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THE CORRUPT REPUBLIC: THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF MACHIAVELLI'S  
CRITIQUE OF INEQUALITY AND DEPENDENCE

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## Abstract

### The Corrupt Republic: The Contemporary Relevance of Machiavelli's Critique of Inequality and Dependence

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This dissertation examines the relationship between wealth inequality and virtue in republican theory and practice. In the wake of the republican revival, contemporary political theorists seeking to reform liberal democracy generally accept the republican claim that freedom depends on the commitment of citizens to certain values and to the institutions that instantiate them. In this dissertation, I consider the source and nature of this public commitment. I challenge the claim I find implicit in contemporary republican scholarship that civic virtue is fundamentally a matter of moral strength and moral education irrespective of social conditions. I argue, instead, that the social relations and power dynamics dictated by the distribution of wealth in a society condition the possibility of virtue. In particular, I identify the effects of inequality on the associational life of a polity as a source of political corruption.

The project emerges from an engagement with the concept of corruption in Machiavelli's political thought. Machiavelli, of course, stands at the epicenter of today's republican revival. His republican theory has directly or indirectly inspired much of the contemporary scholarship connecting individual liberty with a politics grounded on the rule of law and a virtuous citizenry committed to upholding it. In the dissertation, I argue that this literature is built on a misinterpretation of Machiavelli's conception of corruption fixated on human selfishness and, in turn, misconstrues the role of popular participation in his republicanism. Based on a close reading of Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*, I argue that Machiavelli uses the concept of corruption to identify the relations of dependence generated in conditions of inequality and their

deleterious effect on the political activity of non-elite citizens. When inequality prevails, according to Machiavelli, ordinary citizens become accustomed to pursuing personal security and social advancement through dependence upon the private favor of wealthy patrons rather than, as civic freedom demands, through law and public institutions. Armed with this sociological conception of corruption, I enter the current debate regarding Machiavelli's praise of Roman poverty and class conflict arguing that he understood them as a source of plebian virtue in Rome.

In the contemporary, policy-relevant chapters of the project I explore the possibility of civic virtue in an age of increasing inequality and declining political engagement. In the third chapter I draw on Machiavelli's sociological conception of corruption to challenge the principles of individualism and political equality guiding contemporary republican and democratic theory. I argue that a politics capable of checking social and political domination cannot begin from a set of socially agnostic principles. Rather, I contend that republicans, like Philip Pettit, who rely on a vigilant citizenry to prevent domination, must recognize the ineradicable consequences of social inequality both at the institutional level *and* at the level of citizen engagement and pursue institutional reforms and public policies that correct for it. To that end, in the final chapter I explore the contemporary relevance of Machiavelli's radical suggestion that a republic must institutionalize class distinctions and cultivate an ethos of suspicion if it is to foster the kind of vigilant and public-oriented citizenry capable of pursuing and maintaining a republican form of politics. Drawing on Machiavelli's praise of Roman "poverty," the "disunion" between the nobles and plebs and the "suspicion" manifested by the Roman plebs, I develop a theory of civic culture that counts suspicion of concentrated wealth as an integral component of non-elite identity and virtue.

## Introduction

*“Power threatens; wealth rewards; one eludes power by deceiving it; to obtain the favors of wealth one must serve it; the latter is, therefore, bound to win.”*

- Benjamin Constant

Socio-economic inequality is rising at the same time as civic engagement and support for liberal democracy are declining in consolidated democracies throughout the world. In the United States, the disparity between the rich and the non-rich is at a level that has not been seen for over one hundred years. The relatively modest gap between the rich and the non-rich that defined the post-war era in the United States began widening in the 1970s, with the proportion of income and economic growth received by the top ten percent rising annually. Yet, the most significant shift in income and share of economic growth is occurring at the very top, with the top one percent and one tenth of one percent taking home an increasingly larger portion of overall national wealth.<sup>1</sup> Barring some major global crisis (i.e. natural disaster, world war, or economic depression) or significant political intervention, this wealth stratification is expected to continue (Piketty 2014).

At the same time, scholars are documenting a growing cynicism regarding the value of conventional liberal rights and a democratic form of politics. This skepticism is manifest in a constellation of phenomena including, most conspicuously, the rise of far right-wing parties and anti-liberal and anti-democratic populisms in countries like Poland, Turkey, France, and the United States (Mounk 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2017). It is also evident in decreasing electoral turnouts and the decline in mass membership organizations like political parties, national

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<sup>1</sup> For analysis of the multitude of studies tracking the rise of economic inequality, see Scholzman, Verba, and Brady (2012); see also Hacker and Pierson (2010) and Sitaraman (2017).

membership organizations, churches, and trade unions that once gave form and substance to the political action of average citizens (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Fraser 2015; Skocpol 2003; Putnam 2000). A recent study of public opinion reports that citizens in consolidated democracies across the globe are increasingly critical not just of particular governments, but also of liberal democracy as a form of government (Foa and Mounk 2016). Relying on survey research, the authors demonstrate that citizens today, particularly younger citizens, are more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system than previous generations. The authors also describe a growing sense of hopelessness among citizens—that nothing they do will influence public policy—as well as an increasing willingness to entertain the possibility of authoritarian alternatives like military rule.<sup>2</sup> Based on these findings, the authors reach the worrying conclusion that democracies like the United States, once thought to be stable and beyond dissolution, may be in the early stages of deconsolidation (Lijphart 2000; Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017).

The idea upon which this conclusion is grounded, that the freedom and resilience of a democracy depends ultimately on the engagement and support of its citizens, has roots in the renaissance of republican political theory that began in the 1960s with the work of intellectual historians like J. G. A. Pocock (2003) and Quentin Skinner (1978).<sup>3</sup> Through their rigorous excavation of ancient and early modern political history, these intellectual historians recovered a

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<sup>2</sup> As a recent study by Gilens and Page on policy-making in the United States demonstrates, the feeling of hopelessness expressed by citizens is far from groundless (2014). Based on a review of 1,779 policy decisions, Gilens and Page conclude that “economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence” (2014, 565). On the relatively greater impact of economic elites over average citizens on politics, see also Gilens (2012), Page, Bartels and Seawright (2013), and Achen and Bartels (2016).

<sup>3</sup> See also Bailyn (1967) and Wood (1969).

forgotten political discourse of self-government, virtue, and the common good that had been supplanted in twentieth century capitalist democracies by the market-based conception of freedom and pluralist theories of democracy (MacGilvray 2011). Among republicanism's most significant contributions to contemporary political discourse is its attention to the cultural and normative foundations of a legitimate and resilient political order. Liberal, democratic, and republican theorists alike now recognize the dependence of a free and democratic order upon citizens' commitment to certain principles and practices of political action. A polity built on the aggregation of preferences, in which citizens need only account for their own self-interest, is no longer deemed a viable political framework. In order for democracy to remain resilient over time, equality and freedom must continue to infuse the practice of politics and maintain a hold on the minds of citizens such that there are those ready to resist state actions that compromise these principles.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of civic engagement, the revival of republicanism has also brought renewed attention to the underlying power relations that condition the possibility of freedom. Freedom means something more than the mere absence of constraint or interference. Freedom, rather, entails the absence of arbitrary power and, in turn, a constitution that prevents the concentration of social, economic, and political power. Wealth inequality, republicans recognize, poses a significant threat to freedom because it empowers those with access to significant resources to dominate others directly. However, republicans also recognize the more pernicious way inequality threatens the stability and freedom of a republic because of how it empowers a few to manipulate and deform the institutional mechanisms that are intended to maintain political, economic, and social power dispersed.<sup>4</sup> It is to combat the

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<sup>4</sup> On this as a typical republican concern see Sitaraman (2017).

effects of inequality that the need for a virtuous and engaged citizenry arises. To prevent the concentration of economic and political power, republicans argue, institutions must be supported by a vigilant citizenry: one disposed to resist attempts by the powerful to erode the constitutional foundations of government so as to arrogate state authority. It is only when the citizenry defends a republic's institutions against those who would try to undermine them that the checks and balances incorporated into the constitution will function properly to maintain power dispersed. When citizens become apathetic, acquiescent, or, worse, approving of the undue public influence wielded by the rich and powerful, democracy is rendered vulnerable to the ambitions of a few.

In this dissertation, I explore the possibility of civic vigilance in an age of increasing inequality and social dependence. I posit a connection between the social phenomena of increasing inequality and declining civic engagement and support for liberal democracy. Inequality, I shall argue, compromises republican politics and freedom, not only because it empowers some to dominate others or because it enables the rich to take direct aim at law or state institutions. Rather, it also threatens the very existence of a republic by weakening the normative foundations upon which it is grounded and, in turn, the disposition of citizens to resist dangerous concentrations of economic and political power.

I make these claims by engaging with the concept of corruption in Machiavelli's political thought. Machiavelli, of course, stands at the epicenter of today's republican revival. His republican theory has directly or indirectly inspired much of the contemporary scholarship connecting individual liberty with a politics grounded on the rule of law and a virtuous citizenry committed to upholding it. Yet, his theory of corruption and, in turn, virtue diverges from the traditional republican understanding of those terms in fundamental ways that are obscured in contemporary Machiavelli scholarship. Contemporary republican scholars of Machiavelli's

thought interpret corruption as the tendency of individual citizens to place their selfish or factional interests above the common good of the republic (Skinner 1990; Viroli 1998; Pocock 2003). Corruption, so understood, is a moral defect originating in human nature. For Machiavelli, however, corruption is not the natural state of mankind. Rather, corruption identifies a social disorder that arises in conditions of significant socio-economic inequality. It refers to the political culture of dependence and acquiescence generated by attempts by wealthy and powerful elites to consolidate economic and political power through a two-fold strategy that combines an attack on republican political institutions with the distribution of material and social benefits to ordinary citizens. Corruption manifests in citizens' habit of seeking personal security and social advancement through dependence upon the private favor of wealthy patrons, rather than through law and public institutions.

As far as I know Machiavelli is unique among republicans in conceiving the relationship between inequality and corruption in these terms. This divergence from tradition originates in the distinct approach he takes to the study of political society. For his ancient and civic humanist predecessors, the central questions with respect to politics were primarily ethical in nature—who deserves citizenship? What does it mean for those in power to govern well? (Mansfield, 2000). Machiavelli, as we shall see, is less concerned with defining the moral obligations of those in power than with understanding the sources of that power and the possibility of its constraint and dispersal over time (Najemy 2010). Both the *Discourses on Livy* and the *Florentine Histories* exhibit this concern to understand power and wealth from a sociological perspective.<sup>5</sup> Based on this socio-historical approach to politics, Machiavelli concludes that significant inequality

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<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* is herein referenced as the *Discourses* and cited in the text as D with book and chapter numbers. The *Florentine Histories* is herein referenced as the *Histories* and cited in the text as FH with book and chapter numbers.

corrupts republican politics because of the way it structures collective action and shapes the strategic and cultural practices of society. In conditions of concentrated wealth, the wealthy and powerful few exploit their resources to cultivate dependents and partisans from among the many citizens with only modest resources and no direct access to political power. The effect of this for a republican way of life, according to Machiavelli, is catastrophic. The Roman republic, Machiavelli's favored example of ancient republican virtue, was ruined due to the inequality that eventually arose under the commander-patrons of the Roman army (FH III.1 & D III.24). Likewise, as I shall demonstrate in chapter two, Machiavelli blames the persistence of inequality in Florence, and the unrelenting civil conflict and political instability it gave rise to, for the failure of that city to live up to its republican aspirations and its capitulation to the princely rule of the Medici.

Machiavelli's theory of corruption proposes the existence of a strong connection between inequality and the degeneration of the normative framework essential for republican government and freedom. A principle aim of this dissertation is to problematize the tendency of contemporary republicans to discount the relationship between socio-economic inequality and the capacity of citizens to act virtuously. I draw on Machiavelli's sociological theory of corruption to challenge the claim I find implicit in contemporary republican scholarship that virtue is fundamentally a matter of will and moral education, irrespective of social conditions. I argue, instead, that social relations and power dynamics dictated by socio-economic conditions condition the possibility of virtue. In particular, I identify the impact of inequality on the associational life of a republic and the structures of dependence it generates as a source of corruption and, in turn, domination and political instability.

Of course, the reader might justifiably question the relevance of a theory of corruption based on a critique of patronage relations in early-modern Florence. To be sure, social and political power in capitalist democracies is no longer structured by explicit relations of patronage. Yet, the problem of wealth and its impact on politics remains. The recent surge in scholarship on the effects of inequality on the democratic process attests to the growing concern among political scientists and theorists regarding the relationship between money and power. The focus of these studies, however, has largely been limited to the direct influence the wealthy exercise over elected officials through campaign contributions and lobbying or, more recently, the ideological influence they may have directly over public opinion through think tanks, the monopolization of media, and the exploitation of new communication technologies (Lessig 2011; Winters 2011; Hacker and Pierson 2011; Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013; Urbinati, 2014). Machiavelli's theory of corruption suggests that we may need to look deeper into the political implications of inequality. Direct intervention into law-making and administration and the ideological or rhetorical manipulation of citizens may not exhaust the ways in which wealth can have a destructive effect on politics. In conditions of inequality, the manner in which the few dispense with their wealth can, over time, have consequences for the organizational structures and patterns of strategic action and participation of ordinary citizens in political life.

In the United States, for example, recent scholarship on citizen participation links growing economic inequality with the increasingly oligarchic character of the civic universe and an increasingly ideologically polarized yet acquiescent citizenry (Skocpol 2003; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Scholzman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Fraser 2015; Callahan 2017). Professionally run advocacy groups, privately funded non-profit institutions controlled by wealthy patrons, and

corporate and private foundations now dominate civil society. Largely supplanted by these hierarchical modes of civic organization are the labor unions, fraternal societies, local party operations, and similar mass-membership and participatory civic organizations that traditionally gave political expression to the interests of those with modest means (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Skocpol 2003). During the first half of the twentieth century, these egalitarian organizations acted as a countervailing power against the interests of the rich (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Mayville working paper).<sup>6</sup> At the same time, their participatory structure meant that membership in these organizations amounted to something more than a mere financial contribution. The classic voluntary organization, writes Skocpol, “combined social and ritual activities with community service, mutual aid, and involvement in national affairs” (2003, 129). Politics, in other words, was meaningful in terms of both citizens’ strategic interests and social involvement. The strength and salience of these membership-based modes of organization began to decline in the 1960s with the explosion of public policy advocacy groups staffed by professionals and the development of PACS, think tanks, and private mega-foundations (Skocpol 2003; Barkan 2013). These new top-down organizational forms transformed, and continue to transform, the rules of interaction and involvement of ordinary citizens in public life through their control of opportunities for citizens to act. I contend that by “doing for” citizens what citizens had in the past “done together,” these elite-controlled organizations may be contributing to a decline in

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<sup>6</sup> According to Hacker and Pierson, the political and economic vacuum caused by the collapse of the unions has proven deadly to those seeking to redress the winner-take-all economy and friendly to those seeking to promote and consolidate it. Unions were never “just about determining wages. Rather, more fundamentally, unions offer an organizational counterweight to the power of those at the top. Indeed, while there are many ‘progressive’ groups in the American universe of organized interests, labor is the only major one focused on the broad economic concerns of those with modest incomes.” (2010, 57).

civic vigilance by normalizing and in some instances even legitimizing the concentration of economic and political power in the minds of ordinary citizens. If this characterization of the problem is true, or at least possible, then it would behoove those of us concerned with both rising inequality and growing citizen apathy and distrust to attune ourselves to the possibility of corruption understood in Machiavelli's terms.

### **The Social Origins of Republican Virtue**

A defining feature of republican theory is the importance of both virtue and law to freedom. There is, of course, considerable disagreement among republican historians and philosophers regarding the relationship of these three concepts. For those who draw from the Aristotelian tradition, virtue is thought to be the end and substance of freedom (Pocock 2003). Freedom is realized through the participation in self-government and a life spent in service to the republic (Sandel 1998). The virtue of citizens, in turn, is the end of republican government: something to be actively promoted through a program of education and habituation that attends to the moral development of citizens. The problem some scholars see with the Aristotelian conception is that freedom is understood as a form of self-mastery or self-development demanding a positive commitment to certain activities and ways of life. The state, in turn, should function as a "liberating agency," which coerces citizens into becoming virtuous, and hence free, beings (Shaw 2003). Both Skinner and the political philosopher Philip Pettit distinguish what they call the neo-Roman (or Italian-Atlantic) tradition from Aristotelian conceptions of republicanism based, in part, on how it understands the relationship between freedom and virtue. For those associated with this alternative strand of republican thought, virtue is a demand made upon citizens by reason as something purely instrumental to freedom, not the substance of a free

way of life (Skinner 1990, 1998; Pettit 1999). Freedom, so defined, *needs* virtue to secure it; but freedom is not *defined* by the practice of any particular activity or habit of virtue.

The political consequences of this philosophical redefinition of republican freedom in negative terms are considerable. Unlike the Aristotelian conception of freedom, this alternative understanding of republican freedom fits well within the current liberal paradigm because it empties the idea of liberty of any positive content (virtuous activity) and, in so doing, appears to deny the need for any state involvement in the fostering of virtue.<sup>7</sup> The state should attend solely to the problem of securing freedom through a constitutional order that disperses power without any involvement in the moral development of its citizens. This juridical interpretation of republicanism offered by Pettit (1999, 2012) and, recently, emphasized by Skinner (1998) rightfully draws attention to the importance of the rule of law, and the mixed constitution that secures it, for freedom. Freedom depends on the presence of a state entity powerful enough to check the arbitrary power some may have over others through a coercive order of laws. To ensure that the state itself does not become a dominating presence, however, the power of the state must be dispersed through a mixed constitution *and* held in check by virtuous citizens who actively promote the republican values of equality and freedom in public life. The problem with this way of understanding the relationship between freedom, law, and virtue is that it elides the relationship between the constitution and the virtue needed to uphold it. Though necessary for freedom, virtue is something citizens must cultivate on their own: a purely ethical endeavor for which they alone are to be held responsible should they fail.

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<sup>7</sup> The significance of this move was felt most clearly in the debates surrounding Isaiah Berlin's essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" distinguishing negative from positive forms of liberty which were thought to lead to dangerous state intervention (2002). For Skinner's categorization of neo-roman liberty as negative, see Skinner (1990). See also Skinner (2002), which recategorizes neo-roman liberty as a third and distinct concept of liberty.

To be sure, this ethical conception of virtue draws on a long tradition of thought regarding the importance of reason for virtue and politics (Mansfield 2000). Yet, to describe republican virtue in purely moral terms glosses over assumptions made by ancient and early-modern thinkers regarding the privileged social status necessary for both freedom *and* virtue and, in turn, their approval of the highly stratified and hierarchical socio-economic order that made that status possible. Among the ancients, both Aristotle (1997) and Cicero (1999) are well known for identifying privileged social status and wealth, particularly landed wealth, as a condition of virtue and the capacity to rule on behalf of the common good. In early-modern Italy, Machiavelli's contemporaries and predecessors claimed wealth as a fundamental component of virtuous citizenship and political leadership (Pocock 2003).<sup>8</sup> Republicans generally offered two reasons for why wealth was essential for the practice of virtue. First, wealth meant that the citizen could live free from material necessity, which, in turn, provided him with the time for those higher pursuits (political, philosophical and military arts) deemed essential to citizenship. Second, significant wealth, particularly in land, meant the citizen could live free from dependence on others. Wealth, in republican terms, meant independence and self-sufficiency. It meant never having to be beholden or indebted to another.

The idea of dependence was abhorred by ancient and early-modern republicans. "Those who think they are wealthy, honored and blessed do not want even to be under obligation from a kind service," writes Cicero, because "accepting patronage or being labeled a client is tantamount to death" (1991, 91). Dependence was believed to render the individual vulnerable to the threats and influence of those he depended upon. Worse than that, the state of dependence was thought to corrupt one's character, instilling a servile and slavish manner. Required to attend

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<sup>8</sup> Skinner acknowledges this fact in his historical work on early-modern thought (1978).

to the whims and desires of his master or patron to secure his ends, the dependent becomes a groveling sycophant and a master of the corrupt arts of cunning, deceit, and fraud. Only those who could avoid engaging in such relationships as a result of their privileged socio-economic status were thought capable of the virtues of mind and deed required for citizenship and freedom.

In practice, this rejection of dependence as antithetical to both virtue and freedom meant that the large majority of the inhabitants of any city were necessarily excluded from both freedom and the practice of virtue due to their material insecurity and dependence on others (Sparling 2013; Najemy 2000). Not only slaves, serfs, and women, but also laborers, craftsmen, and the relatively well-off whose wealth was founded on trade and commercial activity were thought incapable of virtue and, in most cases, excluded from citizenship. At times, both Skinner and Pettit seem to recognize this fact, acknowledging that, for most in the republican tradition, citizenship was only deemed possible for men of elite status and property (Skinner 1978; Pettit 1999, 48). Still, both discount the significance of this fact in their analyses of republican virtue. For both, as I shall demonstrate in the chapters that follow, the practice of virtue is both universally accessible and essentially moral.

In what follows, I seek to explain what we lose in the attempt to abstract and universalize the republican conception of virtue by unmooring it from its social foundations. My aim in problematizing this way of thinking about virtue is not to expose republican virtue as an anachronism. Rather, I am motivated by a desire to understand the potential for virtue in our current political climate. If virtue still has a role to play, as I will argue that it does, what can and should we demand of the large majority of citizens who do not enjoy the kind of independence once believed to be essential for the practice of virtue? And what, if anything, can be done to promote virtue, properly understood?

Understanding the role of virtue in contemporary democratic politics requires the development of a clearer definitional understanding of the term. While, of course, diverse viewpoints regarding the nature of virtue and its role in political life have been expressed, they generally cohere around two connotations: first, virtue identifies the willingness of citizens to place the common good of the republic ahead of their own self-interests and thus to abide by the constitution, its laws, and its magistrates. Second, virtue requires that citizens are vigilant in resisting abuses of power and guarding the republic against those from both within and outside it who would seek to usurp its authority and take its freedom. Although these two concepts of virtue are often conflated in republican scholarship, they serve distinct ends. The first of these concepts is virtue as a mode of decision-making. It is grounded on the assumption that the individual is in a position of power such that her actions carry public significance. To the extent that this notion has been applied somewhat clumsily to those not in power, as was done by the Florentine civic humanists, it demands identification with the decisions made by those in power (Najemy 2000). The act of vigilance, on the other hand, is performed by those who are removed from, or, at the very least, not currently in power. Vigilance is the act or state of keeping careful watch over the way power is distributed and used with an eye not only to outright abuses, but also to circumstances where power appears to be consolidating in a manner that poses a threat to the rule of law and freedom. It not only requires that citizens are disposed to engage politically, but also that they are able to recognize and respond to the threat posed by concentrations of power and resources that can be exploited to undermine the rule of law and the democratic foundations of the constitution. I will argue that this second conception of virtue demands our attention in contemporary democratic societies because, without it, we risk losing the public space of democratic politics entirely.

## **Machiavelli's Mixed Constitution**

A central aim of Machiavelli's theory of corruption, and his political theory more generally, is to expose the pretensions to virtue and leadership held by his elite contemporaries for what they are: mere pretensions. Indeed, his disgust with the aristocratic self-delusions of his contemporaries is palpable when reading both the *Discourses* and the *Histories*. Yet, the implications of his sociological conception of corruption extend beyond an attack on the aristocratic conceits of the Florentine *ottimati*. His theory of corruption also exposes a critical flaw in the traditional conception of the mixed constitution. Recognizing the inadequacy of moral censure and reason as the only restraints on the ambition and self-interest of the powerful, even the most aristocratic of republicans advocated a mixed constitutional structure in which a larger cohort of non-elite citizens participates in government as a check on the powerful. This idea, that the people (as a collective) are best suited to promote virtue among a republic's rulers, is common in republican discourse. Aristotle expresses a version of this in his support of election and praise of the wisdom and judgment of the crowd (1997, 3.1281(a)42-(b)10). Guicciardini, Machiavelli's thoroughly aristocratic interlocutor, argued that the many are in fact the best judge of the few (who compete for honor and glory in the public forum), due to their unique capacity for impartiality. Defined by their relatively modest resources and lack of social status, the people are the best judge of virtue, according to Guicciardini, simply because they have no real stake in the political game.<sup>9</sup> Machiavelli's radical brilliance, I submit, was in recognizing the contradiction between a republican constitution that relies on the people to regulate elite competition and promote virtue among its leadership and a vastly unequal social order structured

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<sup>9</sup> On Guicciardini's understanding of the people and their role see Moulakis (2000). See also Pocock (2003:122-138).

by patronage and sustained by an ideology of virtue that honors private wealth and fosters deference to it. As a result of their dependence on particular elites or elite families, many non-elite citizens were coopted into participating in the factionalism that perpetually destabilized Florence. Even those who did not participate directly became accustomed to a world in which material benefit and social advancement were sought through dependence on the private wealth of a few. As such, the Florentine people were unable to fulfill their assigned role of upholding virtue among the few in power. Machiavelli's intent in prioritizing the socio-economic origins of corruption was to draw attention to the limits of the (aristocratic) constitutional theory espoused by his contemporaries and the difficulty of maintaining a citizenry attuned to the existential threat posed by the private power of the few under conditions of great inequality.

Machiavelli's critique of inequality, in effect, extends the republican concern regarding the corrupting effects of dependence on the individual to the society as a whole. It addresses the implications of dependence as a sociological phenomenon and its impact on the institutions proffered by republicans to protect against it. Rather than reject involvement of ordinary citizens in politics as necessarily corrupt because of their dependent status (and nature), however, Machiavelli's constitutional theory attempts to correct for it. His popular republicanism is built on an awareness of the structural effects of socio-economic factors on the behavior of citizens, yet it does not take the people's corruption as something fixed or natural. Instead, their dependent status is something permanent and indeed natural; thus, the republic must account for this in its institutional structure.

