

Tenor of Our Times

Volume 8

Article 19

2012

A Deconstruction of "The Discourses on Livy": a biography of Niccolo Machiavelli and his Political Legacy

Matthew Frye

Harding University, mfrye@harding.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor>

Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Frye, Matthew (2012) "A Deconstruction of "The Discourses on Livy": a biography of Niccolo Machiavelli and his Political Legacy," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 8, Article 19.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol8/iss1/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Humanities at Scholar Works at Harding. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tenor of Our Times by an authorized editor of Scholar Works at Harding. For more information, please contact scholarworks@harding.edu.

Footer Logo

A DECONSTRUCTION OF *THE DISCOURSES ON LIVY*: A BIOGRAPHY OF NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI AND HIS POLITICAL LEGACY

By Matthew Frye

One certain Florentine stands today in infamy for his work among the panoply of political theorists. Niccolo Machiavelli is preceded by his reputation; the backlash to his work has immortalized his very name and created an adjective for the political machinations of his design. Reactionaries have turned the Florentine author into an anti-Christ of political thought. The trouble with this stereotype is that it overlooks critical details of Machiavelli's life and the political context of his day. While Machiavelli's amoral approach to politics is the subject of considerable controversy, a closer examination provides new perspectives. This paper examines the humanist background of Machiavelli's time and his rebellion against the Aristotelian and Christian values permeating the culture.

Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, the succeeding work to *The Prince*, is a representation of his political thought and a model as to how a republican government functions effectively. The work also functions as an outcry against the political corruption and violence of Machiavelli's day. Childhood, education, and career choice greatly influence the mind of men, and Machiavelli's past gives great foreshadowing to the subject material and style of his prose. The Machiavelli Family was the silver medalist of the Florentine political elite, serving as subordinates to the acting members of Florentine politics.¹ Niccolo's father, Bernado Machiavelli sought after a law position, but suffered from annual debt problems, preventing his pursuance of the legal profession. Bernado was then kicked out of Florence for a period of time due to his connections to a conspiracy in the city. This inactivity meant that Bernado had to become

¹ Robert Black, *Machiavelli* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3-4.

Tenor of Our Times

frugal financially to support his family. The image of Bernado Machiavelli taking measures to secure his family's livelihood echoes with the figure of the Prince acting for his subjects' good.²

After failing to pursue the legal opportunities before him, Bernado attempted to experience them vicariously through his son Niccolo, which is reflected in the quality of education and career he would achieve. Niccolo's father had accumulated an impressive library of legal and humanist texts, which served to prepare him for the position as Second Chancellor of Florence.³ The young Niccolo focused on his studies in Latin and the language's grammar by his father's decision. Included in Niccolo's curriculum were the works of Cicero, borrowed from outside sources, to expand his horizons in preparation for the future.⁴ The adolescent Niccolo Machiavelli worked as a copyist of Latin works, including his revisions of the texts. He would later produce a far more critical version of *Lucretius* based upon his own life experiences. There was no sign that the young Machiavelli agreed with the work's perspective, but his pathos in text discloses a deep-seated interest in the question of free will for humanity. This philosophical foray is the first inclination of Machiavelli's profundity.⁵

Machiavelli was raised and educated with all the trappings of a humanist background. However, Machiavelli's work life did not match the image of an affluent, well-educated Florentine. Bernado Machiavelli had not taught his son survive in Florence, a city built of small shops and crafts. However, Niccolo Machiavelli had a providential reference for later employment with his childhood friendship with Giuliano Medici, whose family ties recommended Machiavelli to a prominent position as the Second Chancellor of Florence.⁶

² Black, 7-9.

³ Ibid., 11-13.

⁴ Ibid., 16-18.

⁵ Black, 19.

⁶ Ibid., 24-25.

