionally to present his native city in negative contrast to an ancient example. The *Prince* discussed classical figures such as Scipio, Hannibal, and Agathocles and modern but non-Florentine figures such as Cesare Borgia,

Ferdinand of Aragon, and Julius II. Machiavelli did linger on one famous Florentine, the radical Dominican prophet Girolamo Savonarola, but did so largely to distinguish between successful armed prophets such as Moses and unsuccessful unarmed prophets, epitomized by the Florentine friar. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli praised the beneficial consequences of class conflict between the Roman plebs and senators, Rome's functional and martial conception of religion, the Roman system of public indictments, and the city's reliance on an armed citizenry.³ To the extent that the *Discourses* invoke Florence, Machiavelli frequently held up his city as an example of the pernicious consequences of ignoring Rome's lessons. Simply put, we see few Florentine examples in the development of his political thought in those two texts because he was, to a large extent, a critic of modernity who sought his answers in the non-Florentine past.

Machiavelli did write extensively, however, in prose and verse about Florence and Florentine affairs. Literary works predominate: his *First* and *Second Decennale* recounted in verse the trials and tribulations of Florentine and Italian history during the first phase of the Italian Wars; his plays, above all the *Mandrake Root*, were rooted in a clearly Florentine social milieu; and in 1520 he wrote a constitutional proposal for the city that tried to harmonize the reality of Medici power with a republican institutional framework. Of course the *Florentine Histories*, composed in the early 1520s, was his most sustained, complex, and far-reaching analysis of the course and significance of Florentine history.

Few scholars, however, tend to read the *Histories* in the same light as the *Discourses*, namely as a series of historical reflections whose significance lies in what they reveal about political theory rather than history. Instead, scholars generally see Machiavelli's writing on Florence as evidence of a shift from an early, politically engaged focus on politics to a later, politically resigned focus on history, a transition caused by and mirroring the transformation of Florence from the popular republic that Machiavelli served to an increasingly autocratic state dominated by the Medici family.⁴ Thus situated as part of a turn away from politics, it is unsurprising that most scholars have been disinclined to seek evidence of Machiavelli's active political convictions in this work.⁵ As a result, many have concluded that whatever political theory the *Histories* may contain consists principally of reiterations of Machiavelli's earlier arguments from the *Prince* and the *Discourses*.⁶

This book tries to demonstrate that the prevalence of those two views—that Florence served chiefly as a repository of negative examples and that the political theory underpinning the *Histories* passively recycled the convictions of the *Prince* and the *Discourses*—have obscured interesting and important Florentine dimensions of Machiavelli's thought. The key to such a reading lies in making sense of the relationship between Machiavelli's two Florences, the one that drew his ire and contempt and the other that inspired his optimism and confidence.

Machiavelli's later writings, particularly the *Histories*, reveal a temporal distinction between his two voices for Florence and Florentine affairs. When he looked at the Florentine past, he perceived a dismal chain of failures. Yet when he looked to the future, he saw promise and potential. His sense of scorn for the shortcomings of Florentine political culture in the past must have been a direct function of his considerable estimation of the city's as yet unrealized political potential, hence his description of the city as simultaneously "great and wretched." We easily recognize the wretchedness of Florence in Machiavelli's political thought, but the perspective adopted by this book allows us to consider also the question of Florence's greatness. What in particular did this greatness mean to Machiavelli, how did it inform his political thought, and what might it suggest about his interpretation of Florentine politics in the 1520s and his intentions in the *Florentine Histories*? In answering these questions, the book explains the origins of his conviction that Florence, in spite of its dismal past, possessed all the necessary material for a wholesale, triumphant, and epochal political renewal.