Machiavelli famously defines the people, or the many, by their desire for security and freedom from domination (D I.5). He juxtaposes the many against the great, who are driven by a desire for domination. For Machiavelli, politics and history are determined in large part by the

interaction between these two natural social groups, or what Machiavelli calls humors of citizens. Unfortunately, Machiavelli's portrayal of the humors, as social groups defined in the first instance by their desires or disposition towards freedom, has led republican interpreters to either ignore or denounce his social ontology as an outmoded and illiberal conception of political society (Skinner 1990; Viroli 1998).<sup>10</sup> Yet, this understanding of the humors as identifying the inherent disposition of the few and the many obscures its sociological roots. The many are defined by Machiavelli not only by their disposition to seek security, but also by their modest resources and their remove from social and political power. The few are defined by their access to significant resources, which, in turn, translates through various modes into a disproportionate share of political power (D I.5). Rather than view Machiavelli's social ontology as expressing some fact about human nature, I suggest that we view it as an attempt to account for the myriad and complex ways in which the distribution and circulation of wealth in a society shapes politics. Through his experience in politics and study of history, Machiavelli had grown skeptical of the idea that the few, as a class, could be relied on to effectively check the growth of their own power. Though constantly at war among themselves, the few in any society share the common interest of maintaining their privileged socio-economic position and increasing the political power that privilege affords them. To prevent the private concentration of wealth and political power, then, a republic must look to those who do not share in the interest of maintaining and increasing the political clout of wealth. For the same reason as Guicciardini, Machiavelli identifies the many as the most reliable guard of freedom because of their remove from economic and political power. They are a "natural" countervailing force in that they share a

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<sup>10</sup> But see McCormick (2011) whose democratic reading of Machiavelli's republicanism is based on this naturalistic conception of the humors.

common interest in maintaining the dispersal of power. Unlike Guicciardini, however, Machiavelli recognized that what disposes the many to freedom—that is, their relative powerlessness—also makes them susceptible to corruption by those who are in a position to offer them opportunities to improve their welfare through structures of dependence that undermine the significance of the state. Further, because of this vulnerability to corruption, a republic cannot rely on the “natural” disposition of the many towards freedom. Rather, a people capable of acting as the “guard of freedom” and preventing the concentration of economic and political power must be constructed.

Ingenious in its simplicity, the interaction of the two humors explains both the failure of Florentine republicanism and Rome’s republican success. Florence failed because it paid insufficient attention to the insidious ways inequality undermines the ability of citizens to vigilantly defend the republic. The Roman plebs were able to fulfill their role as guards of freedom, on the other hand, despite significant inequality, because of how the constitution in Rome was structured. In praising Roman poverty and the institutionalized disunion between the nobles and plebs in Rome, I shall argue, Machiavelli was doing much more than waxing nostalgic about Roman frugality or simply recognizing the inevitability of social conflict in republican polities. Rather, he was bringing to light those institutions in Rome that channeled the activity of citizens into practices and modes of action that produced and reproduced a distrust of concentrated formations of power and a disposition to act through public modes of collective action. Having become accustomed to a free way of life in Rome, that is, a life secured by public modes of action, the plebs remained, for the most part, steadfast in their defense of Roman freedom.

## Overview

It is the goal of this dissertation to demonstrate the sociological foundations of Machiavelli's concept of corruption and its implications for his republican theory and, in turn, for the contemporary republican revival. To set the stage for this interpretive and analytic inquiry, I begin in the first chapter by engaging with current Machiavellian scholarship to demonstrate why interpreters have missed this way of thinking about corruption in Machiavelli's political thought. Notwithstanding the extreme disagreements among scholars regarding Machiavelli's thought, I contend, they remain committed in some way or another to Skinner's understanding of corruption and virtue, which distracts them from the social and political foundations of each. Corruption, so understood, is an inherent attribute of humanity (or at least some portion of it). Republican virtue is the moral triumph of reason and manifests in the willingness of citizens to place the common good of the republic over their immediate selfish or particular interests. Conceiving corruption and virtue in these terms, I argue, prevents Skinner, and his proponents and critics alike, from reconciling Machiavelli's use of the classical republican language of virtue and the common good with his ideas about human nature and sociology and his praise of the conflict and poverty in Rome. Machiavelli is both a republican and a realist. Undoubtedly less sanguine about reason's potential than his aristocratic contemporaries, he does not give up on the possibility of a properly ordered republic that fosters virtue and promotes the common good. What virtue requires, however, is a constitution that reconfigures power relations between the two humors of citizens so as to orient the many to the threat posed to freedom by concentrated power. Popular virtue, for Machiavelli, is first and foremost a matter of vigilance.

Having surveyed this interpretive terrain, I turn in chapter two to my own interpretation of Machiavelli's notion of corruption based on a close reading of the *Histories*. Comprised of eight dense books chronicling the history of Florence from its inception through the reign of Lorenzo de' Medici, the *Histories* is arguably Machiavelli's most hermeneutically challenging work. The reason for addressing Machiavelli's *Histories* for his understanding of political corruption, rather than the more explicitly political thought set out in the *Discourses*, is that we can only discern so much about Machiavelli's corruption in the *Discourses*. In the *Discourses*, we learn that corruption is not simply a quality of human nature. It is not commensurate with either self-interest or wickedness. Rather, corruption is a social disease that infects citizens in certain historical conditions and causes them to act in ways that give rise to dangerous forms of conflict and domination. We also learn that corruption arises in conditions of "inequality" (D I.16, D I.17). What is not made particularly clear in the *Discourses*, however, is exactly what Machiavelli means by inequality or how it corrupts. To understand the relationship between inequality and corruption, we must turn to Machiavelli's socio-historical analysis of Florentine conflict presented in the *Histories*.

The *Histories* is still one of Machiavelli's lesser read works. Recently, however, intellectual historians and theorists alike have begun to appreciate its hermeneutic value for understanding the complexity of Machiavelli's republicanism. Scholarship devoted to the *Histories* has brought to light the more sociological and historical nature of Machiavelli's analysis of power and agency both in that text and in other later works. This move to a more constructive and nuanced understanding of social categories and social relations has been interpreted as evidence of a conservative turn in Machiavelli's thinking: a turn away from a visionary politics led by founders, redeemers, and men of *virtù* towards a pessimistic, skeptical,

or, at the very least, more modest attitude regarding the republican possibilities for Florence and modernity generally (Jurđjevic 2014; Najemy 1982; Black 2005; McCormick 2017b). While I agree that Machiavelli's thought becomes increasingly sociological, I do not think this fact materially alters Machiavelli's belief in the republican possibilities for Florence. The *Histories*, to be sure, is a chronicle of unrelenting social conflict and corruption that prevented Florence from ever really constituting a republic. Yet, Machiavelli identifies no tragic or inescapable flaw that destines Florence to this failure. Rather, his intent in drawing attention to Florence's weaknesses was to educate his elite contemporaries regarding the somewhat surprising (at least from an elite perspective) source of Florence's instability and conflict, enabling them to form a constitution capable of promoting the virtue necessary for the city's survival. The complexity of the social categories Machiavelli employs to explain the shifting demographics and sectarian conflict in Florence enables us to better appreciate Machiavelli's favorable assessment of Roman social conflict and the crucial role played by the institutionalized Roman plebs in keeping elite sectarianism and corruption at bay.

In chapter two, I focus on Books II through IV of the *Histories*, in which Machiavelli recounts the two centuries of Florentine history leading up to Cosimo de Medici's ascent to first citizen. Contrary to his original intent, I argue, Machiavelli includes this period of Florentine civil history to demonstrate the role played by the Florentine elite in the undoing of their prized republic. The narrative he relays in these books is one dominated by constant and unceasing conflict among generations of Florentine elites bent on the political domination of their rivals and their exploitation of non-elite citizens in these factional enterprises. It is a study of the evolving strategies and techniques each new cohort of elites employed to coopt non-elite citizens into participating in their conflicts and in the domination of others and the state. In refocusing the

history of Florence during this period away from the threat to freedom posed by foreign forces or the licentiousness of the people, I argue, Machiavelli exposes the deleterious effect of inequality on the associational life of Florence and, in turn, its citizenry. At the same time, his depiction of Florence's transformation from a quasi-feudal commune, dominated by a nobility with private armies, to a modern commercial city ruled through patronage illustrates the contingent modality of inequality and the particularly subversive way it can manifest in modern republics.

Armed with this sociological understanding of corruption, I begin in chapter three to explore its contemporary relevance, engaging in a realist critique of Pettit's republican theory of democracy set forth in his latest book: *On the People's Terms* (2012). In *On the People's Terms*, Pettit powerfully underscores the democratic foundations of a constitutional order able to secure freedom. The rule of law, as I shall demonstrate, depends for Pettit ultimately on the centrality of a vigilant citizenry capable of contesting threats to democratic control. Yet, Pettit holds to the moral conception of civic vigilance, and thus does not explore the conditions of the contestatory culture upon which his republic relies. The problem, I argue, is that in conditions of rising inequality, the resources, techniques, and organizational forms that enable powerful elites to interfere directly in the process of law and policy formation may also be used to undermine citizens' disposition to contest the concentration of economic and political power. I make this claim based on a theory of corruption I develop from Machiavelli, arguing that increasing privatization and new modes of philanthropic giving are just some of the secular trends that are undermining the normative foundations of liberal democracy.

In the final chapter, I turn to the question of what a republic can do to check the effects of inequality on associational life and prevent or correct corruption. To that end, I engage with Machiavelli's suggestion, set out in the *Discourses*, that a republic must institutionalize class

distinctions and an ethos of suspicion if it is to foster the kind of non-corrupt, independent, and public-oriented citizenry capable of pursuing and maintaining a republican form of politics. Drawing on Machiavelli's praise of Roman "poverty," the "disunion" between the nobles and plebs, and the "suspicion" manifested by the Roman plebs, I develop a conception of civic culture that counts suspicion of concentrated wealth as an integral component of citizen identity and virtue. I posit that a constitution that makes class a feature of institutional design can foster effective forms of vigilance while, at the same time, opening up the socio-political and psychological space required for non-elite citizens to engage in the difficult work of acting collectively through law. Because of this, I suggest, the incorporation of class into the constitutional framework may have the seemingly paradoxical effect of mitigating against populist threats by promoting democratic interactions among citizens and, in turn, democratic subjectivities committed to the constitutional project that empowers them.

## Chapter 1:

### The Concept of Corruption in Machiavelli Scholarship

What is the relationship between law and virtue in Machiavelli's political theory? In this chapter, I examine the difficulty contemporary scholars of Machiavelli have reconciling his appropriation of the classical language of virtue with his view of human nature and his praise of the constitution and class conflict in Rome. I attribute this difficulty to their shared misunderstanding of Machiavelli's conception of corruption. The focus of this chapter is on Quentin Skinner's interpretation of Machiavelli's liberty. Through a close analysis of Skinner's historical and theoretical work on Machiavelli and republican liberty, I bring to the fore an unanswered question implicit throughout contemporary scholarship on Machiavelli: Does law habituate citizens to virtue? And, if so, how?

Skinner's humanist interpretation of Machiavelli's political thought, published nearly forty years ago in his seminal *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978; herein *Foundations*), marked a paradigm shift in Machiavellian scholarship—replacing Machiavelli the scientist, realist, and teacher of evil with Machiavelli the Florentine patriot and partisan of republican liberty. Portraying Machiavelli as an heir to the golden age of civic humanism that was *quattrocento* Florence, Skinner presents Machiavelli as a faithful follower of that tradition, “basically concerned to uphold the same set of values” as his predecessors, like Leonardo Bruni (156). In particular, Skinner claims, Machiavelli “fully endorses” the civic humanist view that the preservation of liberty depends on the active and virtuous commitment of the whole citizenry to the common good.

Building upon this humanist interpretation of Machiavelli, Skinner elaborated a theory of republican freedom intended as an alternative to liberal rights-based conceptions of freedom

(Skinner 1990, 1998, 2008). Entering the philosophical debate initiated by Isaiah Berlin's critique of positive freedom and its ethics of self-realization, Skinner argues that the assumption held by scholars that the concept of republican freedom is defined by virtuous acts of citizenship is mistaken. Rather, he claims to have discovered in his historical work an alternative republican strand of thinking, best exemplified in Machiavelli's *Discourses*, that ties virtuous public participation with a negative conception of liberty in a way Berlin assumed to be impossible.

The republican theory of freedom Skinner derives from Machiavelli has rightfully received an enthusiastic reception and generated an abundance of learned scholarship in large part because it reconciles two seemingly inconsistent elements within one conceptual frame—the liberty to choose one's own ends and one's obligation to serve the public good. However, the consistency of this conception of republican liberty has been called into question due to the ambiguous role played by law in Skinner's model (Shaw 2003).<sup>1</sup> Relying on Machiavelli's pessimistic view of human nature, Skinner argues a well-ordered constitution is an essential component of a free republic because it forces naturally self-interested and short-sighted (that is, corrupt) citizens into acting virtuously. But it is unclear exactly how the constitutional framework acts to promote virtue in Skinner's account. On one hand, Skinner seems to suggest that the well-ordered constitution *instills* or *implants* virtue into citizens, such that they become inclined to put the common good of the city above their own interests. On the other hand, when

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is indebted to Carl Shaw's elaboration of this ambiguity in Skinner's republican liberty (2003). Shaw is primarily concerned with showing the difficulty Skinner has in reconciling a theory of law as a "liberating agency" that coerces citizens to act virtuously with a negative conception of freedom. Shaw argues that Skinner ultimately moves away from this understanding of law's role with respect to the promotion of civic virtue in favor of a purely juristic model of republicanism in order to preserve the negative character of republican liberty. In this chapter, I am interested in tracing the origins of the theoretical difficulties surrounding the role of law for Skinner to his humanist interpretation of Machiavelli's political thought and explicating the relationship between law and virtue in Machiavelli's republicanism.

he explains the way that the constitution furthers the common good, it appears to institutionally channel and balance the corrupt self-interest of individual citizens, but not transform the interests of those corrupt citizens. On the first count, Machiavelli and Skinner are traditional republicans concerned with transforming selfish individuals into virtuous citizens; on the second, they are liberals simply concerned with counter-balancing the self-interest of individuals. In the latter view, it would seem that a properly functioning mixed constitution obviates the need, demanded by the former view, for employing the law to force citizens to be virtuous. In that case, the republic doesn't require virtuous citizens, merely self-interested ones who accept the validity of institutional constraints and outcomes (Shaw 2003, 51-52).

Skinner has difficulty conceiving the role of law within a republicanism dependent on citizen virtue, I contend, because he incorrectly attributes to Machiavelli a socially agnostic understanding of corruption that originates in human nature. Notwithstanding Machiavelli's propensity to employ the linguistic conventions of his civic humanist predecessors, his diagnosis of the potential threats to republican freedom and stability incorporates a strand of analysis that is more demonstrably sociological. As many in the long tradition of Machiavellian scholarship have noted, Machiavelli was a student of power no less than of rhetoric and moral philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Yes, he was a republican set on defending liberty, a political way of life, and the rule of law. But his work was motivated in large part by a desire to understand why the republican ideals of freedom and virtue espoused by the Florentine humanists failed to translate into stable republican government. To understand why the republicanism of his predecessors deteriorated into the princely rule of the Medici, Machiavelli turned to history, both of Rome and Florence, and to an

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<sup>2</sup> For recent interpretations of Machiavelli's republicanism emphasizing his concern with power and its mediation through law and institutions see: Mansfield (1998); Rahe et al. (2006); Najemy (2010); McCormick (2011); Jurdjevic (2014); and Zuckert (2017).

examination of the social and historical forces of corruption that pose an ineliminable threat to republican polities. What he discovered is that the aspect of human existence that most threatens republican freedom is not our innate selfishness, but a particular kind of social disorder arising in conditions of significant socio-economic inequality. This conclusion undermined much of the civic humanist tradition, particularly the decontextualized assumptions underlying its diagnosis of corruption and understanding of virtue.

As I intend to demonstrate in chapter two, Machiavelli's republican project arose in large part as a response to his overarching concern with the problem of patronage (or "private modes") and the dangerous relations of dependence that arose therefrom. He recognized the way the elite practice of distributing favor in order to cultivate partisans and sects in Florence was largely responsible for the corrupt habitus and the sectarianism that destroyed Florentine republicanism and that this, in turn, was made possible by the existence of great inequalities of wealth and social power. Skinner's intent both to emphasize Machiavelli's linguistic affinity with Roman political philosophy and rhetoric—and later to offer a theory of freedom that privileges civic responsibility but is accessible within a contemporary liberal paradigm—lead him to ignore Machiavelli's sociology of corruption and his arguments regarding the way power dynamics and social relations condition the possibility of virtue. This, I argue, prevents him from understanding the salutary effects of an institutionalized form of class-based discord on the political subjectivity of ordinary citizens.

Yet Skinner is far from alone in his struggle to make sense of Machiavelli's seemingly paradoxical appeal to civic virtue and praise of institutionalized social conflict. The reason for this, I contend, is because both proponents and critics of Skinner's republican interpretation of Machiavelli, unlike the Florentine thinker himself, share Skinner's conception of corruption as

the natural condition of humankind (or at least some portion of it) and virtue as a state of being and mode of action realizable through reason alone. The conventional opposition between the “classical” republic dependent upon reason and virtue and guided by the common good and the “modern” republic reliant on an institutional framework that mediates conflict among corrupt citizens that is recurrent throughout contemporary political theory turns on one’s faith in the power of reason to transcend self-interest in the name of the public good. It is due to their acceptance of this traditional ancient/modern dichotomy that exceptional scholars see in Machiavelli either a revival of the just political community or the founder of modernity and harbinger of political realism and interest-based politics. In this dissertation, I attempt to demonstrate how Machiavelli’s sociologically-grounded republican theory problematizes this opposition. Machiavelli undoubtedly ascribes to a realist conception of human nature and the limits of reason and, in turn, the unavoidability of social conflict. Yet, he never abandons either the republican faith in the possibility of virtue among citizens or the notion that political action should aim at the common good. As I shall demonstrate in the following chapter, Machiavelli’s realism, his concern with the effectual truth, led him to inquire into the conditions, both natural and social, that pose obstacles to the institution of virtue. What he discovered is that the capacity and disposition of citizens to act in furtherance of the common good, that is, to act virtuously, depends a great deal on the way relations between the few and the many are structured. In a corrupt republic, relations between the few and the many are structured by inequality, which, in turn, gives rise to elite factionalism and a culture of dependence. A well-ordered republic, however, mitigates the effects of inequality by (re)configuring social relations between the two humors of citizens through the political institutionalization of conflict between them. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate the way in which the shape of the current debate has obscured the

claim Machiavelli intends to make in the *Discourses*—that the institutionalized class conflict in Rome was essential to the prevention of corruption and sectarianism and the *production and maintenance* of plebian virtue in that republic.

In the next section, I begin with an outline of Skinner’s republican freedom and its theoretical difficulties in defining the role of law. Next, I turn to Skinner’s interpretation of Machiavelli, focusing on the difficulty he has in reconciling his understanding of Machiavelli’s thought on the relationship between freedom and civic virtue with Machiavelli’s concerns regarding wealth and inequality and the importance of institutionalized class conflict. I then review Maurizio Viroli’s republican correction to Skinner’s interpretation and his attunement with the problem of dependence for Machiavelli. I argue that, even though Viroli acknowledges the structural underpinnings of Machiavelli’s diagnosis of corruption, he does not carry this argument to its logical end with respect to Machiavelli’s social and political recommendations. He, like Skinner, wants to maintain Machiavelli’s humanist pedigree and the power of rhetoric and reason and so similarly discounts moments in Machiavelli’s work where he is clearly concerned with the distribution of power and wealth and its effects on virtue. In the next section, I examine criticisms of Skinner’s republican Machiavelli. Though Skinner’s critics come from a wide spectrum of viewpoints on how to position Machiavelli historically, philosophically, and ideologically, they all reject the Cambridge school’s classical reading emphasizing the centrality of power, self-interest, and socio-political conflict in Machiavelli’s political theory. Through a review of these criticisms, I bring to the fore what Skinner neglects—the central importance of conflict and the conditioning effects of power and social structures on virtue for Machiavelli. Thus armed, I conclude by returning to Machiavelli’s freedom and attempt to reconcile the

relationship between institutionalized class conflict and civic virtue in Machiavelli that contemporary treatments of his work leave unresolved.

### **Republican Freedom: Corruption and the Ambiguous Role of Law**

It has been nearly forty years since Skinner first articulated the republican or neo-Roman concept of liberty he first identified in Machiavelli's political thought. Since then, he has continued to elaborate the theory, publishing a number of theoretical and historical works on the subject, including *Liberty before Liberalism*, in which he identifies the neo-Roman concept of freedom (as he has come to call it) in the writings of seventeenth century English parliamentarians (1998). In this chapter, I rely in large part on an earlier piece, "The Republican ideal of political liberty," published as part of a collection of essays entitled *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, in which Skinner develops Machiavelli's theory of freedom and expresses the conceptual difficulties that arise as a result (1990). He begins the piece by setting up the philosophical argument over the concept of freedom between positive and negative adherents in order to interject his third way of thinking of freedom, which rejects a notion of a human telos or moral purpose, yet encompasses within itself the necessity of a free polity governed by law and the duty of active citizenship. Machiavelli and later proponents of this alternative version of republican theory of freedom, Skinner says, are concerned with the protection of liberty understood in purely negative terms—that is, as the liberty to choose one's own ends.<sup>3</sup> However, they argue that the only way that the citizens of a republic can avoid political servitude and

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<sup>3</sup> Skinner quotes the following in Machiavelli's *Discourses* II.2 for this proposition: "In lands and provinces which live as free states' individual citizens can hope 'to live without fear that their patrimony will be taken away from them, knowing not merely that they are born as free citizens and not as slaves, but that they can hope to rise by their abilities to become leaders of their communities'" (302).

relations of personal dependence is if they engage in acts of public service (302). To do so, Skinner's Machiavelli argues, requires the cultivation of civic virtues—specifically those virtues required for the effective participation in public life. Skinner defines Machiavellian civic virtue here as “public-spiritedness” and as the capacities that enable citizens “to willingly serve the common good” (303). These capacities include the martial virtues (or the willingness to defend the community under threat of conquest) and the prudence to actively and effectively participate in government.

Unfortunately, argues Skinner, relying on Machiavelli, individuals are generally reluctant to cultivate these qualities because they tend to ignore the claims of their community as soon as they seem to conflict with the pursuit of their own immediate advantage. In republican terminology, they are corrupt:

To be corrupt... is to forget—or fail to grasp—something which it is profoundly in our interests to remember: that if we wish to enjoy as much freedom as we can hope to attain within political society, there is good reason for us to act in the first instance as virtuous citizens, placing the common good above the pursuit of any individual or factional ends. Corruption, in short, is simply a failure of rationality... (304)

Skinner's Machiavelli follows in the Roman tradition in holding a “classic” definition of corruption and in turn civic virtue (304n42). The term corruption signifies the inherent or natural immoral state of humanity and civic virtue a form of self-mastery: the triumph of reason over our selfish disposition. In *Foundations*, to which I will turn in the following section, Skinner argues that the greatest obstacle to overcoming corruption for Machiavelli is our inherent selfishness. Here, however, he seems to attribute the human disposition towards corruption to our limited cognitive abilities, claiming that: “[t]he chain of practical reason we must follow out in the case of acting to uphold our own liberty is at times so complex, and so unwelcome to citizens of corrupt disposition, that we can easily get lost in the argument” and “even on reflection” fail to

recognize “the range of actions we have good reason to perform in order to bring about the ends we actually desire” (307). In this characterization, our natural disposition towards selfishness only exacerbates what is ultimately a problem of reasoning. This slight alteration in Skinner’s assessment of Machiavelli’s thought on corruption is suggestive of the difficulty he has with interpreting Machiavelli’s concept of corruption, because it acknowledges the way in which corruption is not entirely a matter of individual moral weakness. Corruption is our inability to *know* what is in our own good, rather than our tendency to do what we know is wrong. Mistakenly, however, Skinner attributes corruption to an alternative form of inherent weakness—our cognitive deficiencies—rather than to something external, as in the power relations and socio-political structures of society.

If men are naturally corrupt—whether as a result of their inherent selfishness or cognitive deficiencies—the question then is: how can “they be persuaded to act virtuously” or, as Skinner puts it elsewhere, how can “the generality of men have the quality of *virtú* implanted and maintained in them” so that they can be made to uphold republican liberty? (1990, 305; 2000, 69). Machiavelli’s solution, says Skinner, is the coercive power of law (1990, 305). Republican law, unlike the liberal conception of law, doesn’t act to promote freedom by constraining others from infringing on my rights. Laws serve the ends of both the republic and the individual by “coercing naturally self-interested individuals to act in a particular way” (305). The justification for law’s coercive role for Machiavelli, says Skinner, is that “it creates and preserves a degree of individual liberty which, in its absence, would promptly collapse into servitude” (305).<sup>4</sup> Law forces us “out of our habitual patterns of self-interested behavior” and “into discharging the full range of our civic duties” (305). As evidence for his conclusions, Skinner cites Machiavelli’s

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<sup>4</sup> It is for this reason, writes Skinner, it is said that we may be “forced to be free” (305).

claim that the finest examples of civic virtue are said to “have their origin in good education,” which in turn has its origin “in good laws,” and that, while “hunger and poverty make men industrious,” the “laws make them good” (295). It is here that Skinner’s conception of Machiavelli’s law most looks like a civilizing agency in that it implants or instills virtue by habituating citizens to virtuous action. Still, when Skinner turns to the specific “mechanisms” Machiavelli has in mind when he speaks of using the law to coerce naturally self-interested individuals into acting virtuously, things become confused.

Skinner first notes Machiavelli’s advice on the use of religion and oath-taking to induce a republic’s citizen-armies to maintain their ground in the face of fear (306). But the “key” to instilling virtue by the force of law for Machiavelli, argues Skinner, is a mixed constitution in which the “instabilities of the pure forms are corrected while their strengths are combined” (306). The Romans, by requiring the consent of an assembly of the people and an assembly of the nobility for every law promulgated, ensured that only those laws “conducive to the public liberty” were actually passed. This is so even though “each group admittedly tended to produce proposals designed merely to further its own interests” (306). In a later work, in which Skinner outlines Machiavelli’s political thought, he elaborates on Machiavelli’s institutional mechanism for instilling *virtú*, arguing that Machiavelli’s solution is that citizens in a republic be “well-ordered” or “organized in such a way as to compel them to acquire *virtú* and uphold their liberties” (2000, 69). Good *ordini*—that is “institutions, constitutional arrangements and other methods for ordering and organizing citizens”—will “force” citizens “to place the good of their community above all selfish interests” (72). It does this, says Skinner, because a well-ordered constitution engineers a “tensely balanced equilibrium between the opposed social forces” of the rich and the people so that each faction “motivated entirely by their self-interest... will be guided,

as if by an invisible hand, to promote the public interest in all their legislative acts” (72). “It is from this discord,” Skinner states that “all the laws made in favour of liberty and the common good result” (75).