The first surviving political document of Machiavelli's is a 1498 letter to Ricciardo Becchi, a Florentine official to the papal curia and a critic of Savonarola. Girolamo Savonarola is the friar responsible for raising Florence into fanatical religious fervor, which resulted in the "Bonfire of the Vanities" in 1497. Becchi demanded a report of Savonarola's actions for the Papacy, which included preaching to a partisan party in Florence and warning of an unnamed tyrant set to arrive. Machiavelli responded with a scathing analysis, saying, "[Savonarola] has changed his coat... he trims with the times and colors his fibs." In this primary political document, key elements of Machiavelli's political ideas appear: Machiavelli's view towards religion is secular in purpose. He believes that Savonarola acts on ulterior motives, not the religious zeal that fuels the friar's supporters. Taking advantage of the people is akin to the survival instincts of an animal, as Savonarola uses any means necessary to gather partisan supporters to his side to defend himself.⁷

The venom with which Machiavelli wrote against Savonarola served him well, but only in the reactionary period following the fall of the friar. After the collapse of Savonarola's political faction in 1498, coinciding with the fall of the Medici regime, the government of Florence turned from the oligarchic rule of the Medici to a revival of republican government. A Great Council of approximately three thousand citizens held supreme power with a lesser Council of Eighty to present nominees to its chancery. Machiavelli came to the office of second chancellor in February 1498 but lost his seat to a member of Savonarola's *frateschi* party.

The methods of election in the Florentine republic had traditionally excluded its offices of the chancery from the sphere of Florentine politics, since its responsibilities included foreign policy and the city's diplomacy. During the preceding years to Machiavelli's election, the chancery had become factionalized, becoming filled with

⁷ Ibid., 30.

Tenor of Our Times

Medicean supporters during their regime and spiraling into political turmoil after their fall. The chancery majorities were either for or against Savonarola, and the friar's *frateschi* party held a majority.⁸ In three short months, the Council purged the entire *frateschi* party from its rank and Machiavelli received his new career as the second chancellor on June 19, 1498.⁹

The office of the second chancellor was the second-in-command position of the external policies of Florence. In theory, the first chancellor had the responsibility of managing Florentine foreign relations, while his second handled Florentine business in foreign areas as well as in Florence's subject territories. In actual practice, as Machiavelli's duties display, there was considerable overlap between the offices of first and second chancellor. As a second chancellor, Machiavelli's duties effectively made him a secretary for the Florentine government. With access to the papers and letters circulating through the government, Machiavelli had access to the secrets of Florence. So-called secretaries "...had competence, owing to their discretion and to their particular trustworthiness, over more serious matters affecting popular government, and nothing was to be kept secret from them."¹⁰ Machiavelli's office of second chancellor allowed him to perform duties including foreign missions for Florence. Machiavelli later served as administrator for the newly created Florentine militia – a product of his invention and political perseverance. Yet the primary duty of a chancellor was writing political correspondence. One of the notable responsibilities of Machiavelli was acting as a courier, negotiator, and diplomat for Florence, occasionally taking him abroad to France as well as German provinces.¹¹ Here Machiavelli witnessed various conditions of the governments in Europe, taking note of the military condition of the

⁸ Ibid., 32-33.

⁹ Black, 31.

¹⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹¹ Black, 36-37.

Swiss armies and the oddity of the German “free states.” A key component of Machiavelli’s travels to said “free states” is his observations of the character of its citizens. The Germans he observed maintained wealthy public treasuries to insure the funding for public services, while the citizens lived frugally and effectively, without a wealthy aristocracy to create arbitrary domination of wealth or classes.¹² In his later writings, Machiavelli always referred back to the German provinces with praise, citing it as where “a good part of that ancient goodness reigns” and that “[it] remains only in that province.”¹³ He would likely look back with nostalgia to Germany for examples of a republic in his later life.

Machiavelli’s enthusiasm and industry were channeled into his chancery work. Machiavelli carried out over forty diplomatic missions for Florence and the Medici family in his fourteen years of office.¹⁴ Florence became the exception to the Italian contemporary scene. Machiavelli had no more responsibility than his predecessor, Alessandro Braccesi, but Machiavelli made better use of his position, fulfilling its potential.¹⁵

The activity and energy Machiavelli put into his career would suggest that he possessed a high degree of influence on Florentine politics. However, Machiavelli was considered “a bureaucrat who occasionally pursued an independent line in diplomacy.”¹⁶ Florence’s premier judge Piero Soderini trusted Machiavelli, but not to the degree where Machiavelli influenced official policy. Machiavelli was the official representative of Florence’s military council, the Ten of War,

¹² Julie L. Rose, “‘Keep the Citizens Poor’: Machiavelli’s Prescription for Republican Poverty,” *Political Studies* 64, no. 3 (October 2016): 736-37.