Each of this book's seven chapters addresses these questions. Chapter 1 examines Machiavelli's enduring interest in Savonarola and the impact of his followers' movement on Machiavelli's thought. It argues in particular that the Savonarolan experiment furnished Machiavelli with his principal analytical categories and guiding political questions. Scholarship generally divides Machiavelli's writing into two phases, an early one predominantly characterized by reflection on Roman history, and a later one dominated by Florentine matters. Without wishing to diminish the significance of the *Discourses* and Machiavelli's obsession with Rome, we should not overlook that his first act of political analysis was his letter to Ricciardo Becchi analyzing Savonarola and Florentine politics. In particular, it is worth stressing the degree to which the Savonarolan moment was Machiavelli's first prism

through which to reflect on enduring issues in his writing: the sources and limits of factional power, the role of prophecy and religion in republics, the conditions necessary for political redemption and renewal, and—most central of all—the power of culture and language in political life. Savonarola and his reception by the Florentines inspired the questions for which Machiavelli subsequently sought answers in Livy and the classical past. Just as the Savonarolan movement continued to have a considerable impact on Florentine politics after the friar's execution in 1498, it continued to inform Machiavelli's later writings and his understanding of Florentine politics in the 1520s.

Chapter 2 contrasts the Roman republicanism of the *Discourses* with Machiavelli's later Florentine republicanism, particularly as articulated in his constitutional proposal of 1520, the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs after the Death of Lorenzo*.⁷ This chapter cautions against deriving our sense of Machiavelli's republican convictions entirely from the *Discourses on Livy*, the text that generally dominates much of the scholarship on Machiavelli and republicanism. Without disputing the largely Roman origin of many of Machiavelli's most cherished republican convictions, the chapter argues nonetheless that the *Discourses* betray an undercurrent of doubt about the viability of the Roman model and that in small but illuminating ways Machiavelli distanced himself from the Roman model when he turned to the question of reestablishing a Florentine republic.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the contrast between Machiavelli's early and later assessments of the character and psychology of nobles and people. In the *Prince* and the *Discourses*, Machiavelli confidently attributed collective psychological traits to the people and the nobles: to the people he attributed a passive desire to live unmolested, and to the nobles he attributed an inherent desire to bully and dominate. On the basis of those characteristics, he championed the populist argument that the people constituted a crucial resource for constraining the destabilizing effects of elite ambition. When he began to reflect on Florentine history, however, his sense of the characteristics of each group and their political implications became more complicated.

Although at first glance Machiavelli's Florentine nobles seem to mirror perfectly the domineering instincts of elites that his early works condemn, the *Florentine Histories* reveals that he believed that the people's triumph over the nobility and the loss of noble culture directly paved the way for

Italy's servitude in the sixteenth century. His account of the people's role in Florentine politics departs from his earlier arguments even more sharply than his view of the nobles does. His new perspective in part reflects the subtleties and dynamism of the Florentine context, particularly the city's fluid—by early modern standards—conceptions of social rank and status.⁸ But his new perspective equally reflects an awareness that the people posed just as much of a potential political problem as did elites. And in books 4–6 of the *Florentine Histories*, he began to diminish the political significance of any apparent distinctions between people and elites altogether. The implications of that altered social outlook are evident in his later republicanism.

Machiavelli's study of the Florentine nobles and people analyzed in chapters 3 and 4 sheds interesting light on a venerable debate about the respective roles of class and patronage in Florentine politics. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Gaetano Salvemini proposed a Marxist interpretation of Florentine politics in the late thirteenth century that pitted two clearly distinct classes—feudal magnates and bourgeois *popolani*—against each other in a struggle for control of Florence.⁹ Nicola Ottokar, and after him Nicolai Rubinstein, influentially disputed the existence of the building blocks of Salvemini's interpretation.¹⁰ Ottokar, focusing less on legal status and more on familial connections evident in business, politics, and marriages, argued that no clear class divisions existed, proposing instead an interpretation of Florentine politics in terms of patronage networks that each contained multiple social classes. Although Ottokar's approach generally dominated twentieth-century historiography on Italian politics, variations on Salvemini's class-oriented perspective have persisted in the work of Philip Jones and—more specifically for Florence—John Najemy.¹¹ The interpretation of Florentine politics by Machiavelli analyzed here directly engages this quarrel and integrates the two apparently contrasting perspectives. In Machiavelli's view, Florentine political conflict in the thirteenth century initially reflected and was organized around meaningful class distinctions between noble and nonnoble families. But Machiavelli's narrative reveals that over the course of the fourteenth century, the rise of patronage networks that transcended class boundaries displaced the earlier class-specific conflicts. Obscuring that transformation was the fact that those patronage networks—in his narrative, at least—continued to use the class-specific po-

litical vocabulary of earlier conflicts in spite of its incongruity with contemporary social realities.