The ambiguity as to the role of law arises here because it is unclear exactly how the constitutional framework acts to promote virtue. On one hand, Skinner clearly wants to suggest that a well-ordered constitution *instills* or *implants* virtue into citizens, which means that citizens become inclined as individuals to put the common good of the city above their own interests. Yet, when he explains the way in which the mixed constitution operates to further the common good he describes it as the institutional accommodation of corrupt self-interests by a system that channels and balances but does not transform the interests of citizens. This second characterization of law strongly resembles the liberal doctrine of the invisible hand that states that if citizens pursue an “enlightened self-interest,” the outcome will be the greatest good of the community as a whole (Shaw 2003, 52). But, Skinner argues, republicans such as Machiavelli reject this doctrine as simply another way of describing corruption (1990, 304). Skinner’s Machiavelli is committed to the principle that a well-functioning republic must be supported by a virtuous citizenry devoted to the public good; when pressed to explain how Machiavelli instills this virtue into naturally corrupt citizens, though, Skinner is unable to do so, choosing instead to describe the function of law as the institutional balancing of selfish and factional interests.

It turns out in the end that the civic virtue necessary to maintain the state is not in fact generated from this institutional balancing because “most people remain more committed to their own ambitions than to the public interest, and ‘never do anything good except by necessity’” (2000, 76). In order to prevent “over-mighty citizens and powerful interest groups from altering the balance of the constitution in favour of their own selfish and factional ends” says Skinner,

Machiavelli “has one further constitutional proposal to advance...eternal vigilance” (76).

Skinner claims that it is essential for Machiavelli “that everyone ‘keep their eyes open,’ holding themselves in readiness not only to identify such corrupting tendencies, but also to employ the force of law in order to stamp out as soon as—or even before—they begin to become a menace” (77). Machiavelli’s institutions, in other words, need a vigilant, that is, virtuous, people. But popular virtue—the capacity and motivation to maintain this vigilance and to recognize those forces that threaten a republic and the organizational capacity to act through law—must come from some source external to the constitutional framework, such as a program of civic education. The political institutionalization of social conflict is not the answer.

Skinner’s inability to explain Machiavelli’s thought on the constructive effects of social discord, it seems to me, rests on two related interpretive moves. First, Skinner wants to attribute to Machiavelli a “classical” understanding of the concepts of corruption as our predisposition towards short-sighted and ultimately irrational selfishness and civic virtue as self-mastery through our innate capacity for reason. Second, Skinner largely ignores Machiavelli’s class-based political anthropology in favor of a sociologically agnostic understanding of an abstract citizen (McCormick 2003). Combined, these two moves enable Skinner to argue in favor of a republicanism supported by an undifferentiated collection of citizens devoted to the common good. But they prevent him from understanding exactly how the disunion between the nobles and the plebs in Rome worked to promote the distinct virtue of both classes of citizens and the republic. As I shall argue in the following chapter, for Machiavelli, corruption is a much more complex problem than our inherent tendency toward selfishness and is intricately related to the interaction between the two humors of citizens that exist in all polities. Skinner’s civic humanist interpretation of Machiavelli obscures the sociological origins of corruption and, in turn, the

significance of this disunion for Machiavelli. It is to this interpretation that I turn in the following section.

### **Skinner's Humanist Machiavelli**

In *Foundations*, Skinner applies his contextualist approach of intellectual history to the study of renaissance political thought (Skinner 1978). Skinner's interpretive method builds on Pocock's earlier work on the history of "discourses" or languages by incorporating work on the philosophy of language, specifically J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts (Pocock 2003). For Skinner, the key question to ask about a text when attempting to explain it is what the author intended to do: that is, what question, situation, or problem the author was responding to in writing it (Skinner 2002, 101). To understand what an author meant to do and, in turn, the moves made in his argument, one must first come to an understanding of the historically constituted discursive space in which the author was writing. This requires that the historian delve into both the socio-political and intellectual contexts of the author. "Political life," argues Skinner, "sets the main problems" and causes a "corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate" (1978, xi.) Much more important for Skinner, however, are the prevailing linguistic and political conventions or "ideologies," as Skinner calls them, governing the treatment of the issues or themes with which the author was concerned.<sup>5</sup> These linguistic conventions roughly form the limits of what can be thought and communicated at any given historical moment. By focusing on ideologies, the aim, according to Skinner, is to understand the author's "social imaginary" or "the complete range of symbols and representations that constitute

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<sup>5</sup> Ideology refers to any set of linguistic practices shared by writers of a particular period or writing in a particular discourse: vocabularies, principles, inherited assumptions, problems and conceptual distinctions.

the subjectivity of his age” (2002, 102). Situating Machiavelli within the larger intellectual context of renaissance civic humanism in this way, Skinner argues, alters the conventional understanding of Machiavelli’s aims and intentions in the *Discourses*, revealing it to be a “relatively orthodox contribution to a well-established tradition of Republican political thought” derived from Roman stoicism and law (1978, 180).

Skinner’s work on Machiavelli continues the project begun by Hans Baron (1966) and Pocock of rehabilitating Machiavelli as a republican intent on establishing and maintaining republican liberty. He sets the historical stage for Machiavelli’s republican contribution at the “twilight” preceding the final triumph of monarchy over popular government throughout Italy, thus framing him within the same historical moment as the *quattrocento* humanists writing over one hundred years earlier (1978, 153). His gives little else in the way of social or political context surrounding Machiavelli and his fellow defenders of “Florence’s traditional liberties” other than to note their desire to overturn the Medici and restore the republic as the Florentines had done in 1494.<sup>6</sup> His focus is rather on the language employed by these writers and its congruence with earlier humanist writings. As we shall see, defining Machiavelli’s discursive context in this way leads Skinner to incorrectly identify the social problem Machiavelli means to conceptualize with the term corruption.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Skinner states: “They were animated by their memory of the successful restoration of the Republic in 1494, their hope of overturning the Medici government once again and their need to maintain a ‘spirit of opposition’ to the Medici’s ‘allegedly despotic and tyrannical practices,’” (153).

<sup>7</sup> For critical analysis of Skinner’s interpretive method and the subjective difficulties inherent in defining an author’s problem space, see Clarke (2013a). For a critique of Skinner’s tendency to privilege an author’s intellectual environment over his socio-political context, see Richter (1990). See also Najemy (2000).

Applying his contextual method, Skinner holds liberty to be “the basic value” of the *Discourses* and Machiavelli’s analysis of the term to be essentially the same as that promoted by the *quattrocento* humanists including Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, and Poggio Bracciolini (1978, 157). As it did for these earlier republicans, liberty for Machiavelli means “independence from external aggression and tyranny” and, relatedly, “the power of a free people to govern themselves instead of being governed by a prince” (157, 158). With this view of Machiavelli’s main intent in mind, Skinner finds Machiavelli’s republicanism wholly conventional with respect to its key features, in particular the centrality of a virtuous citizenry. For Machiavelli, claims Skinner, to preserve liberty what needs to be fostered “above all” is not so much “a set of effective institutions” but a “sense of civic pride and patriotism in the people as a whole” (175). Republican freedom and greatness depends on each citizen equating “his own good with that of the city” and “devoting his best energies in assuring its freedom and greatness.” Therefore, a republic must have as its end the promotion of *virtú* understood as a “public commitment” or “public spirit” in the whole body of citizens (175, 176).

To promote virtue, Skinner admits that Machiavelli diverges from the tradition by only “glancingly” mentioning the conventional solution of a proper humanist education (178). Previous humanists had stressed the importance of instruction “of grave and liberal studies” early in life as the best guarantee of being able to “attain and practice *virtú* and wisdom” later on (90). But, he argues, Machiavelli offers the “finest restatement” of the traditional belief that the “*virtú* of the people is most efficiently promoted by involving them as much as possible in the running of the commonwealth” (179). Broad access to the public promotes virtue for Machiavelli, argues Skinner, for the same reasons it does for Bruni: it provides a means through which citizens can “gain favour by service to the public” and achieve reputation, glory, and honor. Machiavelli,

Skinner suggests, emphasizes political equality because it entices “men of the highest talents” to seek to satisfy their ambition through public service rather than “withdrawing into more private and potentially factious allegiances” (179). Indeed, these reasons support Bruni’s aristocratic republicanism, in which a political culture of merit and honor is meant to weaken familial and party loyalties among the elite and channel their ambitions towards public service. But these reasons do not support Machiavelli’s arguments in favor of broad participation by non-elite citizens as a class; nor do they explain how virtue is promoted in the generality of these citizens, who, according to Machiavelli, are motivated more by a desire for security than by a concern for glory or honor (D I.5, I.16).

Notwithstanding his general conclusion regarding the proper understanding of the late renaissance Florentines as heirs to the civic humanist tradition, Skinner himself notes a number of ways in which Machiavelli and his contemporaries “extended and even contradicted” previous assumptions about the preservation of political liberty, particularly in their discussion of corruption and the merits of poverty and institutions (1978, 173). First, Skinner notes the way in which the writers of the later Renaissance, and especially Machiavelli, reveal “a heightened awareness of the problem” of corruption “and devote an unprecedented amount of attention to the investigation of its causes” (166). There is even a sense, writes Skinner, in which the concept of corruption “lies at the heart of the *Discourses*” (164).<sup>8</sup> Further, he notes the way in which Machiavelli is “interested in the more abstract and metaphorical suggestion that the commonwealth itself may be capable of *virtù*, just as it may be liable to become corrupt” (176). For Skinner, what this suggests is a more “collective view” of virtue and corruption, confirming

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<sup>8</sup> Here he cites a passage in *Discourses* I.12 where Machiavelli “tells us that his main aim in the book is to offer advice to ‘those princes and those Republics which desire to remain free from corruption’” (164).

Machiavelli's belief in the need for a "virtuous body of citizens" and correspondingly to relate the concept of virtue to the idea of "public spirit." He doesn't inquire into the possibility of a corrupt commonwealth understood as something distinct from a collection of morally corrupt individuals. Rather, confining the term corruption within individualist parameters, Skinner concludes that what Machiavelli "basically has in mind in speaking of 'corruption' is a failure to devote one's energies to the common good, and a corresponding tendency to place one's own interests above those of the community" (164).

When Skinner turns to the question of corruption's causes, he acknowledges the unprecedented concern that late renaissance writers expressed regarding excessive wealth. While earlier humanists either ignored or praised wealth and its contribution to republican life, the prevalence of disproportionate wealth is taken to be a primary factor inhibiting the achievement of a virtuous civil life by most of Machiavelli's contemporaries (170). Skinner observes Machiavelli's disdain for "luxurious habits" and Machiavelli's repeated comments on the importance of poverty for a free way of life (163, 170). But Skinner neither delineates the relevance of this concern for Machiavelli's thought on corruption, nor explains exactly how wealth destroys republican freedom. Instead, he argues that Machiavelli basically follows Bruni again in arguing that the key to avoiding corruption lies in popular participation. According to Skinner, Bruni argues that the people must have a "sufficiently active role" in government in order "to ensure that the interests of the community as a whole are considered, and not merely the interest of a particular group of citizens" (166). Machiavelli, Skinner writes, sees corruption as a problem of the "ineptitude for a free way of life" that infects the citizenry when "a group of oligarchs manages to seize control of its institutions and prevent the rest of the citizenry from helping to operate them" (166). These two rationales for the salutary effects of popular political

engagement are far from equivalent. As he does in his discussion of the way in which popular government promotes virtue, Skinner here conflates Machiavelli's intent to promote virtue among ordinary citizens—understood as attachment to and aptitude for a free way of life—with Bruni's concern to ensure that a republic's elite leadership take into account the interests of the people and act to promote the common good.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, while Bruni and his followers mainly concentrated on the question of how “to promote the right kind of civic spirit amongst the people and their leaders, assuming that this in turn would serve to maintain the liberty of their city as a whole,” Skinner recounts the way later republicans, including Machiavelli, place considerably more emphasis on the need for political institutions and law (1978, 170-171). These writers following the scholastic approach, argues Skinner, turned their attention to the “machinery of government” and in most cases towards the Venetian constitutional model with its strong senatorial authority as the key to combining liberty with peace. Skinner notes that Machiavelli was, in fact, “more interested than any of his ‘civic’ humanist predecessors in ‘devising good law whereby to maintain liberty’” and that he represented the “great exception to the rule” in rejecting the Venetian model in favor of the more popular constitution of Rome (171). Machiavelli, contrary to many of his contemporaries and the earlier humanists, was a “fervent partisan of popular government” (159). But, says Skinner, Machiavelli's partiality for an inclusive *Consiglio Grande* derived from his preference for an expansionist republicanism and not from any interest in promoting a specific kind of social conflict or popular form of virtue (160).

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<sup>9</sup> Bruni's paternalistic republicanism is consonant with much of the neo-roman tradition beginning with Livy and the ancient Romans (see Kapust 2004). But it is, I argue, this paternalistic conception of republicanism (and the naïve assumptions regarding elite virtue upon which it is based) that Machiavelli's republicanism is meant to challenge.

Notwithstanding these digressions, Skinner maintains his stance regarding Machiavelli's "relatively orthodox contribution," particularly with respect to the nature and import of civic virtue (180). As a result, when Skinner turns to Machiavelli's most "heterodox" argument regarding the political value of social discord, he misconstrues its relationship to popular virtue (181). Skinner describes Machiavelli's thought on the conflict between the plebs and the nobles in Rome as a radical attack on the prevailing orthodoxy regarding the value of unity and harmony and the danger of all factional conflict for liberty. The institutionalization of the conflict in Rome between the nobles and the plebs was beneficial, argues Skinner, because it engineered a "tensely-balanced equilibrium" between the two parties whereby sectional interests were canceled out, leaving only those laws that benefited the community as a whole to be enacted. Those who condemned conflict and argued on behalf of civil concord as essential for freedom, according to Skinner, simply did not follow through on their own arguments regarding the connection between virtue and citizen involvement in public affairs. They failed to appreciate that the "tumults" of ancient Rome were a consequence of "intense political involvement," and were thus a "manifestation of the highest civic *virtù*" (181).

In *Foundations*, Skinner treats the socio-political conflict in Rome as a consequence or symptom of virtue and not as a cause of virtuous political engagement, as he argues in his later works on Machiavelli and republican liberty.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in Skinner's account in *Foundations*, mere engagement in partisan conflict appears sufficient to warrant the label of virtue. Yet, if law is to instill the kind of civic virtue that Skinner attributes to Machiavelli, law must somehow *cause* citizens to act with the *intent* to further the common good. Skinner's explanation of Machiavelli's thought on the institutionalization of social conflict in *Foundations*

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<sup>10</sup> See Skinner (1990, 305) and Skinner (2000, 69).

does not establish this conclusion. Rather, it appears to fall back on the institutional mediation of self-interested factions acting politically to satisfy their partisan ends.

For Skinner, reason and ideas are the foundation of virtue. Because Skinner reads Machiavelli through a humanist frame, he neglects moments in which the Florentine is clearly concerned with understanding the socio-economic origins of corruption and, in turn, the corresponding constitutional remedies. Without a proper understanding of corruption and its foundation in dangerous relations of dependence caused by inequalities in wealth and social power, however, Skinner cannot fully appreciate either the significance of Machiavelli's argument regarding poverty or understand the constructive effects of a constitutional order that does not merely accept, but actually nurtures, a particular kind of social discord.

### **The Problem of Dependence**

Maurizio Viroli's rigorous excavation of Machiavelli's body of work is an attempt to reclaim his political theory from those who attribute to Machiavelli a theory of politics concerned solely with power and state preservation. Building on Skinner's work, Viroli argues that, for Machiavelli, the art of politics or the *vivere civile* is not the art of war but the classical republican art of instituting and preserving the good political community (1990). Political action in turn is "civil wisdom" or the "art of founding, preserving, and reforming a civil community of individuals living together in peace and under the shield of laws" (1998, 7). Viroli's Machiavelli follows the basic precepts of classical Roman civil science by arguing for the institution of justice and equality before the law:

Machiavelli's republicanism is... a commitment to the ideal of a well-ordered republic—that is, a republic which is kept in order by the rule of law and by constitutional arrangements that ensure that each component of the polity has its proper place; it is a commitment to the principles of the political and civil life

*(vivere politico; vivere civile)* and to a conception of political liberty understood as an absence of personal dependence... (116)

Notwithstanding the emphasis he places on the rule of just law for Machiavelli, Viroli, both in his interpretive work devoted to the Florentine thinker and his later work on republican political theory, follows Skinner in continuing to emphasize the role of virtue in maintaining a republican order. Unlike Skinner, however, Viroli explicitly acknowledges the distinction Machiavelli makes between the virtue of a republic's elite leadership and that of ordinary citizens at least functionally if not by their dispositions. Machiavelli's "political man," argues Viroli, is a patriot, a "magnanimous soul who commits himself, or herself, to goals that go beyond the horizon of self-interest, or family, or social group, to encompass the entire political community, the republic at large" (1998, 7). A well-ordered republic, argues Viroli, depends on the political leadership of these patriots—"very severe and intransigent citizens who are 'wholly devoted to the common good' and are 'in no way affected by private ambition.'" However, says Viroli, the republic also depends on the virtue of ordinary citizens, understood as a respect for and guardianship of the rule of law—an "everyday virtue" that "translates into the orderly fulfillment of civic obligations and abiding by the law" and the "know how to resist" and "when it becomes necessary, mobilize against those who wish to destroy their free way of life" (1998, 138; 2002, 75).

Like Skinner's virtuous citizen, Viroli's citizens—both a republic's political leadership and ordinary citizens alike—act out of a sense of duty or public commitment and according to their own principled reasoning. But, unlike Skinner's virtuous citizens, Viroli's are motivated not by reason or belief but by a passion he alternately calls republican patriotism, love of a free way of life, or love of country. Viroli derives this form of passionate virtue from Machiavelli's account in the *Discourses* of both individual citizens and the Roman people acting out "of love of the fatherland" (1998, 156). Love of country is the "moral force" that gives citizens the

wisdom to understand what the common good of the republic consists of and the strength to pursue it (157). Here, Viroli is attempting to resolve a question regarding the motivation behind acts of public service. For Skinner, the motivation stems from reason or alternatively through the coercive power of law. For Viroli, a virtuous citizen does not suppress passions with reason, “but allows one passion, civic charity, to prevail over the other and tries to balance civic virtue, and service to the republic with private life” (2002, 78). He describes this passion as an “attachment” to “a free way of life” and the republican principles, institutions and laws and the political and social practices they permit and encourage as well as the material and cultural particularities of one’s fatherland (1998, 161). But, when he turns to a discussion of how this passion is awoken in citizens, both in a republic’s leadership and those who stand as guard of the law and republican freedom, he wrongly identifies Machiavelli with classical republicanism and its ideational assumptions regarding culture and the inculcation of virtue. This is so, we shall see, notwithstanding Viroli’s recognition of Machiavelli’s unprecedented concern with the material origins of corruption.

Viroli takes up, in detail, the worry Machiavelli expresses regarding the dangers of corruption, calling it a “disease that penetrates the deepest fibres of collective life” (1998, 132). Like Skinner, Viroli understands the problem of corruption for Machiavelli as the degeneration of societal norms—it “permeates the manners, and perverts the citizens’ judgment on honour and glory” whereby they place selfish and factional ends ahead of the common good (132). Unlike Skinner, however, Viroli recognizes that for Machiavelli, the primary cause of corruption is relations of dependence made possible through the consolidation of social, economic and political power. A city founded under foreign rule, that is with “servile” origins, will remain “abject” and incapable of taking care of itself even with the institution of good political orders

(133). This was the case in Florence, where the good orders instituted were “mingled with the old ones that were unfit for free government” so that the good orders were turned bad. Likewise, princely or monarchical rule is the cause of corruption because “peoples who have been living under a prince acquire servile habits; they do not know how to govern themselves, how to deliberate on public matters, or how to defend themselves from external enemies.” Finally, wealthy citizens are particularly corruptive, says Viroli, “because they can easily obtain an outstanding power incompatible with civic equality and the rule of law by doing private favours for other citizens” and in turn form “powerful cohorts of partisans and friends who feel even more encouraged to become ‘corrupters of public morals and law breakers’” (134). With regard to wealth, gentlemen—people who live in “idleness” off landed estates—maintain a form of monied power that is particularly dangerous according to Viroli: “The gentry are pernicious to civil life, not only because of their idle and corrupt way of life, but also, and above all, because they have subjects who are ‘under their obedience’ and therefore dependent on them” (134). Regardless of whether grounded in exaggerated wealth, immense political or military power, or landed title, dependence corrupts because “it erodes the citizens’ moral and physical strength... Instead of learning how to serve the common good, [citizens] learn to serve powerful men and become used to depending on somebody’s will.”

In *The Liberty of Servants* (2010), a recent work on contemporary Italian politics under the modern Medician prince Silvio Berlusconi, Viroli expounds on the problem of dependence for freedom and corruption. Here, he makes a distinction between the liberty of a servant and the liberty of a citizen. Citizens of contemporary Italy are free in that they maintain a significant amount of control over their daily lives according to Italian law. But, they are unfree, according to Viroli, because of the power Berlusconi maintains and his ability to arbitrarily interfere in the

Italian political process. Under Berlusconi, argues Viroli, the Italian republic has degenerated into a court system that functions through a politics of patronage. The immense social power Berlusconi accumulated in wealth and his control over Italian media enabled him to acquire a disproportionate amount of political power through the distribution of favors and the cultivation of a party of clients beholden to him. Importantly, unlike oppression, the relations of servitude cultivated through the court system and the practice of patronage is often sought out by would-be servants (24).<sup>11</sup> This form of politics, according to Viroli, engenders a “servile mentality” in both political elites and ordinary citizens alike (xi). It is a mentality born out of living in “servitude” and engaging in the cultural practices and interactions associated with subservient status (77).<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Viroli, unlike Skinner clearly recognizes the social origins of corruption for Machiavelli. His analysis of the servant mentality and its origin in distortions in economic and social power begins to get at the claim I wish to make in this dissertation about Machiavelli’s thought on dependence and corruption. I am concerned here with the way social relations and patterns of action and interaction structure citizens’ understanding and orientation to public modes of action. Viroli, however, does not explore the implications of this relationship between dependence and a corrupt mentality—that is its origins in necessity and material concerns. He recognizes that a primary aim of Machiavelli’s republicanism “is to *shape*, to educate the passions of the citizens” and that Machiavelli’s republicanism depends on its citizens having the right “mentality” (154). Yet, for Viroli, Machiavelli is a wholehearted proponent of the classical tradition both with respect to the commitments of his virtuous citizens and the “ethical” means

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<sup>11</sup> “A servant who seeks his servitude, unlike a servant who is coerced by force, must learn to think, speak and act like his master” (Ibid).

<sup>12</sup> “Long and assiduous practice of the art of identifying with one’s master ensures that a voluntary servant becomes a servant in his heart” at 24.

through which corruption is prevented and virtue fostered. The problem of dependence, and the servile mentality it engenders, is fought, according to Viroli, through proliferation of civic, moral and religious discourse not through the constitutional restructuring of socio-economic relations and certainly not through the cultivation of any kind of political conflict (138-139).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, when he turns to Machiavelli's thought on the institutional and political measures to be adopted to preserve the civil and free form of life, he neglects Machiavelli's most innovative mode for preventing the formation of dangerous relations of dependence—the redirection of ordinary citizens' material concerns into public modes through the institutionalized disunion between the nobles and the plebs. For Viroli, social discord is not constitutive of virtue in any sense. Rather, it is something a republic must accept as a political reality if it is to be politically inclusive and able to defend itself against external forces (157-159).

Viroli's scholarship is avowedly rhetorical. His latest work on Berlusconi's Italy is a call to action directed at potential patriots in the Italian elite class. Viroli's Machiavelli too believes in the power of words to bring about a new moral custom (72). There is no denying that Machiavelli wrote rhetorically in an attempt to persuade his various elite audiences to act. Nor can I ignore Machiavelli's reliance on the ideal figure of a virtuous founder—a powerful individual born to a corrupt society but committed to the common good—to found and reform the republic. What Viroli seems to overlook, however, is that Machiavelli placed little faith in the human capacity for moral self-restraint, particularly in those with the power and means to ignore societal norms. Florentine political life and history showed Machiavelli quite clearly the way the

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<sup>13</sup> Viroli writes: "The court and courtiers...are the creators of behavior and custom, and we must work to replace the ways of servile thought and life with those proper to a free way of life. It is possible to shape behavior with education, and in particular with civic education" (2010, 139).

practice of rhetoric, moral discourse, and civic education of his *quattrocento* humanists predecessors failed to keep the Florentine *ottimati* and their politics of patronage in check.

Viroli ultimately acknowledges this when he states that for Machiavelli “eloquence is far from sufficient to found and preserve states” because “it is ‘easy to persuade peoples’ but ‘difficult to keep them persuaded’” (1998, 110). Here, he recognizes that, for Machiavelli, “when political orders are corrupt, words are no longer sufficient” (111-112).<sup>14</sup> This, I argue, is because corruption, the kind that destroyed the Florentine republic, did not originate first in citizens’ inherent selfishness or in the corruption of the moral language, beliefs, or ideas of citizens as implied by both Skinner and Viroli and many of their critics.<sup>15</sup> Rather, it had its origins in necessity and in the dangerous forms of dependence that are a result of the consolidation of wealth and social power in the hands of a few. It is for this reason that a true political leader must be an armed prophet, able to “‘force them to believe’, as Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus did” (Viroli 1998, 110). Only with the power to transform the everyday material existence of citizens can a founder hope to cultivate the right kind of mental state in the people and the republic’s political leadership.

Machiavelli’s intent was to found an autonomous system capable of “forcing” citizens to cultivate the virtues distinct to each humor without the dominating presence of a prince. As such, his statecraft was as much concerned with preventing elites from cultivating dangerous forms of dependence as he was with the institutionalization of military, civic, and religious education. If relations of dependence and the interactions experienced therein create a servile mentality, then,

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<sup>14</sup> “Even a wise and good man who knows what should be done to reform the orders of the republic will not be able to ‘persuade others’ to undertake the necessary reforms” (Viroli 1998, 111-112).