¹³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), I. 55.

¹⁴ Black, 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶ Black, 39.

engaging in copious amount of correspondence with the officials. Furthermore, going against the self-serving, sneaky and amoral stereotype often associated with Machiavelli, the man showed no indication of partisan activity during his career, going so far as to not only gain the friendship of Soderini's supporters, but his opponents as well.¹⁷ Machiavelli made multiple attempts, although to little success, to ameliorate the bonds between Soderini and his political opponents.

Machiavelli's longing for a return to the nostalgic age of justice and republics was his response to the political environment in Florence. Florence had become a city rife with factionalism, personal favor, bribery, nepotism, and corruption by the end of the fifteenth century. In the face of this rampant corruption and disruption of republican government, it is no wonder that Machiavelli developed a cynicism and the political survival instincts attributed to him today.¹⁸ The perception of Machiavelli as a political theorist would be further complicated by the ambiguity of political terminology of his day. The support of a political groups' policy on one point was often confused, as it is today, with factional support for all views of that party.¹⁹

Machiavelli's real political thought is foreshadowed in his writings on republican viewpoints with the establishment of a Florentine militia. In Machiavelli's day, various city-states did not militarize armies created out of the ranks of their citizens, such as the Greek *polis* model. Rulers and republics decided to use funding from the Renaissance economy to utilize mercenary forces to settle disputes. In one scale, this led to far less bloodshed on the field, except that it now made payment the determining factor of war, neither courage nor loyalty to one's nation. On the other side of the scale, mercenary soldiers had no reason to care, while the Italian man of the age was beset by passions while forced to

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

never “ruffle feathers,” so to speak.²⁰ Machiavelli, a devout admirer of Republican thought, attempted to regain the accountability of the individual citizen to his or her state with the militia. It should also be noted that in his theories of republicanism in Book I of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli expands the political avenues and agency of the populace in the models of Roman government.²¹

Machiavelli’s numerous travels abroad further increased his dissatisfaction for the Florentine model of government. He wrote the *Florentine Histories* in 1526 as an attempt to curry favor with the Medici family, but he still could not avoid addressing the issues in Florence’s history of divisional factionalism. Machiavelli himself, in this glorification of Florence’s history, points out the issue by the silence of it in the current city’s historical records in the preface of the book.²² Machiavelli, although incredibly critical of his home state’s methods, saw a ray of hope in its problems. Machiavelli also wrote a *Discourse on Florentine Affairs* during the same time period as the *Histories*. When read alongside the *Histories*, *Florentine Affairs* appears to provide solutions to these problems.²³ He claims Florence’s vigor is a reflection of its political dissensions, for many other cities had fallen under the same symptoms, but Florence continues on. The challenge for Florence, according to Machiavelli, was to create a new government fit to manage

²⁰ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *English Essays, from Sir Philip Sidney to Macaulay*, vol. 27 of Harvard Classics New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001.

²¹ John P. McCormick, “Machiavelli against Republicanism: On the Cambridge School’s Guicciardinian Moments,” *Political Theory* 31, no. 5 (2003): 616–17.

²² Niccolò Machiavelli, *The History of Florence*. Vol. 1 of *The Historical, Political and Diplomatic Writings of Niccolò Machiavelli*. Translated by Christian E. Detmold. Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1882.

²³ Mark Jurdjevic, *A Great and Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Machiavelli’s Florentine Political Thought*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 180.

Tenor of Our Times

itself and reroute tensions unto glory.²⁴ This line of thought foreshadowed a critical piece of Machiavelli's later publication, *Discourses on Livy*.