Chapters 5–7 focus on a strategic pattern of connections between Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* and his republican constitutional proposal in the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs*, both texts commissioned by the Medici around 1520.¹² All three chapters share an overarching argument that whatever other work Machiavelli may have wished the *Histories* to perform, he certainly intended his narrative of Florentine history to explain, justify, and amplify key arguments from the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs*. Chapters 5–7 examine his assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the previous Florentine regimes and his synthetic view of the failure of Florentine political institutions. In the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs*, he defended and justified his innovative republican proposal in historical terms. He explained to his Medici audience that any return to allegedly successful earlier regimes, particularly the aristocratic Albizzean oligarchy and the informal shadow government of the fifteenth-century Cosimo and Lorenzo, would be doomed to inevitable failure because those regimes contained structural flaws and shortcomings that could not be overcome. In the *Histories*, he provided a systematic and detailed justification for the brief historical comments in the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs*. Having discounted the institutional arrangements of specific earlier regimes, he went on to level an even greater critique at the defective nature of almost all Florentine political institutions. In the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs*, he argued that the Medici should build their regime on entirely new institutions, magistracies, and councils. The *Histories* supports that argument by demonstrating in detail why any revival of earlier magistracies and institutions will inevitably cause discord, instability, and vulnerability for those in power.

Read in tandem with the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs*, the wretched particulars of Florentine history explored in chapters 3–7 become part of Machiavelli's larger argument about the moral and political necessity of reviving Florentine republicanism in the present and for the future.

The conclusion summarizes the book's principal arguments and situates my reading of Machiavelli in the larger debate about his role in and the significance of Renaissance republicanism. In particular, the conclusion resolves the puzzle of Hans Baron's problematic "third" Machiavelli by showing how

Machiavelli, in his writings on Florence, adapted the republican tradition so that it might address specific problems in the Florentine context of the 1520s and hence remain relevant and politically necessary. The book thus concludes with a dramatic portrayal of Machiavelli as a rare example of a Renaissance intellectual who boldly deployed his talents on behalf of a cause that his city's ruling family and its powerful lieutenants opposed.¹³

The chapters that follow are by necessity narrowly focused on demonstrating how the subtleties of the Florentine context informed and structured Machiavelli's writing and his sense of the potential for a republican revival in Florence. Collectively, however, these chapters make an argument with significant historiographical and biographical implications: that from a textual point of view, at least, Machiavelli's *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* and the *Florentine Histories* espouse a more engaged, activist republican agenda than any of his earlier writings. Taking this argument seriously in turn suggests the necessity of reconsidering the evolution of his political thought.

The constitutional proposal that he wrote for the Medici in 1520 plays a considerable role in this book. In that text he makes a number of provocative arguments that seem to clash with his usual lexicon and earlier arguments, thus posing stubborn interpretive problems for scholars that have tended to inhibit this work's incorporation into mainstream interpretations of his political thought. Gennaro Sasso, for example, described this work first as stridently utopian and later as paradoxical, arguing that we should not see it as centrally connected to Machiavelli's more sustained political convictions.¹⁴ More recently, recognizing some of this work's more striking detours from earlier texts, Humfrey Butters has interpreted the text as evidence of "an increasingly aristocratic perspective" in Machiavelli's later writing.¹⁵ But, significantly, Butters views that turn as the result not of genuinely altered political convictions but of a tactical and strategic retreat from his earlier hard-nosed populism caused by his progressing rapprochement with the Medici and their elitist circle. Both views tend to dismiss the text as an idiosyncratic oddity in an otherwise largely consistent corpus.¹⁶

In contrast, this book shows that that text reflects serious and sustained political convictions. The *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* was far from

anomalous but was structurally connected, both textually and ideologically, to the *Florentine Histories*. In those two texts Machiavelli directed a pugnacious republican challenge at the prevailing oligarchic wisdom of the Medicean ruling group and the autocratic inclinations of the Medici themselves.