<sup>15</sup> See for example Clarke (2013) and Fischer (2006).

for Machiavelli, the transformation of the polity and its citizens requires the eradication of dangerous forms of interaction and their replacement with social relations that produce healthy patterns of action and a virtuous mental state through their performance.

### **The Critique of the Republican Interpretation**

In this section, I explore two distinct lines of criticism raised against the civic humanist interpretation of Machiavelli's republicanism. The first rejects any affinity between Machiavelli and ancient republicanism: both Greek and Roman. These scholars, influenced by Strauss (1958), are concerned with understanding Machiavelli in terms of his modernity and argue that his republicanism rests on a radical departure from teleological accounts of man and his natural capacity for good. Their Machiavelli is the founder of a modern and distinctly liberal form of republicanism and a conception of civil life as a political process that manages the self-interested acquisitiveness of citizens through laws, orders, and, at times, evil to guarantee the security and material well-being of its citizens. The second line of criticism is also concerned with rejecting Machiavelli's civic humanist pedigree, but for reason of its elitist implications. These scholars highlight the strong populism underlying Machiavelli's republican theory and the role class conflict plays in the success and failure of states. Both lines of criticism take seriously Machiavelli's claim in the proem to Book I of the *Discourses* to have entered a "path not yet trodden by anyone" with respect to the "modes and orders" essential to maintaining a republican state; both recognize in Machiavelli a heightened awareness and accommodation of the role of necessity and power in political life. Yet, both discount the structural origins of both corruption and virtue for Machiavelli and, as such, do not appreciate the significance of class conflict for the production of popular virtue.

*Power, Institutions, and the Effectual Truth*

The line of interpretation I consider in this section emphasizes above all else Machiavelli's innovative turn to the "effectual truth" of human existence "rather than to the imagination of it" in the *Prince* (1998, XV).<sup>16</sup> Rejecting the ancient and scholastic belief in an overarching ethical order, scholars argue, Machiavelli sets out to construct a political order that not only acknowledges but also incorporates the reality of how men actually live rather than how they should live into his political theory (P XV). This turn to political and social reality has two important consequences for Machiavelli's republicanism. First, while it is clear that Machiavelli drew extensively on the terms, tropes, arguments, and metaphors of classical philosophy and rhetoric, his republicanism was in fact a radical attempt to check the harsh realities of contemporary and historical Florentine political life. Second, his republicanism forgoes any reliance on moral virtue in favor of an institutional framework of laws buttressed by the power of a few that channels the ambitious and acquisitive nature of men. Many of the conclusions derived by this first line of scholars unjustifiably discount the moments Skinner and Viroli rely on in which Machiavelli is clearly concerned with institutionalizing liberty and the importance of just law and the virtue of ordinary citizens to that end. Nevertheless, their understanding of Machiavelli sheds light on the fault in Skinner's interpretation of Machiavelli and, in turn, the theory of freedom he derives therefrom because it highlights in Machiavelli what Skinner's humanist frame obscures—the influence of necessity on the political habitus.

Skinner's contextual methodology theoretically recognizes the importance of both an author's intellectual context and socio-political context. But, as his critics rightly observe, when Skinner has applied his methodology, as in *Foundations*, he has tended to place much greater

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<sup>16</sup> Herein cited in the text as P with chapter numbers.

emphasis on the linguistic conventions present at a particular historical moment than the institutional and legal contexts or social and political affiliations of particular writers and their audiences (Richter 2001, 64-64; Najemy 2000). This intellectual bias, and his failure to engage with the way different political and social groups applied linguistic conventions to different sets of social conditions within struggles for power, causes Skinner to lump when he should split (Clarke 2013a, 214). This is a point made by a number of scholars regarding Skinner's assessment of Machiavelli and his contemporaries as heirs to the civic humanist tradition (see Jurjevic 2014; Najemy 2000; Moulakis 2000; Rahe 2000; and Mansfield 2000). Though they reach different theoretical conclusions regarding Machiavelli's republicanism, these scholars point to the significant social and political transformations that occurred during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Florence, including the decline of the communal order and guild structures and the corresponding rise of a new oligarchic elite in Florence as formative of a new and thoroughly modern pattern of political thinking in Florence concerned more with constraining power through law.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Jurjevic (2014) challenges Skinner's humanist interpretation, particularly his claim that for Machiavelli good republican government depends on the "moral reform of individual citizens" (56). Jurjevic argues, as I do, that Skinner's humanist reading discounts the importance of law and institutions for Machiavelli's republicanism. For Jurjevic, however, Machiavelli's law replaces virtue. Laws are necessary, according to Jurjevic, because they coerce naturally "depraved and short-sighted" individuals into acting well through fear of punishment (57). "People do not *become* good through the law" argues Jurjevic; rather, "they are compelled to be good by being restrained from acting badly" (62).

Athanos Moulakis designates this new body of thought "realist constitutionalism" and identifies Francesco Guicciardini as its most systematic exponent (2000). This political program, argues Moulakis, was foreshadowed in the works of humanists like Bruni, but it was rooted more in the elite-dominated public discussions that became an everyday part of political life following the Ciompi Rebellion of 1378 and continued through the unofficial reign of the Medici. Moulakis describes the new mode of thought as expressing the aspirations of an emergent oligarchic class that simultaneously sought to consolidate power by setting itself apart as a formally recognized political class and contend with the political realities of a fragmented, sectarian, and vulnerable Florentine existence that no longer reflected the traditional norms and

Markus Fischer (2006), in a contribution to a collection of essays that seek to highlight Machiavelli's radical modernity and the role of power in this political thought, offers an interpretation of Machiavelli that sub-textually recognizes the role of virtue for Machiavelli. Fischer and his fellow contributors understand Machiavelli as the forerunner to modern liberal republicanism's recognition and accommodation of mankind's acquisitive nature (Rahe et al. 2006). This new mode of thought rested on a pervasive skepticism regarding the moral capacity of citizens and Machiavelli, according to Fischer, was more pessimistic than most. Machiavelli understands men, says Fischer, to be inherently "wicked"—by nature self-regarding seekers of preservation, glory, power, wealth, and sexual pleasure (2006, xxxv). Reason, in turn, is merely a prudential capacity that enables us to serve these ends. It is because of his pessimistic view regarding human nature, argues Fischer, that Machiavelli breaks with the classical tradition and rejects the notion that a moral education can be relied upon to promote virtue. And it is because of this pessimism regarding human nature that Machiavelli turns to institutional mechanisms as a way to channel human passions and human pride in ways that would benefit the republic.

The first point to be made here then is that institutions are fundamental to Machiavelli's republican political theory: a fact largely dismissed by Skinner. In *Foundations*, Skinner clearly wants to argue that institutions are of only secondary importance to the presence of a virtuous citizenry (1978, 175). In his theoretical work, Skinner does turn to institutions and law as the means through which virtue is instilled in a corrupt citizenry; however, he is unable to explain

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principles that had ordered the medieval commune and made sense of the corporate guild structure. The result, argues Moulakis, was a "considered constitutional project based on a functional analysis of political processes and institutions considered in their systematic relations to social forces" (201). This was a new theory of politics founded on a fundamentally new political anthropology where "power and will, on the one hand, structure and process, on the other" acquired foundational importance.

how this works. For Fischer, institutions replace virtue—at least virtue in the classical sense understood as a mature habit of moral judgment (xxxviii; see also Jurđjević 2014 and Mansfield 1996). Selfish and largely instrumental concerns drive all human action and a republic, if it is to endure, must accommodate this reality. Thus, for Fischer, law functions both to mediate social conflict in non-violent ways and to serve as a check on the ambitious license of men. It channels the selfish and ambitious behavior of citizens into practices that minimize extra-legal violence and thereby promote the republican goods of stability and expansion. Yet, because “men never work any good except by necessity” law serves this checking function in large part through the threat of violent punishment effected by the prudential few.

Fischer, unlike Skinner, takes up the distinction made by Machiavelli between the two humors of citizens that exist in every republic. According to Fischer, Machiavelli believes that ordinary citizens are fundamentally incapable of governing themselves because they lack the judgment necessary to do so (xlviii). They are incapable of grasping arguments based on general principles, even through a process of deliberation or the counsel of wise men. Therefore, the success of Machiavelli’s republican project depends on the continual intervention of a prudential, yet wicked, elite who rule *through* law and “know how to enter into evil, when forced by necessity.”<sup>18</sup> For Fischer and like-minded scholars, like Mansfield, Machiavelli’s princes are capable of understanding the instrumental good they derive from a mixed regime that offers the people security and a minimal amount of political power. The republican constitution survives, argues Fischer, in large part through the manipulation of the people by these few.

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<sup>18</sup> For this reason, it is a mistake, says Fischer, to conclude as Skinner and Viroli do, that Machiavelli entertained a “precocious admiration for constitutional government and the rule of law” (xli).

Unlike the rational republics of the ancients, then, the success of Machiavelli's republic is predicated on power—that is, the power of a few—who manipulate the people through violence and fraud. But the threat of violence (both secular and providential) is insufficient to compel a majority of people to obey the laws, writes Fischer, particularly if they are readied for war. Fischer quotes Machiavelli when he says that the “civil way of life must have the support of the people” if it is to last (lii). The problem, according to Fischer, is the people lack the rational capacity to understand “in principle why it is good to live under orders and laws” because “they are incapable of grasping such general ideas” (xlvi). They cannot be taught to understand the value of republican institutions. Instead, says Fischer, they must become ‘*accustomed* to living by their own laws and in liberty’ (liii; emphasis added). Once an attachment is formed, writes Fischer, they become its most ardent defender; Fischer quotes Machiavelli, noting that “when they have come to know it, they do not agree to abandon it” (D I.9). Fischer identifies three sets of customs concerning military service, consumption, and religious belief that, combined, “constitute the *virtú* or goodness of citizens.”

Putting aside Fischer's questionable assessment regarding the role of princely elites for a moment, what I find illuminating here is his treatment of the way in which certain habits are instilled in a people. Citizens, says Fischer, are habituated “to living by orders and laws through punishment” under “the constraint of the founder” just “as parents do with their children” (lii). Because the citizens are incapable of the type of reasoning required to understand “in principle” why a civil way of life is better, they must be made to embrace it through some other means. Laws and punishment operate here to channel the action and interaction of citizens, including activity engaged in primarily for instrumental reasons. Through this rerouting of citizens' material as well as ethical concerns, it would seem that over time laws accustom citizens to

certain practices and modes of interaction that are constitutive of virtuous habits of mind and action. That is, through the patterns of action and interaction channeled by the founder's law, norms necessary for the maintenance of republican political life are produced and, in turn, become self-sustaining and supportive of the republican institutions that generated them.

With this line of analysis, Fischer acknowledges, however derisively, Machiavelli's skepticism regarding the power of words, ideas, and reason and, in turn, the importance of institutions and the regulation of citizens' instrumental activity (in particular with respect to the customs associated with consumption) for the promotion of popular virtue.<sup>19</sup> Yet, he ultimately fails to grasp the implications of Machiavelli's turn towards law due to his naturalistic understanding of corruption:

[T]he practices that Machiavelli calls 'good customs' do not perfect a nature already virtuous in its potential and become thereby permanent features of the citizen's character, as the classical view held; 'good customs' serve only to oppose a nature that tends to ambitious license. More precisely, since the mind and the desires work their corrupting effects *necessarily*, whereas good customs exist only *contingently*, ambition will eventually dissolve good customs. (xxxv; emphasis added)

This is why "good customs are subject to corruption as soon as the founder's constraint has been lifted and citizens begin to rule themselves" (liii). It turns out, according to Fischer, that good customs are maintained only with the constant, even "daily," execution of "excessive and notable" punishments by elites (liv). But, as Fischer points out, this "casts serious doubt on the effectiveness of good customs as a cause of compliance" by the people (liv). For all

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<sup>19</sup> Fischer argues that "[p]eople need to be 'content with those goods, to live by those foods, dress with those woollens that the country provides,' as the Germans still do, whereas the 'French or Spanish or Italian customs' are 'the corruption of the world' (D 1.55.3). In the cities of Italy 'both sexes at every age are full of foul customs, for which good laws, because they are spoiled by wicked use, are no remedy (FH 3.5). Florence, in particular, is 'full of courtly delicacies and customs, contrary to all well-ordered civility' (FH 7.28)" (lii).

Machiavelli's talk of custom, says Fischer, "popular virtue" or obedience to the law must be enforced through necessity—that is, through the threat of violence. Only "enforcers," those few elite citizens who live above the law and execute punishments on the republic's behalf, argues Fischer, will be "moved to do their duty from a customary sense of allegiance to the regime" (lv). With this move, Fischer retreats to the traditional distinction between corruption as natural and virtue as rational, dissociating the two analytically by identifying each with one of the two different classes of citizens that exist in a republic.

Nevertheless, Fischer's reading of popular customs in Machiavelli suggests a way in which law for Machiavelli may operate as a means of inculcating citizens with the right habits of mind and action. Through the concrete experience of acting under laws that constrain and direct the ways individuals seek to further their own ends, citizens are inculcated with certain background assumptions that lead them to act in ways that promote the public good and help maintain the conditions of their own freedom. Fischer, like Skinner, retreats from this position due to his naturalistic conception of corruption and the rationalist bias informing his understanding of virtue. He never entertains the possibility that corruption, like virtue, is a potentiality for Machiavelli; both states are conditioned by the totality of social relations that exist in a republic, which include both its discursive and strategic practices. For Fischer, corruption is a necessary or ahistorical condition of human existence. Virtue, in turn, is a prudential capacity grounded in an innate rationality. For Fischer, unlike Skinner, however, only a few are gifted with this capacity for reason while the rest must be coerced by a regime of perpetual fear. Machiavelli's law turns out to be merely a tool of coercion wielded by the few to obtain obedience from the people. But, as we shall see with the next line of criticism, it is in fact possible to defend the argument made by Skinner and Viroli that Machiavelli's republicanism is

grounded on the rule of law rather than the power of a few if we acknowledge, as Fischer does not, Machiavelli's distrust of elites and the importance of popular political participation and class conflict for Machiavelli's republicanism.

### *The Value of Class Conflict*

The scholars I discuss in this section take seriously Machiavelli's radical claim that the tumults between the nobles and the plebs in Rome were the first cause of keeping Rome free (D I.3). They, like Moulakis and Fischer, criticize Skinner for his failure to appreciate Machiavelli's concern with Florentine social and political reality and the fundamental importance of necessity and power for Machiavelli's republican theory. Yet, for these scholars, the greatest threat to republican liberty comes not from the ignorant licentiousness of humankind generally, but from the thirst for domination embodied by the few. Bringing to light the strong populism underlying Machiavelli's republican theory, these scholars argue that the power that matters for republican liberty is that of the people.

The preeminent Florentine scholar John Najemy, for instance, challenges Skinner's civic humanist interpretation of Machiavelli on two grounds. First, as a social historian, Najemy rejects Skinner's materially agnostic interpretation of the Florentine civic humanist discourse exemplified by Bruni and his followers, calling it an ideology in the conventional sense constituted to consolidate the political power of an emerging oligarchic elite through a mythology of consensus (2000, 80). Najemy highlights the origins of civic humanism in the social and political life of Florence rather than in any text or intellectual discipline. He argues that an understanding of the social and economic transformations in Florence during this time, particularly the deterioration of the corporate guild structure, is essential to a proper

understanding of both civic humanism and Machiavelli's critical response thereto (85). According to Najemy, civic humanism did not originate in the panegyrics of the rhetoricians like Bruni, but "in the changing attitudes toward political participation in the class of non-elite major guildsmen" (87). Following the Ciompi rebellion in 1378, in which the lower guildsmen attempted to claim political power, a compact was made between elites and middle class guildsmen whereby the middle class guildsmen submitted to elite power and renounced their alliance with the lower guilds in exchange for collective inclusion in the Florentine political class. This compact, writes Najemy, "overturned traditional assumptions about the nature of political participation" as the representation of interests (92). "Participation without power" became the central feature of this newly formed alliance (87). Thus "non-elites accepted their posts as a recognition of, and reward for, personal merit and thus loyalty to their patrons, and not as an opportunity to represent the interests of their class" (92). The expression of civic humanism, with its praise of the "dutiful and subservient citizen" and loyalty to the government, became "a social and even ritual process, a way of belonging to the consensus" whereby non-elite citizens participated in power (92, 80). Bruni's rhetoric, says Najemy, helped to constitute the civic humanist tradition by appropriating the themes present in the political attitudes of Florentine citizens and transforming them into a moral and educational program whereby "discipline," that is, "culture, learning and education," served to create "virtuous" citizens and sustained the structures of elite hegemony by socializing them "into the cultural and political consensus" (100).

Second, if the discourse of civic humanism arose as the discursive expression of Florentine elite power with its foundation in the acquiescence of non-elite citizens, then Machiavelli, argues Najemy, should be understood not as an heir to that tradition but as its

staunchest and most radical critic. Machiavelli's "path not yet trodden by anyone" says Najemy, "is a revolutionary inquiry" into the "social bases of politics" and "the social structures, class interests, and conflicts underlying the success and failure of states" (2010, 102). Unlike Guicicardini and his fellow elitist exponents of the new realist political paradigm, however, Machiavelli sees only domination and instability in a republican form of government that depends almost entirely on the moral self-restraint of political and social elites. According to Najemy, "[t]he unifying theme of the *Discourses* is the precariousness of republics and their vulnerability to the ambition of noble and elite classes." The foundation of republican government for Machiavelli, therefore, rests not upon the virtue of its leadership, but upon the perpetual antagonism between the nobles and the people: in Rome between the senatorial nobility and the plebs, and in Florence between the *grandi* (or *ottimati*) and the politically organized middle classes called the *popolo*. Najemy argues that it is this antagonism between Rome's classes that made Rome great, according to Machiavelli, because it had the effect of "containing the overweening ambition of nobles by giving the people a share of political power" (103).

The mixed constitution is a fundamental component of a healthy republic for Machiavelli, then, as McCormick argues, not because it mediates a plurality of conflicting interests but because it allows ordinary citizens to hold wealthy elites to account (2011). Further, argues McCormick, institutionalized conflict, if it is to restrain the ambition of socio-economic elites, must be at times tumultuous, angry, and disruptive and it must be *mixed* in the appropriate way; that is, there must be institutions monopolized separately by wealthy and poorer citizens. Through a careful analysis of Machiavelli's treatment of Roman institutions and social conditions, McCormick demonstrates Machiavelli's support for direct and robust modes of

popular participation like class-based magistracies and legislative assemblies, popular accusations, and popular political trials as a means of curtailing the unequal power wealthy elites enjoy under a republican constitution. Only if the people are given real, substantive political power, writes McCormick, can they act to restrain socio-economic and political elites and prevent them from oppressing ordinary citizens and corrupting the laws to achieve their own interests. It is only in a popular republic of this kind, with robust and at times resistive popular political participation, that the law rather than elites can in fact rule.

Skinner's misunderstanding regarding the nature of Machiavelli's popular government originates, according to McCormick, in his neglect of Machiavelli's class based political sociology in favor of "a socially agnostic one focused on abstract citizens" (2003, 627). Notwithstanding his "notoriously cynical generalizations on the nature of men," in fact, Machiavelli made a qualitative distinction between the two humors and their dispositions (2011, 5). "Generalizing from his studies and experiences" contends McCormick, "Machiavelli argues that an unquenchable appetite for oppression drives the *grandi*'s efforts to accumulate wealth, monopolize offices, and gain renown within republics" (4). Machiavelli sharply distinguishes the great from the rest of the citizens who desire primarily to avoid being oppressed by the few. The people, according to McCormick, "are inclined to seek security in their persons and for their families, to be content with whatever material goods they already possess, [and] to avoid diminutions of relatively modest material well-being or demotions in already humble social status" (5). McCormick quotes Machiavelli's claims that the people's ends are more "*onestà*," which, for McCormick, connotes not only "honesty and decency" but also "honor and goodness" (24). Because of this, argues McCormick, "popular indignation" for Machiavelli "is an almost unequivocal good..." (6).

McCormick argues that Machiavelli's widely inclusive and popularly empowered form of government "rests on this remarkably favorable assessment of the common people's abilities, especially their capacity for political judgment" (65). For McCormick, the people's superior judgment is largely a function of their inherent disposition—their disinclination toward domination, both its suffering and its practice (29). But, for Machiavelli, the judgment of a people is good only so long as a republic remains uncorrupt: "For a people into which corruption has entered into everything cannot live free, not for a short time or at all..." (D I.16). While it is true that for Machiavelli "[t]he judgment of free peoples is rarely pernicious to liberty" (D I.4), a people must in fact be "free"—that is, accustomed to a free and political way of life—with all this entails for a republic's social and economic relations. In his analysis, McCormick tends to rely too heavily on the innate and decontextualized goodness of the people and the disciplining effects of institutions and "legally binding decisions" to transform the "raw spontaneous opinion" of citizens into the "considered judgment" that Machiavelli speaks of so favorably (2011, 70). As I argue in greater depth in chapter four, while the people's relative powerlessness inclines them to seek security and freedom from domination and to have a greater respect for the rule of law, this is true only to the extent they are accustomed to a free way of life. Their fundamental inclination to prioritize their security and freedom from domination does not mean they can be relied upon for sound political judgment and virtuous action under all social conditions, particularly when exposed to attempts by the few to corrupt them. Popular judgment is not an unconditional good for Machiavelli.

McCormick is right to point to the few as the greatest threat to republican freedom. However, his focus on the threat posed by elite domination of a republic's political institutions and his overly favorable depiction of popular judgment tends to obscure the more insidious

danger posed by wealthy elites, observed by both Viroli and Najemy, which is the way in which they can corrupt ordinary citizens through the distribution of favors and the cultivation of dependents or *partigiani* (Najemy 2010, 106) Through the distribution of patronage, writes Najemy, “wealthy *grandi* gather clients and build powerful factions that make them more feared than the magistrates.” This accumulation of private or “extra-legal” form of power, he states, “embolden[s]” the heads of factions to “corrupt public institutions...and transgress the law.” Yet, as I shall argue in depth in the following chapter, this “privatization of politics” whereby wealthy and powerful elites distribute their wealth to consolidate private power, if allowed to continue, can eventually corrupt the political habitus of the republic, cultivating a culture of dependence and mode of popular action that is conducive to domination.

With this understanding of corruption and its origin in the socio-political relations of dependence formed through the distribution of private favor, I believe the significance of popular political power and its relationship to popular virtue can be properly accounted for in Machiavelli’s republicanism. Not only does substantive participation enable ordinary citizens to control elites, but participation in class-based organizations formed around the material and social interests of ordinary citizens also prevents their corruption by raising “the class-consciousness of common citizens” and orienting them to the threat posed by private wealth to freedom and to public forms of action as a means of securing themselves (McCormick 2011, 16). I contend that it is this consciousness—and the habits of public action developed through participation by ordinary citizens in specifically class-based forms of organization and institutions—that forms the essence of popular virtue as Machiavelli understood the concept.

## **Conclusion: The Mixed Constitution as the Origin of Popular Virtue**

To return to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: does the law operate in Machiavelli's republicanism to promote virtue or does it merely channel self-interest? Relying on his humanist interpretation of Machiavelli, Skinner claims that a republic must be supported by the dutiful service of all citizens to the common good and that law functions to instill this virtue in all citizens in the same way. With this understanding of virtue, however, Skinner cannot explain how a constitutional order—that not only acquiesces to but also institutionalizes a specifically class-based form of social discord—promotes the virtue of both the citizens and the republic as a whole. This is because Machiavelli's most radical recommendations for promoting virtue, that citizens be kept poor and the two humors of citizens disunited, are based on his recognition of the socio-economic origins of corruption and, in turn, virtue.

Skinner's humanist interpretation of Machiavelli obscures the fact that corruption is not simply a matter of our innate disposition to privilege our own interests. Rather, corruption, like virtue, is a potentiality, and is in large part determined by the power dynamics and social relations operating within a republic. Because he neglects this sociological strain in Machiavelli's thought, the problem of dependence for Skinner appears primarily as a problem of domination or unfreedom.<sup>20</sup> But for Machiavelli, as Viroli recognizes, relations of dependence

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<sup>20</sup> See Sparling (2013) for an insightful discussion of the tendency of both Skinner and Pettit, to focus primarily on the dominating side of dependence. Skinner has always associated dependence with domination, but in his more recent works, following Pettit's philosophical adaption of republican freedom (1999), Skinner begins to distinguish his conception of republican freedom from the liberal idea of freedom based more on the nature of unfreedom than on the role of public virtue in maintaining citizens' freedom (1998, 2008). Following Pettit, Skinner argues that mere dependence on another's will is sufficient to identify that person as unfree. Skinner's retreat from his emphasis on civic virtue as the central feature of neo-Roman republicanism may seem to make the civilizing function of law less of a concern (Shaw 2003). Yet, the problem doesn't go away. As I demonstrate in chapter four, even Pettit's juristic model

are not merely a form of constraint, but also function as sites of discursive and productive power—forming political identities, redefining political discourses, and reproducing and transforming the political habitus. Relations of dependence—and the interactions and practices that accompany and reproduce them—inculcate within ordinary citizens a set of background assumptions and a common-sense understanding. Corrupt social relations deafen the people; that is why, in a corrupt constitutional order, neither rhetoric nor reason is sufficient to correct popular judgment (D I.18).

Recognizing this weakness in the rhetorical and moralist approach to politics recommended by his humanist predecessors, Machiavelli looked to institutions as a mode of channeling the self-interest of citizens in ways that are constitutive of republican ends. The mixed constitution is essential for freedom for Machiavelli, but not because it neutralizes the corrupt self-interest of a multiplicity of factional groups, as Skinner at times seems to suggest. Rather, a constitutional order that institutionalizes the right kind of social discord renders ordinary citizens resistant to attempts by the few to corrupt them by orienting them to the public and to forms of action and organization that do not depend on consolidated and privately controlled forms of wealth and power. Through the kinds of political action engendered by Machiavelli's mixed constitution, ordinary citizens become “accustomed to a free way of life” and develop the virtuous habits of action and thought—an attachment to public modes of action and the hatred of kingly forms of power—that guard republican liberty (D I.4, D I.58).

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of republicanism ultimately relies on the disposition of ordinary citizens to contest instances of undue influence by political and social elites (2012).

## Chapter 2:

### The Power of “Wealth, Nobility and Men”: Inequality and Corruption In Machiavelli’s Florentine Histories

“[T]hat dominion is alone lasting which is voluntary.” *Histories* II.34.