Machiavelli had a long history of failures that shaped his political thought. When the Florentine Republic collapsed, Machiavelli lost his position as the second chancellor, and was subsequently exiled from Florence. During this period Machiavelli began a correspondence with Florentine ambassador Francesco Vettori, out of which arose the majority of the subjects covered in *The Prince*.²⁵ In *The Prince*, Machiavelli releases his pent-up vitriol against the political corruption of the Italian city-states, citing the multitude of military and political sins that had crippled Italy and Florence in his lifetime. The radical nature of Machiavelli's suggestions was of little consequence to him at the time. Florence had fallen from grace and the radical actions prescribed in *The Prince* were, in his mind, justified precautions to preserve the new rulers' authority.²⁶ Examining the historical context of *The Prince*, it can be argued that Machiavelli wrote it as a piece to warn readers of the actions tyrants and princes would use to secure their power.

After writing *The Prince*, Machiavelli shifted his pen to a critical and realistic examination of politics. He returned to his childhood education in classical authors and life experience in the Florentine Republic. The product of this return to classical thought would be a guide to an effective republic, modeled after the Romans: *The Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy*.²⁷ Machiavelli completed the text in November 1519, on the day when one of its dedicatees, Cosimo Rucellai, was buried. Evidence suggests Rucellai was Machiavelli's impetus to write the *Discourses*, as the Rucellai family held a famous series of

²⁴ Jurdjevic, 204.

²⁵ Black, 81.

²⁶ Black, 99-101.

²⁷ Black, 130.

literary discussions in their gardens. An attendee of the discussions and friend of Machiavelli, Filippo de' Nerli describes the group as, "young Latinists of high intellect [who] had met for a long time in the Rucellai Gardens ... [who] exercised themselves a great deal ... through Latin."²⁸

The neoclassical ideals rooted in Ancient Greece and Rome found a voice in Florence and in others. Florence became the mixing bowl of neoclassical thought, ideas and political experimentation.²⁹ One such voice was Giovanni Villani, who walked with the father of humanism, Petrarch, through the ruins of Rome and returned eager to write. Italy had not fallen into the feudalism of the rest of continental Europe during the Middle Ages, and the newly-minted independence of city-states called its citizens to send its ideas into the world.³⁰ The conundrum facing Villani and the humanists of the day was to create a humanist republic, which simultaneously desired to place a universality of values into a finite and specific governmental structure. The issue humanists faced was the unpredictability of fate and opportunity. If the humanists could resolve one or both problems presented, then an impossible dream could be fulfilled.³¹

Unfortunately for Villani, the study of classical thought failed to reproduce the designs desired, as further study revealed imitation as either impossible or undesirable.³² Francesco Guicciardini wrote upon

²⁸ Black, 133.

²⁹ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1954, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), 55.

³⁰ Burckhardt, 121.

³¹ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican tradition* (Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1975), 84.

³² Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy*, Rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1986), 192.

Tenor of Our Times

this condition, saying, “How mistaken are those who quote the Romans at every step. One would have to have a city with exactly the same conditions as theirs and then act according to their example.”³³

Guicciardini was one of Machiavelli’s close friends but also one of the critics of his *Discourses*. Machiavelli had a penchant for bold speculation, supporting his theories with historical information gleaned from his classical education. Guicciardini, in contrast, approached the same topic with heavy suspicion and distrust of analogies from history. Machiavelli held fast to a neoclassical view for his utopia.³⁴

The *Discourses on Livy* is effectively a commentary on Livy’s *History of Rome*, broken into three books: the first addresses the principles underlying the creation and longevity of a successful republic, the second chronicles the expansion of Rome, and the third presents the great leaders during the period of the Roman Republic. Machiavelli draws heavily from Book VI of Polybius, with his model of the three good and bad governments, and suggests the material was familiar to his readers in confronting the issue of Rome’s constitutional reformations. The popular political thought was the concept of the body politic: that a child born healthy will achieve much more than a child born ill. It then follows that a poorly constructed state will fail to flourish. Machiavelli believed that the early constitutional reforms of Rome were akin to sailors rebuilding a poor ship in the open ocean.³⁵

Writers on Machiavelli have spent time and ink debating what the Florentine meant when he said the *Discourses* would be traveling “a

³³ Francesco Guicciardini, *Maxims and Reflections*, Trans. Mario Domandi (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), no. 110.