This book attempts to show in detail that considered and committed republican convictions inspired the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* rather than any tactical political accommodations or wistful nostalgic sentiment for a lost republican cause. This is done by reading the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* in tandem with relevant passages from Machiavelli's *Histories*.¹⁷ There he reinforced with sustained detail every important argument he had earlier made about Florentine history and politics in the constitutional proposal.¹⁸ As a result, it seems problematic to argue that some temporary convictions connected to the Medici commission inspired the *Histories*' big arguments. The seamless interpenetration between the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* and the *Histories*' grand narrative suggests that they were borne of a deeply held and considered vision of Florentine history.

Those intertextual connections in turn cast new and interesting light on the *Florentine Histories*. The reading offered here synthesizes and reconciles the two dominant and seemingly contradictory readings of the *Histories*. Felix Gilbert argued for a utopian reading of the work, arguing that its structure implied a millenarian hope for political renewal similar to the one that concluded the *Prince*. Gilbert's argument was primarily textual: the *Histories* documented Florence's origins, brief period of confidence and power, and then steady decline down to Machiavelli's times. For Gilbert, the depth of the city's corruption in the final years of the *Histories* implied, given Machiavelli's cyclical view of history, that the city would at some point inevitably begin a period of rebirth and ascent, even if Machiavelli himself could not perceive the precise circumstances causing that ascent. To this deductive argument Gilbert added some circumstantial contextual evidence—Machiavelli's return to political life in the 1520s and his proposal for the papacy to arm the Romagna—suggesting an optimistic and engaged Machiavelli who might have had some grounds for entertaining hope for better things. However influential, Gilbert's argument remained conjectural at best, given the degree to which its utopian argument hinged, somewhat counterintuitively, on precisely the absence in the text itself of any actual

positive or utopian statements about Florence or any political developments that clearly suggested the arrival of a redeeming context.

In contrast to Gilbert, a number of scholars read the *Histories* as primarily informed by Machiavelli's overarching sense of pessimistic and resigned fatalism. Gennaro Sasso initially expressed this view most forcefully, arguing that the absence of the political reform or redemption in 1513 for which Machiavelli had so desperately hoped was a crushing intellectual blow with lasting effects on his political thought. Convinced that the earlier republican and subsequently Medicean mismanagement of recent crises had left Florence beyond salvation, he composed the *Histories* in a mental state that was dominated by "anguish for a world without future and without hope."¹⁹ For Sasso, Machiavelli's evident pessimism constrained his imagination and restricted his formerly expansive political and historical vision.²⁰

Most scholars tend to read the *Histories* in one of these two ways. In an influential essay on Machiavelli's treatment of the Medici, John Najemy revisited, reworked, and amplified elements of Gilbert's reading. Najemy not only demonstrated, contrary to Sasso, that Machiavelli's political thought in the *Histories* had become more complex rather than more narrow; he also showed in greater textual detail than Gilbert had how the Polybian logic of cyclical history revealed a Machiavelli who "was never without hope or completely resigned."²¹ What for Sasso was the point of arrival—the overarching bleakness of the *Histories*—was for Najemy a point of departure. Recognizing that "there are no lawgivers . . . in the *Florentine Histories*: no Moses, no Theseus, no Cyrus, no Romulus," Najemy proceeded to show how the *Histories* formally abandoned Machiavelli's earlier myth of the prince-redeemer but replaced it with confidence in the instructional potential of history to "transform suffering into wisdom," hence to teach the Florentines how collectively to reform themselves without the intervention of a prince figure.²²

David Quint and Salvatore de Maria, on the other hand, have shown how Machiavelli's recurring use of irony in the *Histories* underscored the individual's fundamental powerlessness in the face of the impenetrable, unalterable, and frequently capricious power of historical change. Although de Maria acknowledged Machiavelli's reliance on certain aspects of Polybian historical theory, he saw Machiavelli as departing from the Polybian tradition in one crucial way: given the colossal scale of Italy's destruction and