In the last chapter, I made the claim that corruption, for Machiavelli, connotes something other than a moral defect of human nature. Rather, I argued, Machiavelli’s corruption is social in origin, a defect in the social relations and normative foundations of a republic arising in conditions of inequality. In this chapter, I set out to prove this claim based on a close reading of Machiavelli’s *Histories*. Machiavelli begins the *Histories* by making it his express intention to explain the source of the civil conflicts that undercut Florence’s republican aspirations (FH, preface). Yet, as readers of the *Histories* know too well, Machiavelli’s dense and complicated narrative style makes this promised explanation far from easy to discern. Prevailing interpretations trace the divisions Machiavelli condemns in Florence to the unique historical circumstances of early-modern Italy. Harvey Mansfield, for example, ascribes Florentine sectarianism to the temporal and ideological influence of the Church in modern Italy (1996).<sup>1</sup> Others trace the origins of Florentine corruption to the defeat of the Florentine nobility at the beginning of the fourteenth century and to the political machinations of the new merchant elite

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<sup>1</sup> According to Mansfield, the Medici were able to best their fellow elites and rise above public control because of the support they enjoyed from a people corrupted by Christianity and geopolitical circumstances dominated by the Papacy. More recently, Christopher Lynch (2012) argued that the *Histories* centers around the corrupt system of foreign affairs (characterized by mercenary arms, papal meddling, and rentier wealth) that arose in modernity under the influence of Christianity. According to Lynch, both Florentine sectarianism and Medici power were the result of the influence these outside forces had on the internal dynamics of Florentine politics. For other interpretations that emphasize the importance of Christianity and the Church for Machiavelli’s thought on the republican prospects for modern Italy, see Strauss (1995) and Sullivan (1996).

that took their place (Bagge 2007; Clarke 2013; Benner 2009; Black 2005; Najemy 1982).

Taking a somewhat different approach, Mark Jurdjevic (2014) attributes Machiavelli's apparent disillusionment with Florence in the *Histories* to his recognition of the Florentine peoples' uniquely modern ambition to rule (a desire not shared by their Roman plebian counterparts).<sup>2</sup>

While these interpreters disagree on the specifics, for each, the corruption and factionalism that enabled the Medici principality in Florence stems from some transformation Machiavelli observes in the socio-economic or religious (and, in turn, cultural) order of medieval/early-modern Europe. Indeed, Machiavelli blamed both Christianity and the oligarchic merchants that ruled Florence at the turn of the fifteenth century for the loss of military virtue and for the corrupt politics that carved out the immediate path of Cosimo's ascent. As I hope to demonstrate in what follows, however, focusing solely on these aspects of Florentine modernity obscures the more fundamental links that Machiavelli establishes between, on the one hand, civic corruption and social conflict, and, on the other, the perennial problem of inequality.

In what follows, I trace the connections Machiavelli makes among corruption, factional conflict and inequality through a close reading of Books II through IV of the *Histories*, which narrate the internal history of Florence up to 1434, the year Cosimo de' Medici became first citizen. Contrary to his original intention, I contend, Machiavelli included the internal history of Florence prior to 1434 to show the structural origins of intra-elite sectarian conflict in inequality and shifting forms of private power and the positive, if ultimately ephemeral, effects of an institutionalized popular opposition. In the second book of the *Histories*, Machiavelli details the

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<sup>2</sup> While in the *Discourses* Machiavelli treats the popular disposition to seek freedom from domination as fixed across time, through his study of Florentine history, argues Jurdjevic (2014), he came to a very different conclusion regarding the disposition of modern peoples, attributing to them the same ambition for power and domination that he had previously reserved for the ambitious few.

conflicts among Florence's noble factions, or parties, and the constant threat they posed to Florentine stability and freedom. He notes the connection these parties of the nobles had with foreign powers and the considerable strength they drew therefrom. What remains underappreciated, however, is Machiavelli's recognition of the dependence of noble power, both symbolically and materially, on the accumulation of men—that is, non-elite adherents and partisans who could be paraded through the streets and, when necessary, called upon for support in the intra-elite conflicts that continually disrupted Florentine communal life. This privatized form of noble power, predicated on an amassing of partisan men often organized into private armies, is just the kind of “corrupt material” Machiavelli condemns in the *Discourses* as incompatible with republican government (D I.55). The corrupt nature of noble power during this period is not the only reason Machiavelli returned to the commune's beginnings. These early years were also significant for Machiavelli because of the institutional response of an increasingly politicized *popolo* to the corruption and oppression of the nobility. For Machiavelli, these attempts by the relatively powerless non-elite guildsmen in Florence to protect themselves from noble aggression represented potential, though ultimately unsuccessful, moments of republican founding.

Significantly, and for many of Machiavelli's readers somewhat counter-intuitively, the sectarian politics that plagued the early Florentine commune did not disappear with the defeat of the Florentine nobility halfway through the fourteenth century, but was taken up and transformed by the equally wealthy and powerful cohort of merchant elites that took their place. This new form of sectarian politics was distinct in that it was predicated on a more civil form of private power that seamlessly enmeshed itself within the institutional framework established by the *popolo* the preceding century. For Machiavelli, its less barbarous appearance only masked what

remained structurally unchanged as an indisputable manifestation of corruption—an elite practice of cultivating dependents and private power. This new, more sophisticated practice of cultivating socio-political dependents would turn out to be just as destructive of republican freedom because of the insidious way it accustomed the increasingly isolated generality of non-elite citizens in Florence to seeking their ends through private favor and a privatized form of politics rather than through public modes of action. For Machiavelli, the habit of securing oneself through private modes—whether through the favor of a king, a lord, a gentleman, or a member of the Florentine *ottimati*—forms the essence of popular corruption as he employed the term in the *Discourses*.

I conclude by briefly discussing the ways in which this reading of the *Histories* complicates our understanding of Machiavelli's perception of Florence's republican failure. While it is most certainly the case that he believed that both the temporal and ideological influence of the Church supported the sectarian form of politics and culture of dependence in Florence and that the civic humanist ideology embraced by the Florentine *ottimati* served to legitimate the practices of patronage practiced by the new merchant elite, as I hope will have been made clear, Machiavelli's analysis of the problem of corruption and, in turn, good republican government had deep structural foundations. Corruption is first and foremost a problem of inequality and of the power of elite citizens to use their wealth and social resources to cultivate partisans and to nurture, through the pervasiveness of these privatized interactions, a culture of dependence. The Florentine republic collapsed because it failed, even after the destruction of the powerful and corrupt magnate class, to order itself like Rome so as to prevent the new Florentine merchant elite from exploiting private modes of gaining power and thereby corrupting the Florentine *popolo*.

## **Sectarianism and Corruption in the *Florentine Histories***

In an illustrative and often quoted passage in the *Histories*, Machiavelli has an anonymous citizen, moved by love of his fatherland, describe the nature of Florentine corruption in excessively moral language. According to the anonymous patriot, in a corrupt city there is a generalized habit of moral laxity:

The young are lazy, the old lascivious; both sexes at every age are full of foul customs, for which good laws, because they are spoiled by wicked use, are no remedy. From this grows the avarice that is seen in our citizens and the appetite, not for true glory, but for the contemptible honors on which hatreds, enmities, differences and sects depend; and from these arise deaths, exiles, persecution of the good, exaltation of the wicked. (FH III.5).

Citizens in a corrupt city have no faith in God or religion and, as a result, are quick to disregard oaths taken and use fraud to suit their needs. They exhibit poor judgment, praising “harmful men” as “industrious” and blaming “good men” as “fools.” As a result, there is no “union or friendship” among the citizens, except “among those who knowingly committed some wickedness either against their fatherland or against private persons.” Relying solely on a reading of the above, we would probably conclude with Viroli (1998) that a corrupt city is merely one in which immoral behavior has become pervasive and the generality of citizens are dishonest, faithless, and habitually place selfish, acquisitive, and base desires before the common good.

The complexity of the concept begins to surface, however, when we turn to the question of what causes this generalized process of moral decay. Earlier on in the speech, Machiavelli associates Florentine immorality with a particular kind of politics. According to the anonymous patriot, “the common corruption of all the Italian cities” is to have ordered their states and governments “so as not to be free but divided into sects” (FH III.5). This, he states, is the source

of “all the other evils and all the other disorders that appear in it,” including those described above. Machiavelli reiterates this point elsewhere in the *Histories* when he differentiates the type of conflict and divisions that existed in Florence from those that existed in the early Roman republic. In Rome, the tumults between the nobles and the plebs were the source of Roman freedom, resilience and greatness (D I.4). But in Florence the enmities between the people and the nobles were the source of “all evils” and the eventual usurpation of the republic by the Medici (FH III.1). This difference arises, says Machiavelli, because the divisions that plagued Florence were accompanied by sects or factions (*sette*) and by partisans, while the divisions in the early Roman republic were not. Those divisions that are accompanied by sects and partisans are always harmful to a republic, while those unaccompanied by sects and partisans benefit a republic (FH VII.1).

But what causes some divisions to become sectarian in nature? Sects and partisans arise in a city, Machiavelli tells us at the beginning of Book VII of the *Histories*, when reputation and power is obtained by citizens through private modes: “by benefiting this or that other citizen, defending him from the magistrates, helping him with money, getting him unmerited honors, and ingratiating oneself with the plebs with games and public gifts” (FH VII.1). Private modes of gaining reputation are available only to those who are already rich and well-connected. They involve the distribution of material and social benefits by wealthy patrons to individuals or groups in a manner intended to form networks of obligation and loyalty (Clarke 2013). Machiavelli sets these private modes in contrast to those public modes of acquiring reputation which are beneficial to the republic: “winning a battle, acquiring a town, carrying out a mission with care and prudence, advising the republic wisely and prosperously.” The reputation gained from these public modes, writes Machiavelli, is founded on a “common good,” rather than on a

“private good.” Those who achieve reputation and power through public modes depend ultimately on the authority bestowed upon them by the republic (and its selection procedures) for the power they wield in the public sphere and their capacity for significant public action. Their power is defined and constrained by laws and by institutions meant to maintain power dispersed. As such, regardless of their ambition and conflicts with others, they cannot acquire “partisans who follow them for their own utility” and are, therefore, not in a position to “cause harm to the republic” (FH VII.1).<sup>3</sup> Those who gain reputation through private modes, on the other hand, do so by using their personal resources to cultivate adherents and, in turn, a personal and institutionally unconstrained form of power. This mode of power is dangerous because the ambitious few who are able to amass a significant cadre can exploit the influence they cultivate over their dependent-recipients in their bid to dominate opposing elites and their parties.

The *Discourses* contains a similar passage in which Machiavelli advises the founder and protector of a republic to be wary and always mindful of those citizens who gain reputation in a republic. All republics, according to Machiavelli, find themselves in a similar bind: a republic needs reputed citizens in order to stand and be governed well, but the reputation of citizens is also the cause of tyranny in a republic (D III.28). To manage this paradox of leadership, says Machiavelli, the republic must be ordered so that reputation is achieved only by way of acts done for the common benefit and not through doing benefit to private individuals, which creates partisans out of citizens and “give[s] spirit to whoever is so favored to be able to corrupt the public and to breach the laws.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “[O]n the contrary,” continues Machiavelli, “they must help it, because to pass their tests it is necessary for them to attempt to exalt the republic and to watch each other particularly so that civil bounds are not transgressed” (FH VII.1).

<sup>4</sup> “The public modes are when one individual by counseling well, by working better in the common benefit, acquires reputation... The private ways are doing benefit to this and to

Though “administered under the name of a republic” Florence never achieved a truly free way of life because it was burdened with a corrupt citizenry and a form of politics marked by sectarian conflict and the “power of parties.”<sup>5</sup> Importantly, according to Machiavelli’s anonymous patriot, the decay of the normative order was not the cause of the growth of sects but occurred concomitant with it. Both a corrupt moral order and the growth of sects arose in Florence as a result of its being “ordered” in a way that “nourished sects.” What this means is that citizens become corrupt not as a result of their innate wickedness or selfish disposition, but because of certain “corrupt” socio-political orders that organize political life—namely, “those private modes” used by an ambitious few for their “own safety” (FH III.5). It was because of its continuing reliance on private modes, I will argue, that Florence could not rid itself of sectarian conflict and corruption, even following the conquest of the ancient nobility whose pride and ambition were (wrongly) thought to be the cause.

### *Sectarianism in the Early Commune*

Machiavelli begins the preface to the *Histories* by remarking that it had been his original intent to begin his history in 1434, the year Cosimo de’ Medici became the first citizen of Florence. Instead, he begins his narrative two hundred years earlier. His stated reason is to account for the glaring lacuna in the preeminent Florentine histories of his day. According to Machiavelli, neither Leonardo Bruni nor Poggio Bracciolini, “two very excellent historians,” thought to account for the “civil discords and internal enmities” that, according to Machiavelli,

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that other private individual—by lending him money, marrying his daughters for him, defending him from the magistrates, and doing for him similar private favors...” (D III.28).

<sup>5</sup> “For two hundred years of true memory” Florence “never had a state which could truly be called a republic” (D I.49).

consistently ravaged Florentine political life and sabotaged all attempts to found a republic (FH, preface). Both Bruni and Poggio were far more concerned with protecting the legacy of the leading families of Florence than providing an accurate and useful account of the political and social conflicts that drove Florentine history (FH, preface). Not only did they neglect to include any sustained treatment of elite conflict during the years prior to Medici rule, but civic humanists like Bruni and Bracciolini also speciously traced the origins of Florentine republicanism to a glorified vision of Florentine harmony and unity.<sup>6</sup> Florentine republicanism, according to this traditional humanist historiography, owed its existence to the virtue of the great men of Florence whose prudence and valor safeguarded Florentine independence from foreign subjugation under the Roman emperor and, later, Milan.

Consequences of these misguided histories rebounded in Machiavelli's time. For Machiavelli's aristocratic contemporaries, like Guicciardini, the period immediately prior to Cosimo's rise to power represented a golden age of Florentine republican history in which the city was united and strong under the rule of the best families led by the Albizzi (Najemy 2008, 434-445). In his *History of Florence*, Guicciardini praises the Albizzi for restoring Florence onto the path of republican glory following the devastation of the Ciompi revolt that convulsed Florence in the late fourteenth century. According to Guicciardini, under the Albizzi:

Florence was successful both at home and abroad: at home, because it remained free, united, and governed by well-to-do, good, and capable men; abroad, because it defended itself against powerful enemies and greatly expanded its dominion. Florentine successes were so great that this government is deservedly said to be the wisest, the most glorious, and the happiest that our city had had for a long time. (Guicciardini 1970, 3)

Guicciardini juxtaposed the Albizzi regime not only against the unstable politics under the popular regime that preceded it, but also against the tyrannical rule under the Medici that

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<sup>6</sup> See Najemy (2000); Jurdjevic (1999); Hankins (2000).

followed it. For Guicciardini, the aristocratic rule of the Albizzi represented something he and his contemporaries should aspire to and attempt to replicate.

Against this view, Machiavelli relays the history of a city that, despite its own self-congratulatory assessment, never truly deserved the name republic (D I.49). As I describe in the sections that follow, Machiavelli blames the rise of the Medici on the modes of cultivating power devised by the Albizzi and their fellow elites towards the end of the preceding century.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Machiavelli begins the story more than a century earlier during a period dominated by the Florentine nobility prior to the emergence of many of the republic's key institutions. In shifting and broadening the periodization of Florentine history in this way, Machiavelli refocuses the overarching narrative of Florentine history away from the danger of anarchy posed by popular government towards the systemic and unending crisis of elite sectarianism that had always plagued Florence.

In the Preface to the *Histories* Machiavelli describes Florence as a city racked by perpetual, yet constantly shifting, conflict. Unlike Rome, which was “content” with only one division between the nobles and the plebs by which it maintained itself until its ruin, Florence had many divisions: “first between the nobles; then the nobles and the people; and in the end the people and the plebs; and it happened many times that the winning party was divided in two” (FH, preface). But if Rome was able to maintain a single division between the powerful and the people, why did the winning party in each Florentine conflict split?

The answer lies in the account of Florentine sectarian conflict Machiavelli interlaces with his narrative on the discord between the classes in Florence: that of the political struggle that occurred among socially and economically powerful elite families and their friends and

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<sup>7</sup> I build here on arguments made by Najemy (1982, 569-572).

partisans. In the account Machiavelli sets forth in the *Histories*, the political history of Florence was driven as much by this intra-elite struggle for political domination as it was by the natural antagonisms that arose between the elite and the people.<sup>8</sup> The reason Florence was unable to maintain a single constructive political division, we shall see, was due to the evolving strategies and techniques adopted by a succession of Florentine elite families in their struggles for political dominance and the ways in which these methods eventually corrupted the generality of Florentine citizens.

Book II of the *Histories* chronicles the period beginning with Florence's founding through the military defeat and political disenfranchisement of the magnate or ancient families by an alliance of interests led by the guild-based *popolo* at the end of the thirteenth century. Central to the narrative that unfolds in this book are the violent conflicts that arose among the powerful noble families of Florence and their destructive effects on Florence's nascent attempts at a free way of life. The powerful in Florence during this period were called nobles or the great (*grandi*), but they were not a legally designated political class. Culturally, the elite families of this period distinguished themselves from the people and from the merely wealthy popular families by the age of their lineage and by the cultivation of a courtly ethos of knighthood and honor, or what Machiavelli calls a "generous spirit" (FH II.6 and III.1).<sup>9</sup> Yet, their power and, in turn, the ability of particular families to thwart attempts made by their peers and later the people to order Florentine political life derived from their ability to amass men from the middling ranks of society who could be mobilized to follow them on ritual and festive occasions and support

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<sup>8</sup> Contemporary historical work on Florence confirms the centrality of elite sectarian conflict to the political and social world on Florence during this period. See Najemy (2008); McLean (2007); Brucker (1969).

<sup>9</sup> On noble culture during this period see Lansing (2014); Najemy (2008).

them in the councils and, most importantly, on the streets during times of tension and conflict (Najemy 2008, 25). It was the corrupt nature of the nobility's socio-political power—its foundation in the dependence and partisan support of less powerful men and the private armies to which it gave rise—that enabled the violent and fiercely competitive behavior that defined Florentine noble existence during this period and made an ordered and free way of life all but impossible.

As Machiavelli portrays it, two intra-elite conflicts marked this period, separated by a brief respite from factional politics. With each, what begins as an intra-family dispute comes to consume the city and all its inhabitants. The first division arose as a result of a marital dispute between the Uberti and the Buondelmonti families. The conflict quickly escalated and soon “divided the whole city and one part stood with the Buondelmonti, the other with the Uberti” (FH II.3). Both families were strong in “houses, towers, and men” and so fought for many years without one dislodging the other. Though the conflict quieted down at times, it was often inflamed again by new accidents (FH II.3). Years into this feud, the Emperor would come to exploit it in the hopes of gaining support in Florence. Favoring the Uberti, Frederick II drove out the Buondelmonti thereby dividing Florence, like the rest of Italy, down Guelf and Ghibelline lines: “Many men of the people joined the noble families on one side or the other so that almost the whole city was corrupted by the division” (FH II.4).

The division between the Guelf and Ghibelline sects in Florence, with its foundation in the considerable force of the Empire and the Church, would continue to convulse Florence for the greater part of the thirteenth century. While generally destructive of Florentine civil life, these conflicts led to a number of popular institutional innovations as each party sought the favor of the increasingly powerful *popolo*, composed of non-elite citizens organized into economic

guilds. Guilds proliferated throughout the thirteenth century with non-elite citizens from all manner of trades and crafts organizing themselves into legal corporations (Najemy 2008, 40). In Machiavelli's narrative, the Ghibellines, as the less popular of the two factions, to "get the people on their side," made the grievous mistake of incorporating the guilds into the communal government each with a magistrate to judge disputes and a banner under which the citizens could gather in defense of themselves (FH II.8). This was a mistake, according to Machiavelli, because the guild system soon became the primary locus of popular political strength and opposition in Florence. Machiavelli points to guild-based priorate (later called the *Signoria*), instituted while the nobles were too busy trying to destroy each other to notice, as the beginning of the end for the Florentine nobility.<sup>10</sup>

Eventually, says Machiavelli, the feud between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines in Florence was laid to rest by the wars outside and by the growing power of the guild community whose magistrates and ensigns had become "highly reputed" (FH II.11). For a period following the end of this intra-elite conflict, all that remained in Florence were those humors "that are naturally wont to exist in all cities between the powerful and the people," that is, between those who "want to live according to the laws" and those who "want to command by them" (FH II.12). Yet, the insolence of the remaining elite families and the harm they caused to ordinary citizens prompted the *popolo* to strengthen the commune's guild-based institutions that had been introduced earlier that century by the Ghibellines. Under the leadership of Giano della Bella, they instituted the Ordinances of Justice which barred the nobles from the highest magistracies, strengthened the Gonfalonier of Justice ("man of the people"), arming him with four thousand

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<sup>10</sup> At the time, writes Machiavelli, the "nobles consented to it because they were not united; for, as one desired to take away the state of another, they all lost it" (FH II.11).

men to protect them, and instituted a form of accusation to be used against offending nobles (FH II.12-13). Under the Ordinances, magnates were not only barred from office, but restrictions were also placed on their right to carry weapons, assemble men, and buy property in the city limits of Florence (Lansing 1990, 198-201).

Though the conflict between the nobles and the people over the Ordinances nearly came to arms, it was averted by the intervention of moderate citizens from both sides who were able to quell the tensions with words. According to Machiavelli, though the two sides continued to live suspicious of each other and “fortified within towers and arms,” the city of Florence was never “greater and more prosperous than in these times, when it was replete with men, riches and reputation...and although there was some anger and suspicion between the nobles and the people, nonetheless they produced no bad effect, and everyone lived united and in peace” (FH II.15). For Machiavelli, this period, in which no noble family or faction dominated the political stage, represented a moment of good republican government. Politics was driven by the opposition between the few, those with the desire to dominate, and the many, those disposed to constrain and channel that desire towards good ends.

Unfortunately, notwithstanding the many notable innovations made by the *popolo* in institutionalizing public power, the Florentine nobility continued to maintain their grip on power through private modes. As such, the moment of prosperous disunion between the natural humors was short lived and was soon undone by the second intra-elite conflict to divide Florence, that between the Cerchi and Donati families, again both “powerful in wealth, nobility and men” (FH II.16). Again, says Machiavelli, this division divided “the whole city, the men of the people as well as the great” into the White and Black parties, and because all took up arms it was the beginnings of “much evil” (FH II.17-18). Machiavelli’s recounting of the travails of Corso

Donati, the head of the Donati family and prince of the Black party, provides an excellent illustration of the corrupt nature of noble power during this period. Corso was a man of “restless spirit” whose personal political achievements depended primarily on the great “authority he carried in his person” (FH II.22). In Book II.19 Machiavelli describes how Corso, having been exiled by the Cerchi and the White dominated state, single-handedly took back the government through the private support he maintained both abroad and at home. With the whole city in arms and fearful of Charles of Valois, who had been sent by the Pope at Corso’s request, he entered Florence with “the exiles and many others who were his followers.” Unimpeded by anyone, he took a stand near his home where he gathered “many friends and people desiring new things” who aided him in forcing the *signori* to return to their homes as private men and in electing a new government comprised of his friends in the Black party and of the people. To add insult to injury, following the complete usurpation of the state, he took to plundering the leaders of the White party for a period of five days during which no one opposed him. As a result of Corso’s great power, the Cerchi, along with many of the White party, were eventually exiled.

Following the exile of the White party, one might think that Cerchi and the Blacks would have been content with the new government they had such a heavy hand in shaping. But, as Machiavelli relates, Corso’s restlessness and pride were stirred again by the popular nature of the government and the “inferior” quality of the men participating in government. He again sought greater power in the city, this time by slandering his former allies in the public magistracy (FH II.21). After having exhausted all “civil modes,” this dispute, like those that came before it, “came to arms,” this time with the bishop, many of the great, and some of the people on the side of Corso and the greater part of the people on the side of the *Signoria*. According to Machiavelli, fighting occurred in many parts of the city with the *signori* managing to settle things only by

calling in the Lucchese for help. Corso's party was so formidable it took forces from another city to subdue him.

Corso would eventually be bested by the growing opposition in his own party. Relying on the power of accusation established by the *popolo*, his enemies within the Black party accused him before the people and within two hours he was convicted and sentenced to death (FH II.23). Unperturbed, Corso did what he had always done, making "use of his private forces and authority" to fortify himself in his house (FH II.23). Surrounded by his partisans, he was defended "in such a way that the people, despite their great number, were unable to overcome them" (FH II.23). It was only through "unexpected routes," explains Machiavelli, that the people were finally able to encircle Corso's partisans and eventually capture and kill the man himself.

Through this recounting of Corso Donati's political machinations, Machiavelli illuminates the significant socio-political power exercised by the Florentine *grandi* during this period independent of any public authority. Corso's power was sourced in his family, friends and foreign connections and, just as importantly, in the private forces he cultivated out of his clients and those from among the people willing to follow him against the authority of the *Signoria*. His ability to not only flout the law but also to take possession of the city's magistracies with men loyal to him was due to his great wealth, his connections, and the partisans he cultivated among the non-elite citizens of Florence.

Following Corso's death, the nobility would continue to act as if they lived above the laws of the state. But their attempts to do so were thwarted by an increasingly powerful *popolo* and by the continuous threat of foreign invasion that plagued Florence throughout the early part

of the fourteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Made increasingly desperate and judging “that they had no other mode of subduing the people that had afflicted them then to put themselves under a prince,” a number of noble families would eventually provoke Walter, duke of Athens, to seek the principality of Florence (FH II.34). They would soon recognize their grave mistake and ally with the people against Walter’s cruelty. But, according to Machiavelli, even this experience of “slavery” under the duke did not teach them how to live “with the modesty which is required by civil life.” Following the duke’s departure, the government was reordered to include the great, who were to have one-third of the Signoria and half the other offices. Unfortunately, writes Machiavelli, the nobles could not endure this institutional structure for long, “for as individuals they did not want companions, and in the magistracies they wanted to be lords” (FH II.39). Thus, “every day produced some example of their insolence and arrogance” motivating the *popolo* to eventually exclude them entirely from the government. Encouraged by an attempt made by Messer Andrea Strozzi to take back the city for his own through the favor of the desperate and hungry plebs, the great armed themselves “with every sort of help so as to regain by force” what they had lost. Brazen with desperation, they openly provided themselves with arms, fortifying their houses, and sending to friends as far away as Lombardy for help (FH II.40). This final attempt at taking the city of Florence was eventually put down by a popular opposition that included a number of powerful popular families, the people (the middle guildsmen), and the lesser people (the lower guildsmen or artisans) with the worst offending elite families excluded from political authority through the revival of the Ordinances of Justice (FH II.42).