³⁴ Mark Salber Phillips, “A Study in Contrasts: Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and the Idea of Example,” in *On Historical Distance*, (Yale University Press, 2013), 42-43.

³⁵ Ryan, 382.

new route.”³⁶ Machiavelli boasted that he would use historical evidence properly, unlike the “proud indolence” of Christian states. Unfortunately, Machiavelli failed to distinguish neither who these states are nor the uniqueness for his approach to history compared to previous writers. There is evidence that Machiavelli held genuine contempt for the aristocratic practice of replicating ancient statuary, as the men who did so held little to no regard for the ideas and men responsible for said art.³⁷ Machiavelli often asserts that contemporary readers of history fail to imitate the deeds they read about, and instead take pleasure only in the variety of stories. Machiavelli held that change in these was, “not only difficult, but impossible, as though heaven ... and men had changed ... and were different from what they were in ancient times.”³⁸

Unfortunately, as determined as Machiavelli was to analyze and copy the Roman model, he failed to recognize the *milieu* of cultural, social, and religious differences that made Renaissance Italy and Rome so unlike each other. Machiavelli’s best friend and critic, Guicciardini, echoed the complaint. Attempts persisted until the French Revolution to imitate Rome, followed with similar disappointment.³⁹ Furthermore, Machiavelli’s admiration for the past did not translate to historical accuracy. While the structure of the Early Roman Republic was the best match for Machiavelli’s political experience, Livy’s material did not cover the appropriate issues he sought after. Machiavelli desired “a return to first principles” which is better found in the Punic Wars, three hundred years before Livy. The Reforms of Emperor Augustus would

³⁶ Niccolo Machiavelli, introduction to *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³⁷ Ryan, 382.

³⁸ Machiavelli, introduction to *Discourses on Livy*.

³⁹ Ryan, 383.

Tenor of Our Times

provide better evidence for a “return to first principles” as envisioned by Machiavelli.⁴⁰

Machiavelli examined history by following Polybius’ model of cyclical history: the creation of “good” governments and subsequent corruption into “bad” governments. An earlier author in 1330, Bartolo of Sassoferrato, believed that Rome had gone beyond Polybius’ classic model of six forms of government, claiming that the empire had evolved into a “monstrous” seventh kind. The Rome of the 1330s overextended itself across Europe, splitting itself into dioceses (states), each under a governor. The consequence of this action resulted in a series of governors who took initiative, ignoring the authority of the Emperor of Rome. Bartolo described it as “a single body with a weak head, and many other heads stronger than that one, contesting among themselves.”⁴¹ Machiavelli attempts to reconcile this evolving view of governance with his concept of an unpredictable “Wheel of Fate” and the influence of fortune.⁴²

Fortune (or Fate) is a consistent and convenient view of the world that maintains that Man has little influence upon his own condition. Machiavelli himself was tempted to succumb to that fatalistic idea, but he could not give up the element of human freedom.⁴³ Instead, he compromised, saying, “fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, ...it lets us control roughly the other half.”⁴³ This perspective justifies the mercurial attitudes of the rulers Machiavelli recommends: in a world of unpredictability, Machiavelli saw it beneficial to one’s survival to

⁴⁰ Carl Roebuck, “A Search for Political Stability: Machiavelli’s ‘Discourses on Livy,’” *Phoenix* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1952): 54.

⁴¹ Bartolo of Sassoferrato. “Treatise on City Government according to Bartolus of Sassoferrato.” Trans. Steve Lane. *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval*.

⁴² Ryan, 383.

⁴³ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Tran. W.K. Marriot, *Internet History Sourcebook: Medieval*, XXV.

⁴⁵ Ryan, 378.

maintain the cunning of a fox and the force of a lion in political activity.⁴⁵ Without the historical context, this view becomes the “ends justify the means” label often associated with Machiavelli.