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<sup>11</sup> See (FH II.32), in which Messrs Piero de’Bardi and Messer Bardo Frescobaldi lead a conspiracy joined by many noble families and some popular ones against the state for which “many armed men” were gathered. Quelled by the words of a moderate man of spirited nature, Messer Jacopo da Gubbio, the nobles returned to their castles outside the city and a law was instituted whereby no citizen could own a castle nearer than twenty miles to Florence.

*The New “Popular” Florentine Elite and Their More “Civil” Private Modes*

In the opening to Book III, Machiavelli expresses ambivalent feelings regarding the political ruin of the ancient lineages. On the one hand, the exile of the magnate order meant that Florence was left in the hands of men nurtured in trade (FH I.39). This, in turn, meant the loss of military virtue and honor from Florentine political life and the beginning of Florence’s longstanding and loathsome dependence on mercenary captains for its security (FH III.1).<sup>12</sup> At the same time, however, the exile of the magnate class, with its private armies and connections to the emperor and the Pope, meant, according to Machiavelli, that Florence was “reduced” from a state of “inequality” to a state of “wonderful equality” where it “could easily have been reordered in any form of government by a wise lawgiver.” This, I argue, was a pivotal moment for Machiavelli in Florentine history. Not only had the unruly noble class, with its pretensions to knighthood, been chastened, but the *popolo* was also at the height of its power. The wealthy *grandi* fortunate enough to avoid magnate status had not yet attempted to establish political dominance, concerned more with disposing of the powerful magnate families and, therefore, held in check. As a result of the social and political transformations that had taken place over the preceding century, Florence enjoyed an unprecedented level of equality with no family or set of families benefiting from excessive private reputation. There was no citizen too powerful to be reined in by a properly ordered republic. Unfortunately, no wise lawgiver appeared and, as a result, Florence once again devolved into sectarianism: this time among the cohort of wealthy elites that had sided with the *popolo* against the old noble families so as to avoid political exile.

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<sup>12</sup> “[T]he virtue in arms and generosity of spirit that were in the nobility were eliminated, and in the people, where they never had been, they could not be rekindled; thus did Florence become ever more humble and abject” (FH III.1). See also (FH VI.1).

From this point on in the historical narrative, the elite-driven nature of Florentine political conflict becomes harder to recognize because of the terminology Machiavelli uses when discussing the new cohort of politically dominant citizens. Machiavelli calls these men *popolani* or “popular nobles.” Contemporary scholarship on Florentine politics confirms, however, that Florence was not left without powerful families following the political exclusion of the magnate order. Many families that escaped magnate status—including the Albizzi, Ricci, Medici, Alberti and Strozzi families—were just as wealthy and socially connected as the families that had been exiled.<sup>13</sup> Yet, what distinguishes the factions that arose following the Ordinances from those that preceded them in the thirteenth century was the fact that they no longer gave rise to private armies (Najemy 2008, 147). Because “the citizens had already attained such equality through the ruin of the great, the magistrates were more revered than they used to be in the past” so the parties “planned to prevail by the ordinary way and without private violence” (FH III.2). This was a new sort of elite, whose wealth was founded almost entirely on commercial activity (manufacturing, trade, and banking) and whose political behavior and culture was shaped in dialogue with the *popolo* the preceding century. Machiavelli further distinguishes the powerful *popolani* families by labeling the Albizzi faction the popular party and the Ricci the party of the plebs, in part because the Albizzi faction contained a larger number of the older popular families and the ancient noble families, and in part because the Ricci tended to favor more popular government in its political maneuverings (FH III.18).<sup>14</sup> Both parties were led by very wealthy

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<sup>13</sup> The “only sense in which non-magnate elite families were *popolani* is that they were not magnates and could hold office” (Najemy 2008, 38).

<sup>14</sup> The popular faction included the Albizzi, Castiglionchio and “the greater part of the most powerful men of the people,” while the plebian party included “the popular men of lesser sort,” including the Scali, Strozzi, Ricci, Alberti and Medici. The multitude, according to Machiavelli, “adhered to the malcontents,” in this case the plebian party, “as almost always happens” (FH III.8).

and socially powerful families (Najemy 2008, 146). There was a new mode of conflict, whereby elite citizens used the influence they wielded over their clients and partisans to dominate through the guild-originated institutional framework and law rather than through violence and private wars.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately their methods of acquiring power were just as deleterious for a free way of life (FH III.3).

As the antagonisms between the Albizzi and Ricci families worsened, these factions, like their magnate predecessors, sought to acquire adherents in order to add to their parties (FH III.3). It is here in the narration of the conflict between the Albizzi and Ricci sects that Machiavelli inserts the speech of the anonymous patriot chastising Florence and its “love of parties.” Towards the end of the speech, the patriot laments the false judgment held by those who believed that the conquest of the ancient nobility would mean an end of sects and parties because they had gotten rid of those motivated by ambition (FH III.5). What happened instead is that this ambition was not eliminated with the destruction of the nobility but “taken from them by our men of the people” who, like their predecessors, used “private modes” to acquire “extraordinary” power within the state. Fortunately, the anonymous patriot declares, all was not lost due to the changed nature of the times. Following Machiavelli’s arguments in the introduction to Book III, the anonymous patriot identifies a similar distinction regarding the nature of Florence’s ancient and modern divisions. According to the patriot, no civil modes and orders could have ever been enough to check Florence’s ancient families due to their great private power and the favor they enjoyed from foreign princes. But, he argued, Florence and Italy now found itself in a state of “equality,” in which it could easily “maintain itself united” and “rule itself” if only it would

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<sup>15</sup> Rather than meet on the streets, writes Machiavelli, these new sects, “out of hatred for each other,” opposed each other’s “alliances, undertakings and decisions” in the councils and in the state (FH III.4).

annul “those orders that nourish sects” and adopt those “that do in truth conform to a free way of life.”

In the speech, as I noted above, the patriot only hints at what those orders “that nourish sects” may be. But we can draw a number of conclusions based on Machiavelli’s historical narrative up to this point. In Florence, unlike in the early Roman republic, there was a recurring problem of conflict between powerful Florentine men, and their families, friends, and partisans and their political manifestations as parties. While Rome had managed to order itself so as to be free from sects, at least for a time, Florence was never able to prevent ambitious citizens from acquiring power through the use of private modes and the accumulation of men who would honor them “extraordinarily.” The corrupt nature of the magnate class—that is, the privatized nature of their power grounded in landed wealth, private armies, and foreign support—made it impossible to reconcile them within a republican framework governed by law. Thus, while Machiavelli mourned the loss of their generous spirit, it is far from clear whether he blamed the *popolo* for ultimately “seeking to be alone” in the government.<sup>16</sup> What he does blame the *popolo* for, however, is their refusal (or inability) to order the new republic so as to prevent the exploitation of private modes and the formation of sects by the new commercial elite. “It is very true that most men are more apt to preserve a good order than to know how to find one for themselves.” The citizens placed in charge of reordering the state “gave more thought to eliminating the present sects than to taking away the causes of future ones; so they achieved neither the one nor the other” (FH III.6).<sup>17</sup> This failure meant that the privatized nature of politics and power in Florence didn’t disappear following the political disenfranchisement of the

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<sup>16</sup> See McCormick 2017(a).

<sup>17</sup> I believe this moment constitutes a failure of leadership of the sort referenced by Zuckert (2017). See also McCormick 2017a.

magnate class, but was simply adapted (in good Machiavellian fashion) by the new commercial elite to the times and to the culture and institutions previously erected by the *popolo*.

Unfortunately, this new more civilized form of cultivating dependence through the distribution of patronage to non-elite citizens would eventually corrupt the Florentine *popolo*, paving the way for the Medici principality.

As I discussed above, one of Machiavelli's primary purposes in providing an account of the two centuries prior to Cosimo's ascent was to draw attention to the sectarian nature of Florentine conflict and its origin in the private or personal power maintained by the Florentine elite. But this period was also significant for Machiavelli because it was during these early years of the republic that the private power of the Florentine elite was opposed and often checked by the strength and vitality of the increasingly powerful *popolo* (FH II.15). Originally intended for purposes of commercial security, the guilds became a source of security against elite violence, political strength, and cultural identity for non-elite citizens (Najemy 2008, 40). At the height of guild power, the common citizen's identity, economic relationships, and political interactions were defined in large part by his corporate membership in a guild.<sup>18</sup> Membership in a guild and identification as a member of the politically salient class of the *popolo* not only protected citizens from elite insolence and violence on the streets and in the councils, but also safeguarded them from the most insidious effects of elite offers of security and material and social benefits because it offered them an alternative way of securing themselves and, in turn, an alternative culture, identity, and way of life.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Brucker (1969, 97-101).

<sup>19</sup> See Najemy (2008) for a discussion of guild culture and its contrast with the culture of the Florentine nobility.

Even during this period, when the political and cultural salience of the guild community was at its peak, Machiavelli's depiction of elite power in Book II and Book III draws our attention to the way elite sectarianism and the logic of patronage and clientelism continued to operate to neutralize the *popolo* politically by corrupting ordinary citizens and recruiting them into factions.<sup>20</sup> As Machiavelli's anonymous patriot laments, in a city ordered so as to nourish sects, a civil or free way of life is impossible because all citizens, both bad and good, feel compelled to participate in them (FH III.5). The bad men do so out of "avarice and ambition" and the good out of "necessity." Sectarian support becomes a necessary condition for political success; those good men who make the mistake of attempting to succeed politically without acquiring friends and partisans to defend and honor them "extraordinarily" fall "undefended" and "unhonored."

The fact that the popular elite in the second half of the fourteenth century were no different than their ancient predecessors in their desire to live above the law and to subdue rival elites is a crucial and often misinterpreted element of Machiavelli's analysis.<sup>21</sup> Unlike Florence's

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<sup>20</sup> As in the power of Corso Donati and as described in the anonymous patriot's speech (FH III.5). See Najemy 2008, 27,147.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Jurdjevic interprets key passages of the *Histories* as suggesting that Machiavelli in fact abandoned his previously favorable analysis of the people as naturally decent (*ònesta*) and indifferent to rule for its own sake. Instead, argues Jurdjevic, Machiavelli came to the conclusion that the nature of peoples is variable and that, whereas the ancient Roman people were moderate and willing to share political power with the Roman nobility, the modern Florentine people had turned out to be just as ambitious and, therefore, just as dangerous for republican stability as the nobles. Jurdjevic is correct in that Florentine history revealed to Machiavelli "the ease with which members of the *popolo* could adopt the nobles' tyrannical aristocratic psychology" when left alone in the state following the political exile of the Florentine nobility (119). What this indicates, however, is not that Machiavelli revised his social ontology or that he abandoned the idea that the people are best suited to the task of guarding the republic's freedom in modernity (D I.5). Rather, it simply demonstrates Machiavelli's appreciation of the difficulty inherent in founding a republic capable of controlling inequality and mitigating its effect on politics. Jurdjevic's conclusion that the modern Florentine people "share an innate satisfaction in dominating others" is based on a mischaracterization of Machiavelli's humors. As I discuss in

ancient nobility, however, they were obliged by the economic and political conditions of the time to operate *within* the guild corporate structure erected by the people. One consequence of this is that both parties, the popular nobles and the party of the plebs, were forced to speak in a language of republicanism, freedom, and the common good. According to Machiavelli, these “pious words” only masked the true intent of both the “ministers of servitude” and the “ministers of license,” which was “the satisfaction of having overcome others and of having usurped the principality of the city” (FH III.5, FH IV.1). And so, while they both espoused support for republican orders, their considerable wealth acquired through banking, manufacturing, and trade enabled each to surreptitiously circumvent Florence’s popular orders through the cultivation of partisans who could then be counted on to support them in the councils and in the state.

Through their persistent attempts to augment their power and dominate the state, the new popular parties slowly eroded the institutions erected by the *popolo* over the course of the fourteenth century. While the popular nobles sought to reinvigorate the power of the Party Guelfa, relying most heavily on the favor of members of the upper guilds, the party of the plebs pursued political power through the magistracies and through the favor of members of the lesser guilds and later the plebs (FH III.8-10). Following the Ciompi rebellion in 1378, in which the plebs, those historically excluded from guild-based rule, violently claimed a stake in the government, the elite party of the plebs now led by members of the powerful Scali, Alberti, Medici, and Strozzi families, managed to make considerable inroads in the state becoming

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greater detail in the following chapter, the people are defined, for Machiavelli, not by some historically determined social designation, but by their modest resources and their remove from political power (D I.5). Individuals and families who acquire riches and ascend to political leadership should no longer be considered part of the people, insofar as one is concerned with the people’s disposition towards rule and law.

almost “princes of that city” and of the newly formed popular government (FH III.19). But the private power wielded by these new princes—in particular Messers Scali and Strozzi, “whose authority surpassed that of the magistrates” due to the “favor” they enjoyed from the plebs—would be that party’s undoing. According to Machiavelli, their “tyrannical” behavior and ultimate execution set off a struggle among the parties and among the various humors in the city that, over the course of a year, would lead to the collapse of the popular government and the decimation of the guilds as a political power (FH III.20-21).

Following the fall of the popular government in 1382, the state was claimed decisively by the popular party with the backing of the now fearful non-elite upper guildsmen under the leadership of the Albizzi family (FH III.26). Thus, begins the golden age of Florentine republicanism mythologized by Machiavelli’s aristocratic contemporaries. Indeed, the image Machiavelli depicts at the conclusion of Book III is of a period of unusual “quiet” in which a seemingly unified Florence successfully defends itself in war against the Duke of Milan and the King of Lapisdas while also growing its dominion over Tuscany (FH III.29). As Machiavelli’s account in the following book reveals, however, the Albizzi regime suffered from the same intrinsic and fatal weakness that dooms all sectarian governments; having been built on private modes and partisan loyalties, rather than good laws and orders, it remained vulnerable to the insolence of its members and to internal divisions and to attacks from elites excluded from power (FH IV.1 & IV.2).

Indeed, the narrative that unfolds in Book IV is of a regime concerned only with shoring up its fragile grasp on power and held together solely by the virtue of two men, Maso degli Albizzi followed by Niccolò da Uzzano, who were able, through the private authority they wielded, to keep the party united (FH IV.2). To strengthen its hold, the newly entrenched state

reduced the defeated party of the plebs “to almost nothing” through frequent parliaments and persecutions (FH IV.2). Yet, it didn’t stay quiet for long. Unnecessary wars were waged by the state, according to Machiavelli, first to satisfy the ambition of the few in power and later as result of the newly revived factional conflicts. In their desire for domination as well as their reliance on sectarian forms of power, the popular nobles turned out to be no different than their magnate predecessors. Worse, Machiavelli blames their particular mode of cultivating power through patronage and an ideology of virtue for the rise of the Medici principality.

Indeed, contemporary scholarship confirms the explosion of patronage as a tool of exchange, connection, and political domination under the Albizzi regime (McLean 2007, 40; Najemy 2008). In order to consolidate their newly acquired power over the state, the political elite employed a two-fold strategy whereby they enlarged the pool of citizens eligible for political office to include many non-elite upper and middle guildsmen, while at the same instituting formal rules and using informal strategies to limit the participation of the vast majority of those eligible. Without any real political power and cut off from the corporate solidarities that had defined their political role and collective interests for so long, the non-elite citizens of Florence became economically and politically vulnerable (Brucker 1969, 79-101). To defend themselves against the dangers and threats that now confronted them, they sought security through the support, protection, and friendship of men more powerful and influential than themselves. Access to jobs, marriages, religious benefices, tax relief, and social status were all sought by means of patronage. As a result, patronage became even more pervasive. The crosscutting networks of elite and non-elite friends and partisans that had always been an important source of elite political power became politically decisive after 1400 (Najemy 2008, 251).

By the time Cosimo entered the political stage, patronage seeking had become an institution in Florence: a normal and culturally-accepted means of seeking material, social, and political ends. And, as Machiavelli observes, there was no greater player of the patronage game than Cosimo. His immense wealth acquired in banking and his connections to the Papacy enabled him to build a political and economic network of friends and partisans that far exceeded any built by any other elite citizen. Throughout the latter half of the *Histories*, Machiavelli remarks repeatedly on Cosimo's liberality and prudence, the two qualities essential for success in fifteenth century sectarian politics. Cosimo, according to Machiavelli, was "a very prudent man, of grave and pleasing appearance, quite liberal, quite humane; he never attempted anything against either the Party or the state but took care to benefit everyone and with his liberality to make many citizens into his partisans" (FH IV.26). Later, when eulogizing Cosimo following the narration of his death, Machiavelli again describes the way he "surpassed every other man of his times not only in authority and riches but also liberality and prudence, because among all the other qualities that made him prince in his fatherland was that, above all other men, he was liberal and magnificent" (FH VII.5). As evidence of his liberality, Machiavelli points to the fact that he had managed to lend substantial amounts of money to almost every member of the Florentine nobility, often without ever being asked for it. Further, "to gain partisans in Florence and friends outside," Machiavelli tell us, he was "very liberal in sharing his property with everyone, so that for those causes he was creditor of a sum neither small nor of slight importance." (FH VII.10). As evidence of Cosimo's magnificence, Machiavelli points to the abundance of buildings he built, including the city's most impressive sacred buildings and the countryside's most princely private palaces (FH VII.5).

Cosimo's prudence appeared in the manner in which he managed to cover such princely behavior with "decency" and "modesty" and with his ability and willingness to extend patronage and associate with new men in economic endeavors. Although this is arguably what gave his faction a "popular" reputation, it was not because of any policies favored or because he represented an emerging economic elite class of new men.<sup>22</sup> As Niccolò da Uzzano, the honored and esteemed patrician allied with, yet critical of, the noble party points out, the Medici, like the Alberti, Ricci, and Strozzi before them, were no different than those who called themselves nobles (IV.27). They were as patrician in identity and interests as the other leading families of the time. What made Cosimo's network so unique was its size and its incorporation of a wider pool of rising new men and non-elite citizens (Padgett and Ansell 1993). In a speech attributed to Uzzano on the eve of Cosimo's usurpation of power, Machiavelli has Uzzano condemn Cosimo's use of patronage:

[F]or the cause impelling us is altogether founded on the suspicion that a prince may be established in the city. If we have this suspicion, others do not; *indeed, what is worse, they accuse us of what we accuse them*. The deeds of Cosimo that make us suspect him are these: because he helps everyone with money, and not only private individuals but the public, and not only Florentines but the condottieri; because he favors this or that citizen who has need of the magistrates; because by the good will that he has in the generality of people he pulls this or

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<sup>22</sup> Contemporary network analysis on the Medici party confirms its cross-cutting nature (Padgett and Ansell 1993). Traditionally, the partisan conflict between the patrician and Medici factions has been interpreted in economic and social class terms as between a wealthy patrician class threatened by an economically rising new men. But these two groups were not political groups in the Marxist or pluralist sense. Political "groups" in this sense share similar attributional traits and come together in order to coordinate action on common (sometimes latent) interests. Rather, what Padgett found was that there was no simple mapping of groups or spatial dimensions onto parties: social attributes and group interests were "merely" cognitive categories, which party mobilization, networks, and actions crosscut. According to Padgett, the Medici's success was founded on their economic and patronage ties with the new men. The Medici were willing to make connections with rising citizens with whom the patrician faction refused any relationship. These new men who were so anxious to enter the political elite were structurally available for mobilization. Almost all new men tied to the Medici through economic or patronage relations became active Medici partisan. (Padgett and Ansell 1993). See also Najemy 2008, 268.

that friend to higher ranks of honor. Thus, one would have to allege as the causes for driving him out that he is merciful, helpful, liberal, and loved by everyone. So tell me what law is it that forbids or that blames and condemns in men mercy, liberality, and love? And although these are all modes that send men flying to a principedom, nonetheless they are not believed to be so, nor are we adequate to the task of making them be so understood, because our modes have destroyed their faith in us; and the city, *which is naturally partisan and, since it has always lived with parties, is corrupt, cannot give a hearing to such accusations* (FH IV.27 emphasis added).

Yet Uzzano's real target in the speech is not Cosimo, but his fellow patrician party members who own private modes and partisan politics were to blame for Cosimo's success. The citizenry in Florence could not be made to see the threat posed by Cosimo's good deeds because they had been corrupted by patronage and the partisan politics that defined the Albizzi regime over the previous half century.

### *The Corruption of the Florentine Popolo*

What I hope is clear at this point is that Machiavelli blamed the use of private modes and the cultivation of private or personal power for the elite sectarianism that had always corrupted Florentine political life and made republican politics all but impossible. The further point I wish to make is that Machiavelli blamed the particular manifestation of private modes—originated by the Florentine patricians of the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and perfected by Cosimo for the corruption of the nascent Florentine republic and the Medici principality—in large part because of its effect on the political identity and self-conception of the *popolo*. No longer protected or engaged politically by the guilds, vulnerable and isolated citizens increasingly engaged in acts of favor seeking with powerful men or their brokers. These acts of favor seeking, though they were always strategic attempts to secure benefits, were never just this. They were also significant moments of culture reproduction.

Paul McLean, a scholar of Florentine social and political history, brings contemporary methods of studying social networks, social capital, and culture to bear on Florentine patronage letter writing (2007). McLean analyzes patronage's effect on the identity of those seeking patronage, demonstrating that most middle and upper class citizens in Florence sought not only security and material benefits through patronage, but also recognition and social mobility—that is, the sum of their well-being. As a result, McLean argues, patronage interactions were an important site of identity formation, shaping Florentine citizens' expectations about the world and how it operated (xii). To secure a patronage relationship, a Florentine citizen had to rhetorically commit himself to certain goals and relationships as something to be desired and honored (225). In doing so, he was “remaking” himself and participating in the reproduction of a political culture and a subjective political identity that honored certain modes of living and ways of being (226).

It is these modes of living and ways of being affirmed in patronage interactions that Machiavelli's anonymous patriot condemns in Book III of the *Histories*. Many citizens became “bad,” developing an “avarice” and “appetite, not for true glory, but for... contemptible honors on which hatreds, enmities, differences and sects depend” and for “the satisfaction of having overcome others and of having usurped the principality of the city” (FH III.5). In a city corrupted by patronage, citizens who identify with a particular patron or faction are rewarded not only with material benefits and protection, but also with position and a sense of status. As such, those citizens in Florence with an ambitious disposition became “bad,” seeking power and honor through private modes and the political dominance of their sect. They became loyal partisans, willing to “defend” and “honor” their party and its leadership “extraordinarily” in order to secure its (and their own) position of authority (FH III.5). But even those citizens who did not become

active partisans on behalf of one or the other sect were inculcated with certain assumptions concerning political action and its meaning. Through their lived, concrete experience of securing themselves and their well-being through patronage and the favor of those like Cosimo, Florentine citizens became accustomed to acting through private forms of individual and collective action and esteem for the moral (i.e., ideological) values used to legitimate them. In particular, they developed a “love of parties” and “industrious men” and an appreciation for the virtues of liberality, generosity and loyalty because it was through these “private modes” that they were able to better their situation (FH III.5).

The civic humanist ideology that developed during the latter end of the fourteenth century, which came to dominate Florentine political thought in the fifteenth century under the Albizzi oligarchy, reinforced and gave expression to the power of patrons and the culture of sectarianism. Capitalizing on the new set of political attitudes arising out of the concentration of socio-political power and the evolving patterns of social interaction between the classes in Florence, the civic humanists espoused a myth of consensus and paternalistic leadership derived from Roman philosophical and legal sources that buttressed the Albizzi’s oligarchic power and authority (Najemy 2000; Jurdjevic 1999). Civic humanists like Bruni lauded the “dutiful and subservient citizen” who remained a respectful distance from those who exercise power—the factions, patrician families and patrons” (Najemy 2000, 92). They praised the virtues of liberality and magnificence, on one side, and gratitude, personal trustworthiness and loyalty, on the other, as the true civic virtues. Ordinary citizens came to understand their posts as a recognition of, and reward for, personal merit and thus loyalty to their patrons, and not as an opportunity to represent the interests of their class. In participating in the practice of patronage seeking, ordinary citizens

affirmed these virtues as the mode of life most likely to lead to individual security and success and the common good.<sup>23</sup>

The habit of acting through private modes of improving one's material and social condition is the essence of popular corruption for Machiavelli. A people that has become

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<sup>23</sup> Recent interpreters of Machiavelli's political thought have directed their attention to the ways in which an elite few may use rhetoric and moral language to corrupt or deceive ordinary citizens. For instance, in *Machiavelli's Ethics*, Erica Benner argues that Machiavelli's primary concern in the *Histories* is with dangerous forms of rhetoric and persuasion (2009, 27). According to Benner, Machiavelli ultimately condemned the Medici because of the way they used honest and honorable words like freedom, justice, and fatherland to disguise dishonorable means. Machiavelli's work, for Benner, is an attempt to educate his readers on how to distinguish between persuasions that tend to support stable republican orders and those that corrupt them: "If the *Florentine Histories* had a single leitmotif, it is the disparity between good words, appearances, or reputations and the less praiseworthy deeds that these may gloss.... Throughout the work he urges readers, particularly citizens of republics such as Florence, to consider how genuinely *onesto* actions aimed at serving the public good can be distinguished from *disonesto* deeds that pursue private or partisan aims in the name of the republic" (19).

Michelle Clarke rightly accentuates Machiavelli's skepticism regarding those traditional Roman social virtues lauded by the humanists that are voiced in Florentine patron-client relationships (2013b). According to Clarke, the Roman writers praised the qualities of *fides* (personal trustworthiness and loyalty) as central to Roman citizenship because they "cemented bonds of interpersonal association by giving moral weight to the performance of duties and the reciprocation of favors" (318). But, Clarke argues, Machiavelli criticized these virtues because they encouraged a "submissiveness" and "compliance" towards elites that encouraged "partisanship" or "clientelistic attitudes" and behaviors that undermined liberty (318). In particular, she argues, the normative orders of both Rome and Florence rendered popular judgment ineffective because it blinded citizens to the danger posed by ambitious elites (325). Indeed, the culture of dependence fostered by the institution of patronage undermined the ability of the Florentine people to guard the republic against ambitious citizens. But, whereas Clarke focuses on the ideological practices employed by the Florentine elite in their attempts to consolidate political power, I am concerned in this dissertation with identifying the underlying economic conditions and social structures that caused the moral discourse and rhetoric of the elite to resonate with the Florentine people. The virtues of liberality and gratitude were honored in Rome and Florence, I contend, because, through the relationships and interactions that these virtues validated, ordinary citizens sought to satisfy their strategic interests and improve their welfare. Having become accustomed to gratifying their wants and needs through dependence on the private favor of a wealthy few, the Florentine citizens could not, or chose not to, see the danger posed by those very forms of private power upon which they had come to depend.

accustomed to acting through private modes will not act publically to guard the republic from ambitious citizens with princely aspirations because they cannot or choose not to see the danger posed by the very forms of private power upon which they have come to depend. Elite attempts to usurp republican institutions are only truly dangerous when the generality of citizens is fully corrupt (D I.17, D III.8): that is, when they no longer “know freedom” and can no longer recognize the “modes that send men flying to a principedom” when they see it (FH VIII.8, FH IV.27). This is what happened to the Florentine *popolo*, according to Machiavelli, who were made “deaf” as a result of the extraordinary “fortune and liberality” of the Medici (FH VIII.8).

Unfortunately for Florence, unlike Rome, it could not overcome the corrupting effects of wealth on politics and, therefore, always suffered from sectarian politics (FH III.5). Though the politically organized *popolo* managed to make significant institutional gains during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the private or personal power maintained by the Florentine *grandi* through their strategy of cultivating clients and partisans prevented Florence from ever really constituting a republic (D I.49). During its early years, the power of Florence’s ancient nobility and “the favors they had from princes” meant that “civil orders and modes” could never “be enough to check them” (FH III.5). Following the political defeat of the magnate order, however, Florence found itself in a state of “wonderful equality,” such that it could easily have been ordered for a civil way of life (FH III.1, D I.55).<sup>24</sup> The Florence of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, unlike the late Roman republic or the Italian regions outside Tuscany, was not plagued by a nobility or commander-patrons fortified with private armies. The new Florentine *ottimati*

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<sup>24</sup> The anonymous patriot makes a similar statement regarding the state of Florence at the beginning of the fourteenth century: “now the empire has no force here, the pope is not feared, and all Italy and this city have been brought to such equality that for it to be able to rule itself is not very difficult for us” (FH III.5).

were not lords or gentleman, but merchants, bankers, and manufacturers. Yet, the new cohort of elite in Florence, using the wealth it accumulated through commercial endeavors, cultivated its own civil form of private power, combining both material and ideological persuasions, which turned out to be just as corrupting and just as dangerous for freedom because of its enervating effects on the institutions and political consciousness of the once formidable *popolo*.

### **Inequality: The Source of Corruption**

Turning back to Machiavelli's *Discourses*, we observe that the structures of power and the socio-political relations of dependence that enabled Florentine political sectarianism constitute the essence of corruption as Machiavelli employed the term. A corrupt city, says Machiavelli, is a city in which the "matter" (*materia*), that is, the citizens, have become corrupt in that they no longer act towards a good end (D I.16 & I.17). It is tempting here again to interpret corruption in moral terms, attributing to citizens an insatiably selfish and debased character. Indeed, for Machiavelli, a voracious egoism lies at the heart of human nature (D I.37). But for Machiavelli, as is well known, the good end to which all behavior should be directed is not some kind of teleological moral virtue. Rather, citizens' ends are good when they are constitutive of republican freedom, stability, and greatness. Importantly, I argue in opposition to Skinner, such action need not be wholly or even primarily guided by thoughts of the common good for Machiavelli to consider it directed towards a good end. This is because what matters most with respect to the end, for Machiavelli, is the outcome or effect of an action, not the final cause or intent behind it. In a well-ordered republic, citizens simply become accustomed to acting in ways and towards the kind of self-interested ends that are consistent with the good of the republic. In contrast, in a corrupt city, citizens habitually act in ways that make them vulnerable to

domination and the republic to tyranny (D I.17). That these ways of being and acting can be condemned in many cases as foul, wicked and immoral, in the more conventional sense, does not compel their identity as such. All there needs to be present in a corrupt city are customs and habits that fail to support the laws and orders that constitute a free way of life (D I.17).

This tendency of citizens to make themselves vulnerable to domination, Machiavelli informs readers in book I, chapter 17 of the *Discourses*, has its origins in “inequality.” Machiavelli’s notion of inequality is not merely distributional, that is, focused on the uneven distribution of resources. Rather, inequality for Machiavelli, is relational; it connotes a social condition in which common or non-elite members of a society have become dependent on a few possessing significant wealth and social power.<sup>25</sup> The powerful, in turn, enjoy influence and in some cases near absolute control over the actions of those dependent on them. Although it is analytically distinct from pure material inequality, Machiavelli’s inequality arises in societies where a few ambitious citizens, driven by a desire to command and dominate, are able to acquire great private wealth or absolute power over public resources (as in the case of Appius Claudius and the patron-commanders in Rome) and disperse it in ways intended to make clients and partisans out of ordinary citizens (D I.40, D I.37, D I.55). Landed gentry and lords, and the feudal relations they personify, epitomize this corrupt and conflict-generating form of socio-political power for Machiavelli. Gentlemen are men able to live idly off their landed possessions (D I.55). Lords are particularly dangerous because they “command from a castle and have subjects who obey them” (D I.55). It is because of the control they exercise over their dependents

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<sup>25</sup> For interpretations of the *Discourses* that acknowledge a relationship between inequality, dependence, and corruption for Machiavelli see Pocock (2003), Viroli (1998), and Nelson (2004). While these scholars recognize Machiavelli’s concern with the problem of dependence, they do not appreciate the connection I make between this concern and his thought on the source and nature of popular virtue.

and retainers that these big men are able to make an “alteration with greater power and greater motion” and therefore pose the most significant threat to republican freedom (D I.5). This is why Machiavelli holds that in provinces populated by gentlemen or lords, a republican way of life is impossible because “there is so much corrupt matter” there that a “kingly hand” with “absolute and excessive power” is necessary to give order and put a check on “the excessive ambition and corruption of the powerful” (D I.55).

Significantly, the power maintained by lords, though it may be one of the more extreme examples, is not the only manifestation of private power and social organization that threatens republican freedom. Private power and the sectarian form of politics it engenders can arise in any political society, particularly if it is ordered for expansion or trade, like Rome and Florence, and therefore disposed to the accumulation of great wealth.<sup>26</sup> Republican Rome, Machiavelli’s cherished example of ancient orders, was ruined due to the “great inequality” that eventually arose there and the sectarian politics that soon followed (FH III.1). Rome’s policy of expansion to distant regions required the extension of military consulships that, over time, gave rise to a privatized military under patron-commanders (D III.24). At the same time, the newly acquired lands benefited only those noble men who had the ability to cultivate them at a great distance (D I.37). Thus, this policy of expansion “redoubled” the private power of elite citizens and military commanders who used their positions to favor the common citizenry and build parties (D I.37, III.24). The Roman people, corrupted by these private modes and feeling secure against their enemies, “no longer regard[ed] virtue but *favor* in bestowing the consulate, lifting to that rank those who knew better how to entertain men rather than those who knew better how to conquer

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<sup>26</sup> See Najemy (2010) for an excellent discussion on the similarities between landed gentry and urban *grandi*.

enemies” (D I.18; emphasis added). From favor, the citizens soon descended to electing the powerful, whom they had come to fear, and Rome’s ruin soon followed.

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli focuses on the power and reputation acquired by ambitious citizens through the use of private modes and their ability to disrupt and dismantle a republic’s laws and orders as a result.<sup>27</sup> To be sure, Machiavelli’s corruption refers, in the first place, to the formation of unaccountable formations of power that can be exploited by elites to manipulate republican institutions and undermine law. Largely obscured by this elite-centered frame is the effect that continuous distribution of private favor by the few has over time on the generality of citizens and their ability to guard the republic. Read in light of Machiavelli’s analysis in the *Histories*, however, we get a sense of the effect that elite use of private modes has on ordinary citizens. As inequality grows and the use of private modes expands, citizens slowly become accustomed to depending on the private favor of elites.<sup>28</sup> Acting on their inherent desire for security and freedom from domination, they will often collude with particular elites in the domination of others (and unwittingly of themselves) and eventually in the destruction of the republic. Popular corruption, thus conceptualized, is the habit ordinary citizens develop of

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<sup>27</sup> Citizens who live “ambitiously” in a republic, writes Machiavelli, “seek friendships” in order to make themselves proof against offense from both private individuals and magistrates. They acquire them “in ways honest in appearance, either by helping with money or by defending them from the powerful. Because this appears virtuous, it easily deceives everyone” until it is too late and both the citizens and magistrates have fear of him. Once in this position, according to Machiavelli, the citizen will have no trouble getting both private individuals and magistrates to “judge and to offend in his mode” (D I.46).

<sup>28</sup> The corruption of a city’s social order does not happen all at once. One citizen with wicked intent cannot corrupt a republic in one lifetime (D III.8). Rather, a people drifts slowly into corruption “little by little” over generations unless “it is not often refreshed with good examples or pulled back toward its beginnings with new laws.” Unfortunately, the gradualness of this transformation, along with the general obtuseness and intransigence of men accustomed to a particular order and way of acting, make it imperceptible to all but the most virtuous of men until it is too late and the matter is past reordering (D I.18).

seeking their ends through private modes and their participation in practices, interactions, and forms of social organization that empower a few to oppress the weak and usurp a republic.

## **Conclusion**

Machiavelli, like most writers associated with the republican tradition, recognizes the inextricable connection between wealth, politics, and freedom. In contrast to most in the tradition, whose work justifies (however unintentionally) the outsized political influence of the wealthy, Machiavelli condemns socio-economic inequality as the single greatest cause of the political corruption and civil conflict that destroys republics. Significant inequality corrupts republican politics because of the way it structures collective action and shapes the strategic and cultural practices of society. Feudal relations constitute the starkest form of inequality and corruption for Machiavelli: a socio-juridical structure irreconcilable with republican government. What the nuanced socio-historical analysis of the *Histories* reveals is how the form of inequality varies and can transform over time. Indeed, the particular ethos of the Florentine commercial elite, its modes of living and manner of cultivating dependents, was in many (not insignificant) ways quite distinct from the noble culture that dominated Florence in the preceding century. The Medici no doubt appeared and even thought of themselves as virtuous, certainly more virtuous than the violent nobilities of Florence's past. But it is what they shared with the Florentine magnate class—that is, their unceasing drive to accumulate unaccountable power so as to dominate their rivals and the relations of inequality they cultivated (rather than the civic ideology that distinguished them)—that mattered for Florence's republican prospects.

What distinguished the Florentine republic from the Roman one, I argue, was the failure of that city to order itself in such a way as to prevent the popular elite that emerged in the

fourteenth century from exploiting private modes of gaining power and reputation. The threat to republican freedom for Machiavelli does not come from citizens with claims to noble lineage or generous (martial) spirit, but from citizens with significant private wealth and social power. In Florence, the presence of such citizens combined with the persistently privatized nature of Florentine politics meant that ambitious and powerful citizens, regardless of whether they were nominally classified as noble or popular due to their patrilineage, could and did engage in practices intended to accumulate dependents. Unfortunately for Florence, and notwithstanding the institutional successes of the guild organized *popolo* in the early years of the commune, it never experienced the kind of founding moments that occurred in Rome—the establishment of the Senate and the arming of the plebs by Romulus and the institutionalization of the tribune and the plebian councils—that had the effect, over time, of fashioning a publically-oriented and resilient people out of the multitude of non-elite Roman citizens. This failure to empower the middle and lower ranks of citizens in Florence following the political defeat of the magnate families with a truly robust and specifically class-based set of political institutions meant that the kind of public and resistive popular culture present in Rome and essential to republican government—the habit of acting through public modes of action and a distrust of princely forms of power—never took hold in Florence. As a result, over the course of the fourteenth century, the *popolo* of Florence became increasingly accustomed to seeking their ends through private rather than public modes. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, the form and pervasiveness of such practices had corrupted the political habitus of Florence such that the generality of the Florentine people were unable or, better yet, unwilling to act in their role as the guardians of liberty against the Medici's princely aspirations.

However, the fact that Florence never experienced its own founding moment (or moments) did not mean for Machiavelli that the project of Florentine republicanism was doomed. Machiavelli's project in the *Histories* was both political and rhetorical. He sought to enlighten his readers, the Medici and *ottimati* of sixteenth century Florence, as to the causes of Florentine sectarianism and its corrupt political culture, namely its foundation in gross inequality, relations of dependence, and the material and ideological practices bound up with the institution of patronage, so that the Florentine elite could come to understand their role in their own undoing and bring about the institutional reform that could, over time, make that people and that city virtuous.

### Chapter 3:

#### **The Corruption of a Republic's Contestatory Culture: A Realist Critique of Pettit's Democratic Republic**

In the last two chapters, I set forth what I call the sociology of corruption underlying Machiavelli's critique of Florentine politics in the *Histories*. In both my review of contemporary Machiavellian scholarship and my own interpretive analysis of Machiavelli's historical writings, I emphasized Machiavelli's recognition of the effects of wealth, power, and social relations on the associational life of a polity and, in turn, on the norms that structure political behavior. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Machiavelli's sociology of corruption can contribute to contemporary debates on political equality, freedom, and the role of ordinary citizens in democratic politics.

Machiavelli's theory of corruption calls on theorists of democracy to recognize the influence wealth has on politics beyond the direct impact it can have in electoral campaigns and lobbying efforts. It demands that we account for the effects of the distribution of wealth on the associational life of a republic and, in turn, the strength of the normative framework that supports it. Unfortunately, contemporary liberal, democratic, and republican theorists alike tend to discount this phenomenological reality when addressing issues related to wealth and politics.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, contemporary theorists are attuned to the undue influence wealth can have directly on the election of political officials and on policy-making as well as its ideological impact through the monopolization and manipulation of media. However, they generally do not take account of the impact of wealth on social relations, organizational structures, and modes of collective action

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<sup>1</sup> See Greene (2016) on the tendency of liberal democratic theorists to discount the political consequences of wealth inequality.

in the space of civil society. This tendency to ignore the way inequality shapes society stems from their adherence to the strategy of separation as the solution to the problem of wealth in politics.<sup>2</sup> There exists a widely shared belief among political theorists that the only just solution to the problem of wealth inequality is a set of institutions and practices that effectively insulates collective decision making from the disproportionate influence of the wealthy.<sup>3</sup> This idea of civic equality as the only solution to the problem of wealth continues to hold sway, notwithstanding the harsh criticism it has received over the years, in particular from those inspired by Marx, who view it as little more than ideological cover for capitalist interests.

Motivated as they are by the ideal of a public sphere walled off from the influence of wealth, scholars accustomed to working in the prevailing liberal paradigm generally do not take into account how the way citizens *with each other* shapes the interests brought into the public sphere. Society, which encompasses all non-state relations and activities, stands as a separate and distinct space from which the politically salient interests and concerns of citizens are sourced and only brought into public view once fully formed through engagement with and participation in state institutional structures. For the most part, at least insofar as it pertains to the distribution of wealth, theorists ignore the mechanisms by which these interests are formed or become salient in the public sphere.

Pettit's theory of republican democracy, though justly acclaimed for its originality, perspicacity, and progressiveness, nevertheless exemplifies the limits of this approach. His latest endeavor, set forth in *On the People's Terms*, has much recommend it, incorporating many of Machiavelli's more radical ideas and confirming the fundamentally democratic nature of the rule

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Luke Mayville for the idea of the strategy of separation (working paper).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Rawls (1993) and Urbinati (2011, 2015). I expand on this point in greater detail in chapter four.

of law as a fount of freedom and justice (2012, herein cited as OPT). Pettit's juridical model of republicanism emphasizes a constitutional order that restrains the potentially dominating power of the state through its dispersal. Often this "juridical" model of republicanism is contrasted with "civic" forms of republicanism that rely on the virtue of citizens. To make this distinction, however, is to ignore the central role Pettit assigns to citizens of a republic in securing the rule of law.

As I shall demonstrate below, Pettit's juridical republic rests ultimately on a citizenry disposed to resist attempts by the powerful to arrogate state power to themselves. From where does this disposition to contest arise? And how do citizens recognize threats to democracy and freedom? For Pettit, the contestation needed to preserve freedom can be sourced in a combination of citizens' interests and particularistic attachments and their patriotic commitment to republican norms. It is a socio-political phenomenon that appears to arise spontaneously in a free society composed of virtuous citizens committed to principles of equality and freedom. In articulating the origins of citizen contestation in these terms, Pettit remains faithful to the dominant line of thinking in the neo-Roman tradition (or what Pettit calls the Italian-Atlantic tradition) regarding the foundations of virtue in citizens' moral strength. In addition to its notable genealogy, this understanding of civic virtue is easily reconciled with the principle of political individualism, making Pettit's republican an appealing alternative within the contemporary liberal paradigm. In what follows, however, I argue that this socially agnostic theory of civic vigilance cannot produce the contestation and political habitus Pettit's republicanism depends upon because it neglects the subtle ways power operates in conditions of inequality to undermine citizens' disposition to engage in freedom-producing forms of resistance.

In many ways, Pettit's republicanism is quite attentive to the threat socio-economic inequality and unequal power pose to republican politics. Yet, his theory does not account for the way inequality and the relations of dependence it engenders can affect the political identity of ordinary citizens and their capacity to guard the republic. Building on Skinner's work (1978, 1990), Pettit characterizes what for Machiavelli was a two-fold concern with dependence as a condition of unfreedom *and* corruption solely as problem of domination akin to slavery (Sparling 2013). To be dominated, as Pettit defines it, is to be subject to the uncontrolled or arbitrary power of interference of another agent, whether this is a person or group of people sharing in one will (as in a corporation or political majority) (OPT, 50). Importantly, the mere fact that the agent chooses not to interfere does not make the subject any less unfree. One is unfree to the extent that she is dependent on the will of another. This depiction of dependence as domination has proven to be a fruitful one, enabling the criticism of forms of unfreedom left theoretically unaccountable by contemporary liberal theories of freedom as non-interference. In particular, it has brought to light a structure of *negating* or *repressive* power that functions to deny not only the dependent's capacity to act, but his humanity and dignity as well. However, this characterization of dependence as domination does little to help us understand its *positive* and *constructive* power—that is, how it contributes to the formation of norms of action and in turn shapes the dependent's ideas about her world.

Pettit is far from denying the constructive effects of power on the formation of the subject. Indeed, an appreciation of the socially embedded reality of individual existence and the effects of power dynamics and social interactions on the formation of the self are central to Pettit's philosophical analysis of the freedom of will (2001). For purposes of his political theory, however, Pettit remains largely indifferent to these positive or subject-forming aspects of power

and dependence. So as not to drift into the territory of positive freedom and the dangerous forms of state intervention into private life that it is said to inevitably entail, Pettit's political theory takes the citizen and her freedom of choice as paramount.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this political decision to privilege the individual and her freedom to choose comes at a cost. In doing so, Pettit essentially closes off inquiry into the material and social conditions necessary for fostering the contestatory culture his republicanism ultimately depends upon. Pettit's civic vigilance turns out to be essentially voluntary, a matter of will attainable irrespective of one's social position. As such, Pettit's republicanism (following in the footsteps of Machiavelli's more aristocratic opponents) does not contend with the potentially corrupting effects non-state structures, institutions, and practices can have through the cultivation of what may turn out to be technically non-dominating forms of dependence (at least in Pettit's terms) on ordinary citizens. In particular, he discounts the potentially detrimental effects the political and social distribution of resources by the wealthy and powerful few can have on ordinary citizens' capacity and desire to contest and, just as importantly, what they believe deserves contestation.

In this chapter, I engage in a close analysis of Pettit's republican theory of democracy, demonstrating that its viability depends on the presence of a virtuous citizenry disposed to

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<sup>4</sup> In *A Theory of Freedom* (2001) Pettit argues that the state should not involve itself in developing such intrapersonal factors as identity or citizens' strength of will in order to promote freedom because it is unlikely that the state can do anything useful on this intrapersonal front and "it seems all too likely that were the state to embrace the ambition of improving people's psychology in the respects required then it might well degenerate into an intrusive and oppressive agency" (127). Likewise, in *Republicanism* (1999), Pettit warns against state attempts to promote civility through the education system because it is "painfully obvious in most societies that those measures easily deteriorate into the sort of propaganda that bores and alienates" (253). Pettit recognizes the possibility that powerful agents may attempt to manipulate public opinion and that the republic should seek out ways to prevent this from happening (as through publicly-funded media outlets) (OPT, 234). But, aside from instances of intentional deception or manipulation, Pettit does not focus in his political philosophy on the effects of social relations on the formation of interests and political behavior.

overcome the inclination towards apathy and contest forms of power that threaten democratic control. In theorizing this indispensable role of the people in his republicanism, I argue, Pettit neglects the possibility that certain social relations arising in conditions of inequality might prevent citizens from recognizing, and, in turn, contesting forms of power that pose a threat to popular control. I then go on to develop a theory of corruption I argue is applicable today and summarized as follows: in conditions of concentrated wealth, those with control over significant resources can, and often do, use those resources to benefit citizens in modes intended to legitimate their excessive social and political power. Over time, the private distribution and administration of social and political goods by the few alters the associational landscape of a democracy, crowding out more egalitarian forms of organization and action in the ostensibly private space of civil society. The effect of this, I suggest, is that citizens become accustomed to pursuing their social and political ends (i.e. a better life) through dependence upon the organizations and forms of collective action controlled by a wealthy few. As a result, citizens can become acquiescent, or at the very least resigned, to the outsized influence that some are afforded in public life as a result of their power and munificence such that claims made in public against the concentration of power will fail to resonate—they will fail to provoke the critical reflection and response in citizens upon which the rule of law and a democratic form of government depends. Accounting for the possibility of corruption so understood, I conclude, calls into question the effectiveness of the strategy of separation as a viable means of countering the problem of wealth in politics.

## The Concentration of Power and the Resistive Community

In *On the People's Terms*, Pettit continues the project he began twenty years ago of articulating the political framework necessary for the realization of the philosophical ideal of freedom as non-domination. He frames this most recent endeavor in republican constitutionalism as a theory of political legitimacy that grounds the legitimacy of the state in a conception of popular control.<sup>5</sup> While a state structure is essential to promote freedom as non-domination for citizens in their relations with each other, argues Pettit, the state itself will constitute a dominating presence in people's lives unless citizens exercise a form of control over its actions.<sup>6</sup> What control requires, according to Pettit, is that citizens share in a system of "directed influence"—each enjoying equal access to a robust system of influence that actually imposes a direction on law and policy that citizens are inclined to accept (OPT, 167). This idea that citizens may somehow enjoy what truly amounts to *equal* access to political influence—notwithstanding the inevitable inequality of social power that exists in a free society—and that such influence should somehow *direct* the actions of government over the long term toward something arguably approaching the public interest—notwithstanding the indeterminate and inconsistent nature of people's judgments and the considerable discretionary power retained by political authorities—is one many believe to be beyond the realm of human possibility.<sup>7</sup> Pettit disagrees, offering a

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<sup>5</sup> Pettit bifurcates political legitimacy and social justice (the ethical ordering of relations among persons in society) as two distinct components of justice (76). Political legitimacy concerns the relationship between people and the regime under which they live (130).

<sup>6</sup> This conception of control marks a shift from Pettit's previous work in which freedom depended on limiting the ability of the state to arbitrarily interfere in the lives of its citizens (1999). Control is a more demanding condition insofar as it denies the possibility that a state may be legitimately constrained by anything other than the ongoing influence of a properly constituted people. Thus, a state constrained by a set of self-ascribed rules or international norms, under this new framework, would not be legitimate. See Markell (2008) for a critique of paternalism admissible with Pettit's former articulation of freedom.

<sup>7</sup> For the classic argument denying such a possibility, see Schumpeter (2008).

constitutional program meant not only as an ideal dictated by justice, but also as a feasible set of institutions and practices that, when put into place, will make the republic both legitimate and stable over time.

The problem of stabilizing the republic, as Pettit notes, is “one of the age-old themes in the tradition” with the challenge being to identify institutions and practices “fit to survive the worst that nature and culture can confront it with” (1999, 210). This realist approach to political theory taken by republicans originates in part in the very nature of the republican ideal of freedom concerned as it is with limiting the arbitrary power of the state and state actors. While this intrinsic concern for power and how it operates is an attractive feature of republican political theory, it raises challenging questions concerning human nature and sociology. For purposes of conceiving a set of political institutions, it requires that we understand *when* and *how* citizens might intentionally or unintentionally subvert institutional intent and compromise the system. In particular, it requires that we understand how those in positions of power might exploit that position to accrue greater power or exert undue influence on state action. Finally, it requires that we effectively constrain the powerful and that the checks we put in place continue to be effective notwithstanding historical change and the sociological tendency of power to consolidate in fewer and fewer hands.<sup>8</sup> Only with an accurate understanding of how power functions in a society can we hope to constrain the arbitrary power of the state and stabilize the republic over time.

Pettit attempts to address these concerns through an institutional model meant to be both feasible given human nature and contemporary social conditions and capable in the long term of

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<sup>8</sup> As Pettit writes: “Unregulated by the agency of the state, wealth and power tend to accumulate in fewer and fewer hands”; he quotes Francis Fukuyama in his recent history of political order: “As if by an ‘iron law’... ‘the rich tend to get richer in the absence of state intervention’” OPT (135).

generating and regenerating the normative conditions of its continued existence. What is required, according to Pettit, is that a system of popular influence be individualized, unconditioned, and efficacious (OPT, 260). Pettit initially identifies each of these conditions as requirements of popular control—that is, requirements of public freedom and political legitimacy (OPT, 166-167).<sup>9</sup> As it turns out, however, these same three conditions are also both necessary and sufficient to generate the kind of deliberative practices and communal norms Pettit argues will promote the public interest over the long term (OPT, 260). The first requirement, that the system of influence be individualized, is familiar from Pettit’s previous work and provides the original foundation of his contestatory theory of democracy (1999). To guard against majority tyranny and the devaluation of votes of sticky minorities, a system of election and representation must be complemented by an equally accessible system of individualized contestation—mechanisms that allow for challenges by individuals or social groups to problematic measures passed by the majority (OPT, 167). The institutional mechanisms Pettit has in mind to allow for these challenges include measures that promote transparency, channels of consultation and appeal between the public and the legislature, and a set of forums that guarantee individual contestations receive impartial hearing and judgment (OPT, 215-216). Individualization of the system of influence promotes inclusiveness by guaranteeing equal access to all citizens irrespective of identity.