Livy and Polybius believed that the tumults and divisions in the early Roman Republic were threats to the state’s survival, while Machiavelli held that the divisions in the Republic’s youth were vital to the state’s health. Basing his reasoning on the old medical science of the physical humours (where an imbalance of one of the four humours produced ill effects), Machiavelli applied the same principles to the early Roman Republic. In an active body, politic or physical, the humours are active and in constant motion, and likewise in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli recommended that differing political desires and ambitions combine to serve the state they both wanted to benefit.⁴⁴ His recommendation holds historical precedent. In the early Roman Republic, the plebeian class was granted the right to *secession*, or the ability to secede from the Republic until their demands were met. This provided incredibly effective courts, political positions, and rights for the plebeian class that would secure their position in the Roman Republic. Machiavelli argued this point by examining the examples of Venice and Sparta, two insular, powerful states that had suppressed the political tumult in their societies at the expense of their own expansion and glory. By removing the potential for healthy political unrest in their systems, they created a cycle of stagnation, whereas Rome had utilized its constitution to “vent” itself and open the avenue to expand the ever-growing political creature.⁴⁵

However, Machiavelli knew that not all political humours could negotiate towards a common goal. He cited multiple examples from

⁴⁴ Jarrett A. Carty, “Machiavelli’s Art of Politics: A Critique of Humanism and the Lessons of Rome,” in *On Civic Republicanism: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics*, ed. Geoffrey C. Kellow and Neven Leddy (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 128.

⁴⁵ Carty, 130.

Tenor of Our Times

history when indecision crippled and spelt death for a political regime, such as when French King Louis XII overthrew Milan, and Florence doomed it by delaying decision on a treaty.⁴⁶ Florence itself tended to lack political urgency, which was the source of many problems. Machiavelli warned his premier judge Piero Soderini for decisive action, but his advice fell upon deaf ears. Soderini believed that through goodwill and patience he could wear away those who opposed his regime, for he believed that to rise up and strike down his opponents (even for the sake of security) would be a breach of the laws and civil equality.⁴⁷ In terms of a body, Soderini would choose to ignore a cancer as long as the patient looked normal.

The greatest concept Machiavelli put in his works is *virtú*. The concept has no Christian religious connotations with virtue, as Machiavelli draws from the Ancient Greek value of the glory of the state. The qualities for glory of the state come first for the leader in *The Prince*, and for the benefit of the citizens in *Discourses*. Citizens in a strong republic have the character to be honest and mutually loyal to their nation in the *Discourses*, while the ruler described in Machiavelli's *Prince* must be ready to use his wit and resources to equally befriend and destroy one's enemies.⁴⁸

The Renaissance in Italy had reached its zenith, and mankind had become inundated with new ideas. However, the influx of political thought and individualism appeared to herald a collapse of the political environment, and Machiavelli saw a connection between Italy's condition and the morality of its populace, saying, "We Italians are irreligious and corrupt above others." Machiavelli claimed the moral

⁴⁶ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III.3.

⁴⁸ Ryan, 375-77.

situation was the result “because the Church and representatives set us the worst example.”⁴⁹

The Christian practice of turning the other cheek and a focus on the other world created submissiveness in spirit that disgusted Machiavelli.⁵⁰ The second chancellor did not entirely despise the Church, as in the twelfth chapter of the *Discourses* he wrote that the peninsula of Italy would have united had men taken the answers to questions they asked to God as Providence. However, the entire chapter is dedicated to how Italy had been ruined by the Roman Church. Machiavelli cited the two great problems as the facts that the Roman Church still held first obligation to the Italians, despite the clergy’s wickedness, and that it held enough power to keep Italy divided amongst itself, rather than unite it.⁵¹ By establishing a “temporary power” in government under a “higher power” of religion, the Papacy and its Papal States created a political copy of the mythical Tithonus, who wished for eternal life, but did not receive eternal youth.

The final point Machiavelli expounds in the *Discourses* echoes Polybius’ cyclical idea of history. Machiavelli’s pessimistic view towards humanity is reflected in grim acceptance of the impermanence of any form of government. Therefore, connecting back to his political survival instinct in the hectic world of Florence, Machiavelli continues to assert that every step be taken wholeheartedly that will insure the country’s freedom.⁵² Unfortunately, Machiavelli’s pessimism reflects the harsh reality that nothing lasts forever. Whether or not a reader agrees to that truth creates the schism of reaction against or agreement with Machiavelli’s “anything goes” attitude.⁵³

In terms of influence on political thought, some have placed Machiavelli on the same pedestal as Aristotle. Unfortunately, this praise

⁴⁹ Burckhardt, 300.

⁵⁰ Ryan, 385.

⁵¹ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I. 12. 1-2.

⁵² Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III. 41.

⁵³ Ryan, 388.

Tenor of Our Times

overlooks Machiavelli's emphasis on glory in government, not the Aristotelian "common good."⁵⁶ Furthermore, while the Florentine has become synonymous with his specific methodology of political practice, Machiavelli was never in a position to implement his philosophy and his works were only published posthumously in 1532.⁵⁷ Most of the attention for his controversial subjects came from mankind's natural inclination to investigate the taboo, for *The Prince*, *Discourses on Livy*, and a majority of Machiavelli's works were listed in Pope Paul IV's list of prohibited books in 1559.

The backlash of the Catholic Church and the Jesuits are to be expected considering Machiavelli's standing, but special mention should be given to Tommaso Bozio: a church historian who plunged into a hate-fueled tirade against Machiavelli. Point by point Bozio lambasted each idea of Machiavelli, going so far as to argue that the Earth had had no "good rulers" before Constantine.⁵⁴

In sharp relief, by the time of the Italian Enlightenment, multiple authors referred to Machiavelli as the man by whom Italian patriotism could flourish once again. In one instance, Vittorio Alfieri argued in his short booklet that the *Discourses* were the true way to find Machiavelli's heart in political and moral truths. While Alfieri notes that a handful of immoral and tyrannical ideas exist in *The Prince*, he argues that these serve the purpose of a cautionary tale to the people – the readers – of the deliberate schemes and cruelties that all princes will use at one time or another. This cautionary tale urges those reading the *Discourses* to better emulate the qualities of the republican citizen. Similarly, the first Italian Romantic poet, Ugo Foscolo, follows similar logic and states Machiavelli shows people the moral toil on the ruler, its real nature beyond "pomp and laurels," to reinforce how a great state is built on its great citizens.⁵⁵

54

Giorgini, 630-31.

⁵⁵ Giorgini., 632-33.

Unfortunately, as time progressed in Europe, men appreciated the colder, scientific approach to politics, and figures such as the Fascists and Benito Mussolini took interest in Machiavelli's ideas of necessity of an authoritarian trait in the ruler.⁵⁶

However, the longest lasting influence from Machiavelli is the peculiar kinship modern executives, whether in business or politics, possess in the qualities he desired for *esecuzioni*.⁵⁷ Previous philosophers had proposed solutions to the conundrums where law was ineffective, and whereby the virtuous ruler would supersede the problems in law and his power and intercede. A "natural law" by the virtue of the ruler would be made apparent and overrule the written legal statutes for the situation. Machiavelli, on the other hand, denies the possibility of a "natural law" in humanity, instead resorting to the concept that executive force can compel obedience by the power exerted in its actions.⁵⁸ Seven elements of executive power appear in Machiavelli's work conducive to the modern executive: capital punishment, a primacy of war and foreign affairs over peace and domestic affairs, usage of indirect government – so that the leading force appears to be a group other than the ruler, the value of secrecy, a need for decisiveness, an erosion of the differences between groups, and the responsibility of the executive to take glory and blame.⁵⁹

In summation, Niccolo Machiavelli was indeed a rebel against the Aristotelian and Christian values of his time. However, he was a product of the humanist age, where multitudes of like minds strived to the past for the glories of the ancient republics. A republic that was long desired to be grasped, but rarely achieved. Machiavelli, well educated in

⁵⁶ Ibid, 637-38.

⁵⁷ Harvey C. Mansfield, "Machiavelli and the Modern Executive," *Understanding the Political Spirit: Philosophical Investigations from Socrates to Nietzsche*, ed. Catherine H. Zuckert (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1988), 88.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 89-90.

⁵⁹ Mansfield, 91-92.

Tenor of Our Times

political function and its failures in his career, attempted to recreate a republic with his pessimistic outlook on life, in order to escape from the political failings he had lived and died under. Unfortunately, the attention garnered by the reaction made him both infamous and implemented in the present day.