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<sup>9</sup> A system of influence is individualized if it is equally accessible to all citizens and imposes a direction that all can accept. It is efficacious if it has an intuitively acceptable level of impact on the direction of government. And it is unconditioned if no agent in political society (including the state or some part of it) is in a position to arbitrarily decide whether popular influence should control state action. The requirement that a system of influence be individualized, unconditioned, and efficacious is necessary but not sufficient for political legitimacy because it must also be the case that the system of influence imposes a certain direction on law and state action.

With the second requirement, that popular influence is unconditioned, Pettit seeks to make the system of popular influence proof against the power of the state or other agents (such as a standing army or group of moneyed supporters) to determine arbitrarily whether popular influence should govern. In order to guarantee the independent and resilient character of popular influence the republic must maintain a “resistive community” (OPT, 219). What is required is a community in which it is the case (or at least commonly believed to be the case) that citizens are disposed to resist government should it ignore popular influence and government is disposed to avoid triggering this resistance. It is a community in which the political habitus makes present in the minds and actions of state officials and citizens alike the power of the people to resist. Pettit calls the people’s power of resistance democracy’s “trump card” and the foundation of any claim by a polity to political legitimacy (OPT, 173).<sup>10</sup> When it is expressed in the habitus of a republic, it functions as a check on those who would attempt to undermine popular control—either by taking certain options off the table as a matter of cognition or by making them wary of engaging in such activity due to the likelihood that it will provoke reprisal.

What does a resistive community require? To incline state officials to avoid triggering popular resistance, argues Pettit, state power must be dispersed in line with the traditional conception of the mixed constitution. For Pettit, the traditional republican imagery of the mixed constitution as a mixture of the three pure constitutional types—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—serves merely as a “rhetorical trope” to “encode straightforward institutional constraints” that disposes the government to avoid triggering resistance (OPT, 221). What this

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<sup>10</sup> In a society where the habitus does not reflect the power of the people to rise up in response to attempts made to undermine their control, citizens are relegated as a theoretical matter, for Pettit, to the status of subjects. It is, of course, also quite likely that they will be subjected to abusive interference as a matter of fact (the possibility of benevolent despotism notwithstanding).

requires, according to Pettit, is a mixed constitution—that is, an institutional structure of government decision-making and execution that excludes no one from influence (balancing) and prevents the consolidation of decision making power in too few hands (sharing and separation) (OPT, 221-223). While I will have more to say about the mixed constitution in the following chapter, the point to be made here is that, for Pettit, the mixed constitution serves primarily as a tool for dispersing power and rendering political officials who operate within and through it vulnerable and therefore accountable to the power of popular resistance.

For their part, citizens must be “contestatory”—they must participate in an “active, engaged style of politics” with “numbers of people” manifesting “an interest in every initiative of government” and insisting “on government justifying the initiatives it takes” (OPT, 226). They must be “vigilant” and “on the watch for proposals or measures that are not suitably supported” by popular norms and “they must be ready to organize in opposition to such policies.” It is, according to Pettit, only in the presence of “civic vigilance—in the old term—that we can have assurance that government will be forced to remain responsive to popular inputs.” Though Pettit’s description conjures up traditional republican images of civic virtue, he is quick to point out that he harbors no romantic delusions regarding the level of public involvement by ordinary citizens. Contemporary states, Pettit argues, are too “complex” to allow for the “panoramic scrutiny and interrogation” or the “participatory, Rousseauvian engagement” contemplated by traditional republican ideas of civic virtue (OPT, 226-227). What is needed, according to Pettit, is “specialization and organization...a division of labour in the exercise of civic vigilance.” What he says he has in mind here are the social movements generated and led by watchdog, activist bodies, or NGOs that he argues have shown themselves to naturally emerge in contemporary democratic polities (OPT, 226). This kind of agnostic politics generated in a free and democratic

society, writes Pettit, is both efficient and feasible because the motivation to act is based on people's "particular concerns and passions" rather than on the abstract duty to engage in altruistic forms of oversight (OPT, 227).

Finally, the requirement that the system of influence be efficacious alerts us to the fact that any system of popular control will nevertheless require that political officials maintain significant discretionary power in order to fulfill their duties; this leaves open the possibility that officials may ignore popular influence.<sup>11</sup> Efficacy, therefore, demands the implementation of mechanisms of oversight and measures aimed at insulating the sites of influence so that citizens can see unwelcome decisions as a matter of "tough luck" and not the result of some alien will (OPT, 232-234). These measures are meant to complement and complete the inclusive and contestatory system formed with the first two requirements by securing citizens' equal access against attempts by elected officials and private lobbies to exert undue influence.

*If* the above conditions are met and popular influence is indeed individualized, unconditioned, and efficacious, Pettit argues that certain deliberative practices (what he refers to as "acceptability games") will come to dominate the public sphere (OPT, 260). The inclusive, contestatory nature of the system is such, contends Pettit, that it will compel citizens in public discussion surrounding the formulation of policy to craft their claims based on the avowed dispositions of the other interested parties present in the public space (OPT, 261). With these rules in place, according to Pettit, participants that enter debate need not be moved by anything

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<sup>11</sup> Conceptually Pettit separates the requirement that popular influence be unconditioned from the condition that it be efficacious. But I believe it is also possible to see the conditioned system of popular influence as simply one that would undoubtedly fail the "tough-luck test" in that it would be impossible not to think that any unwelcome political decision is not the result of "a will at work in the public sphere that operates beyond the equally shared control of you and your fellows" (OPT, 177).

close to an impartial concern for the common good. So long as they are disciplined by the rules of the deliberative game, it does no harm that their fundamental motivations be more or less self-seeking (OPT, 258). Over the long term, Pettit argues, this deliberative framework should cause certain norms of equality and freedom to emerge (as if by an invisible-hand) and function as regulative background conditions channeling claim-making (OPT, 262) *and* government policy (OPT, 267) in a direction approaching the public interest (understood in a post-social non-corporate sense).<sup>12</sup>

Like all republican political theories, then, Pettit's contestatory-deliberative framework rests on a cultural or normative foundation. It depends on the existence of a robust commitment to the communal norm of equality of influence (OPT, 228). In order for the deliberative process and popular norms it generates to fulfill its disciplinary role on claim and policy making so as to promote the public interest, it must be the case that the principle of equality of influence continues to infuse the practices of politics and maintain a hold on the minds of citizens, or at least some powerful section of them, such that there are those at the ready to contest claims or policies that compromise it. According to Pettit, this political culture will be reproduced in part through the operation of the system as the fairness, inclusiveness, and openness of the system becomes a matter of common perception (1999, 252). Yet, while some citizens will engage in the practices of contestation and deliberation as a result of their attempts to exert influence on the state, for the majority, according to Pettit, influence will be exerted in virtual or reserve form (OPT, 230-231). What this means is that, for most, interaction in public will be minimal.

Nevertheless, citizens are expected to maintain the patriotic commitment to republican norms—

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<sup>12</sup> A post-social non-corporate understanding of the public interest is “composed of goods that anyone who accepts the necessity of living on equal terms with others is likely to want to have collectively guaranteed or promoted” (OPT, 245).

particularly equality of influence as the foundational principle of freedom and the republic—and be receptive to claims and contestation based upon them. Freedom, according to Pettit, requires both a “suitable constitution” *and* a “suitable citizenry” (OPT, 266). The former, however, cannot (and should not try to) make the latter.

The picture that emerges from Pettit’s constitutional ideal is of a self-perpetuating system that, if institutionalized, will reproduce a normative order that functions to guarantee its continued existence. What his conception of the “contestatory citizenry” registers, however, is the inherent and ineliminable threat that power and its consolidation (both in the state and in society) poses for popular control and long-term stability. It registers the fact that, in a free society governed by a state apparatus, there exists the permanent possibility that state power will consolidate under private control and that this is true even in a republic such as Pettit’s, founded on principles of equality and held together by norms of equality, reciprocity, and freedom. It accounts for the sociological reality that power will never be completely dispersed nor norms completely internalized. Regardless of the institutional system of checks and balances put in place, over time, as Machiavelli recognized, there is a tendency for the norms that maintain the dispersal of power to degenerate *unless* the citizenry continues to hold power—in all its novel and constantly changing iterations—to account.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, however, to fulfill this role, citizens of Pettit’s republic must not only be engaged, they must be vigilant—that is, properly attuned to those organizations, practices, and forms of power that pose a threat to popular control. Indeed, citizens of Pettit’s republic must be able to *recognize* dangerous forms of power and, further, they must be *willing* and *able* to actively resist those threats through the appropriate channels.

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<sup>13</sup> As Pettit notes: “popular acquiescence in how the regime operates is the ultimate guarantee of a constitution” giving “the citizenry a special role in the maintenance of the regime” (OPT, 223).

Only then will the contestatory citizenry continue to guard the institutional system of popular influence.

Where is this democracy-securing form of resistance to come from? Pettit maintains the traditional line of republican thinking with regard to the source of civic vigilance—that is, its origins in citizens’ moral strength. Though the substance of resistance may be sourced in part in the particular concerns and interests of citizens, the motivation to act publically is fundamentally a matter of will grounded in a patriotic attachment to the republic and the ideals of equality and freedom on which it stands (OPT, 227-228). To maintain the appropriate level of engagement and oversight, writes Pettit, citizens (or at least a select group of them) must make the effort of overcoming the inclination or tendency towards apathy; the habit of doing so, says Pettit, “deserves the name of virtue” (OPT, 228). Though demanding, this “motivated” kind of virtue is “certainly within peoples’ reach” such that a failure to display it will stem “from a weakness of will” for which citizens “only have themselves to blame” (OPT, 228).

What Pettit’s theory of civic virtue does not address, however, is the further requirement that citizens be properly attuned to the ever-shifting formations of power that actually pose a threat to democratic control. Rather, he seems to assume that citizens (or their representatives in elite-managed watchdog organizations) will simply know a threat to popular control when they see it, that a powerful social movement will develop, *and* that it will generate the appropriate public outrage in the citizenry to affect state action. In interpreting the origins of a democracy-securing resistive culture in these socially-agnostic terms, Pettit ignores the subtle way power can operate through the norms generated by everyday strategic interactions to weaken or distort citizens’ disposition to resist. In Machiavelli’s terms, he does not account for the corrupting effects of inequality on the ability of the people to guard the republic from the inescapable threat

the concentration of wealth and power poses to its freedom and stability. Pettit's republic depends upon a virtuous citizenry to hold power in check without giving an account of its origins beyond a sense of moral duty and a patriotic attachment to republican ideals supported by the subjectively avowed interests of citizens.

### **Inequality, Corruption and Resonance**

The concept of inequality, for Machiavelli, identifies the set of social relations and modes of collective action that arise in conditions of concentrated wealth. In particular, it identifies the structures of dependence that develop in the associational life of a polity when certain individuals or groups possess great wealth and have unique access to resources (including information and network connections), such that they are able to offer others opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Machiavelli is not alone in his condemnation of dependence as a site of corruption. Indeed, most modern republicans denounce dependence both for its tendency to generate relations of domination and for its ability to undermine virtue (Sparling 2015). What distinguishes Machiavelli's critique, however, is his focus on the systemic and involuntary manner in which relations of dependence can corrupt the normative foundations of the republic.

Resource dependence, as Pettit rightly notes, can and will often give rise to domination. Yet, not all relations of resource dependence give rise to domination. For a relationship of domination to exist, according to Pettit, an agent must have the capacity to *restrict* the choice of another, either objectively, by removing or penalizing an option, or cognitively, by manipulating the other person so that he believes that such option is either taken off the table, penalized, or that there is an additional option that does not in fact exist (OPT, 54). The offer of an *additional*

option or even a reward for choosing an available option, though it changes the range of options presented, does not in itself constitute a relation of domination (OPT, 53).<sup>14</sup> This makes intuitive sense in that the dependent is receiving something that she had not legitimate expectation of receiving. In many cases, however, the act of receiving something or gaining an additional option creates a relationship of influence with cultural and psychological consequences that can make it difficult for the dependent-recipient to perform in her role as citizen.

In thinking about the way dependence undermines virtue, most republicans, we have seen, focus on the moral consequences of dependence—how dependence saps citizens of their moral integrity or uprightness, weakening their will to act in ways they know will promote the common good. Viroli highlights this aspect of dependence in his critique of contemporary Italian politics, offering a vivid description of the “servile mentality” that arose around the person and party of Silvio Berlusconi (2010). Through their participation in Berlusconi’s court system and the relations of dependence it entailed, argues Viroli, the political elite in Italy developed habits of servility: “flattery, simulation, obsession with appearances, and complete identification with the feelings, the thoughts, and the will of the signore...” (xx). Viroli’s servile mentality is characterized by a lack of self-respect and moral conscience. The servant, through his interaction with a master, is drained of all inner strength. He is motivated, according to Viroli, solely by the obligation to that other rather than by a sense of duty to a set of reflexively determined principles.

Robert Sparling similarly addresses the ethical consequences of dependence, or what he calls material subordinancy, arising in contemporary American politics (2015). Building on the

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<sup>14</sup> Over time, if the additional option continues to be relied upon in a routine manner it can become a source of domination (OPT, 73).

work of Lawrence Lessig (2011), Sparling cites increasing dependence of political officials on large corporations and wealthy donors as a systemic problem giving rise to both corruption and unfreedom. Sparling offers the example of an elected state judge who, while trying a case involving a powerful corporation, is offered a sizeable campaign contribution as well as a prestigious country club membership by the corporation involved in the case (2015, 625). Sparling's argument is that, although the judge should ultimately be held morally responsible should she allow her judgment of the case to be affected by the favor, we should still think that her civil freedom is undermined by a system that regularly allows for pressures like this to be exerted on her and others like her in similar positions of political authority.<sup>15</sup>

Both Viroli and Sparling draw our attention to the systemic way dependence can undermine political life and its consequences for freedom. Yet, they follow the tradition in characterizing dependence as corrupting because it saps citizens of their moral integrity or uprightness, weakening their will to act in ways they know will promote the common good. The understanding of the problem of dependence I draw from Machiavelli's critique of Florentine politics is related to but distinct from this ethical concern. My concern is not with the effect dependence has on an individual person's *willingness* to act in accordance with what she knows political morality demands. My focus, rather, is on the way the proliferation of structures of dependence throughout the associational space of a polity shapes citizens' *interpretation* of the political world, its possibilities, and the relationship of their actions to freedom. The system of

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<sup>15</sup> Sparling writes: “[W]hen we evaluate the regime in which this situation is possible, we are inclined to think it is less free than one where this relationship did not obtain, and insofar as the judge is not enjoying the independence necessary for her office, she, on an individual lacks a degree of civic liberty. If a situation obtained in which many or all civic offices—including the most basic office of elector—systemically faced such distorting incentives, we might well think that liberty—both at the level of the individual and at a civic level—was negatively affected” (2015, 625).

dependence that arises in conditions of inequality can obscure the threat to freedom posed by certain kinds of power as well as the value of certain modes of political action as a means of affecting change and improving one's situation. The problem of dependence, as I conceive it, is as much about citizens' understanding of what they *can* do to protect freedom (that is, what options are realistically or plausibly available to them to affect change in their lives) as what they *should* do (or what political morality demands of them).

How do relations of inequality translate into the degeneration of civic vigilance? All culture is at root interactional.<sup>16</sup> It is constituted in the interactions citizens engage in when pursuing politically salient ends which are themselves mediated through the institutions and organizations that define and order these interactions.<sup>17</sup> Critically, the relations relevant to the construction of a republic's political culture extend beyond citizens' direct interactions with state institutions to encompass those organizations and institutionalized pathways through which citizens act to improve their welfare or advance their social position. In conditions that allow for the accumulation of excessive wealth, the options for both political action and social advancement for ordinary citizens are dictated more and more by the wealthy and distributed and administered through organizations and institutional structures controlled from the top down (Skocpol 2003; Horvath and Powell 2016). By defining the opportunities available to citizens to act, those in control are able to shape citizens' understanding about the world regarding what it is

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<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to Paul McLean's cultural analysis of patronage interactions in Florence for my understanding of the way structures of dependence shape culture and identity (2007).

<sup>17</sup> The notion that social and political institutions shape citizen identity and influence civic engagement is far from new. Beginning with Aristotle and Plato, republicans have emphasized the broadly educative quality of the constitution of a republic. See Macedo et al. (2003). What both republicans and liberals tend to ignore, however, are the "educative" (that is, subject-forming) effects of the distribution of wealth.

people need or should have access to, who is deserving of such access, and, most importantly, the best means of obtaining such access.

Why would citizens be receptive to these ideas? First, there is the fact that instances of resource dependence are often actively pursued by the weaker party because of what they offer. Even in situations in which this kind of active pursuit does not occur, it is a relationship in which the dependent-recipient receives a welcomed benefit that she would not otherwise be able to obtain evoking a sense of gratitude or, as in the case of more mediated forms of dependence, a favorable appreciation of the means through which the benefit is obtained.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, the interactions and practices involved in the formation and maintenance of these kinds of exchange relationships constitute a particularly receptive site of socialization and preference formation and, in turn, a relationship through which power influences identity and culture.<sup>19</sup> In employing

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<sup>18</sup> Pettit's characterization of the problem of domination focuses on the negative and repressive side of dependents and so too on its negative or unwelcomed psychological effects. In particular, he has identified fear, resentment, and indignation as the three key mental states experienced by those subject to relations of domination (OPT, 43-44). He contrasts the experience of domination with other forms of interference that occur but do not originate in another's willed decision to interfere, as in the case of interference caused by nature or by social forces outside of any one person, or group of people's, control. In such cases, argues Pettit, we are likely to feel exasperated or frustrated, but not outraged. It is only those restrictions placed upon us by another who presumes to rule over our actions that foster feelings of indignation and resentment. I do not disagree with Pettit's contention here that relations of domination will often cause fear and outrage in the dominated and that any conception of freedom must seek to avoid these. But I believe the description he offers of the mental experience of domination misrepresents the complexity of the psychological effects of dependence, particularly that kind of dependence generated through the distribution of favor and benefit. See Clarke (2013) for a discussion of Machiavelli's views on the deleterious effects of the gratitude cultivated by relations of patronage in ancient Rome and in Florence.

<sup>19</sup> On the "identity model" of culture as interaction, see Swidler (2003). The understanding of the normative or cultural effects of resource dependence I am developing here is analogous in some respects to what Pettit calls "cognitive frailty" or the tendency of powerful private interests to delude us into seeing a particular directive or policy as a requirement of public interest when in fact it is not (OPT, 246). In certain circumstances, writes Pettit, private or personal interests can be so powerful that they can mislead us, causing us to both believe and judge favorably certain

the semiotic practices and discursive strategies involved in resource dependence interactions, would-be dependent-recipients are defining their interests and acting out a particular way of obtaining them.<sup>20</sup> It is my contention that, as a result of their engagement in interactions of dependence and the cultural practices associated therewith, citizens can come to identify (both consciously and unconsciously) with certain beliefs, ideas, and values about political action that undermine citizens' disposition to oppose concentrated wealth.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, not all citizens will engage in interactions of resource dependence with corporate or individual benefactors. Still, the growth of these modes of political organization impacts the political experience of all citizens, as it has done in the United States, by crowding out other more participatory and egalitarian forms of civic engagement (Skocpol 2003; Hacker and Pierson 2010; Bartan 2013). The options available to citizens in the United States to seek their ends in public are dramatically different today than they were during the first half of the twentieth century. This alone has had significant consequences for citizens' understanding of politics and its value.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the impact of the new hierarchical modes of organization is

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ideas about the world that in the absence of such an interest we would easily see as either false or morally problematic.

<sup>20</sup> On culture as semiotic practice, see Wedeen (2002).

<sup>21</sup> This power to shape identity is in many ways analogous to what Lukes (2005) has called power's third dimension. Unlike the first two dimensions of power, which restrict action, Lukes' third dimension of power operates through the imposition of internal constraints on the mind. Lukes describes it as "the power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things..." (28). In this now classic work, Lukes demonstrates how political institutions and leaders can exercise considerable control over the political process by influencing what people choose to care about and how forcefully they articulate their cares through the manipulation of information distribution and decision-making processes. Through the manipulation of these processes, writes Lukes, ostensibly democratic social and political institutions and practices are imbued with an "inarticulate ideology" that has the effect of stunting the political consciousness of the public (47).

<sup>22</sup> On the political and normative effects of associational ecologies, see Warren (2001).

compounded through more traditional “ideological” modes. In Florence, the civic humanists and their successors helped legitimized the power of the Florentine *ottimati* by extoling the virtues of liberality and munificence. So too, in the United States, the private distribution and administration of social and public goods is buttressed by a cornucopia of high- and low-brow philosophies united in their determination to undermine the value of liberal democratic institutions and social welfare programs in the minds of citizens.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the actual distribution of resources by the wealthy remains the ultimate source of corruption. This is because the structures of dependence generated in conditions of inequality really do provide citizens with opportunities that they would otherwise not have. The private distribution of wealth makes citizens’ lives better and, in doing so, gives credence to those who seek to devalue the state and the liberal democratic principles that define it.

In their recent contribution to *Philanthropy and Democratic Society*, sociologists Horvath and Powell offer a critique of recent trends in philanthropic practices in the United States consistent with the theory of corruption I am developing here (2016). The authors identify a new mode of philanthropy being pursued in the United States: what they call “disruptive” philanthropy, which they suggest poses a threat to democracy. Adopted by newly wealthy venture capitalists and young business elite, disruptive philanthropy, the authors argue, brings the philosophy of creative destruction or disruption into the philanthropic field. Its adherents

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<sup>23</sup> The number of think-tanks in the United State began to increase dramatically in the 1970s, becoming significantly more ideological than their predecessors who had been formed with the mission of providing elected and administrative officials with neutral, objective research. These new think tanks are, unsurprisingly, spending more money on shaping public discourse than their predecessors, who spent the large majority of their much smaller budgets on research. More than two-thirds of these ideologically driven think-tanks that populate Washington are focused primarily on limiting government and promoting unregulated markets (Sitarman 2017, 252-253; see also Callahan 2017).

have little faith in deliberation or discussion, according to the authors, and are generally proponents of competition and the market-based allocation of public funds. More importantly, they seek change from the top-down, operating with the express intent of altering public opinion regarding the social issues that matter and the best means of addressing those issues. According to Horvath and Powell, disruptive philanthropists tend to criticize state methods of execution (i.e. inefficient bureaucracies) and democratic deliberative means of agenda setting (too many entrenched interests). They make these claims while simultaneously exploiting their resources to administer social goods. In doing so, the authors claim, disruptive philanthropists are transforming citizens' understanding of the public good, "replacing civic goals with narrower concerns about efficiency and markets." Over time, this intrusion of the private into the public space, the authors write, will undermine the "efficacy" of the democratic state and, in turn, its "legitimacy" in the minds of citizens (120-121).

Horvath and Powell, like Machiavelli, problematize the seemingly virtuous act of giving by framing it in terms of its consequences for citizen engagement, democracy, and the rule of law. The problem these theorists draw out is that in conditions of significant inequality, politics and the very idea of equality, freedom, and the public good are mediated for many citizens through their engagement with and perception of elite-controlled hierarchical forms of organization. Through these interactions, and the employment of the cultural repertoires associated therewith, citizens can develop an appreciation of privately-controlled hierarchical forms of organization as the best or most efficient means of achieving their ends and the goals of society more generally.<sup>24</sup> The goods of equality and freedom are always just some goods among

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<sup>24</sup> Even Pettit's "enthusiastic crusaders," those who work tirelessly on behalf of some common or collective good (1999, 250), may be drawn to these private forms of organization and collective

many in debates surrounding policy, and the perception of their value is intimately connected with the perception of the state as a means of redress. Policies that undermine the norms of equality and freedom can be, and often are, framed in terms that appeal to people's concerns for welfare, efficiency, and security. When claims in public are framed in such a way that these goods appear to be better served privately—that is, through dependence upon the resources controlled by a few—it is not unlikely that popular norms sanctioning concentrated forms of power as legitimate will develop. Over time, citizens can become acquiescent or, at the very least, resigned to the outsized influence that some are afforded in public life as a result of their power and munificence. Indeed, according to Horvath and Powell, something like this appears to be already happening in the United States:

Today's philanthropists are celebrated by politicians, featured glowingly on the covers of *Forbes*, *Time*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Town and Country*, and have created a burgeoning fashion for social entrepreneurship. This uncritical reception has led to an unexamined belief that philanthropic efforts are more efficacious than government, and acceptance that those with great wealth can and should determine public purposes. (2016, 120)

In these conditions, I argue, there is a danger that claims made in public against the attempts to weaken the constitution and the rule of law will fail to resonate with citizens—that is, they will fail to provoke the critical reflection and response from citizens upon which the system depends.<sup>25</sup> To be sure, Pettit is correct that making claims resonate is the task of activists and social movements who bring new concerns to the public sphere and re-describe accepted practices as oppressive and harmful. Yet, in order for the system to function properly the demands made by activists must make some claim on the moral conceptual imaginary of citizens. Citizens must be able to see the alternative vision of society encompassed by the claim

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action as the best or most efficient means of creating social change not appreciating the systemic threat to democracy this poses over the long term.

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Livingston (2012) for the conception of resonance I employ here.

as a real possibility and express this in public; otherwise, there is little incentive for government to respond. Indeed, the receptivity of citizens to calls for resistance and public action is an essential element in the historical example Pettit offers as evidence of the viability of his dual-aspect model. The democratic and humanitarian transformations that occurred in labor, social, and political practices during the nineteenth century in England, were due, according to Pettit, in large part to the “widespread and ever-growing influence of humanitarian sentiment” (OPT, 273). Pettit writes:

In each case the change began with the revelation by newspapers or reform organizations of just how scandalous conditions were in this or that domain: in each case this scandal led to a degree of public outrage amongst the population at large; and in each case the outrage prompted a reaction from government, in particular an initiative designed to put things right (OPT, 273).

Public outrage is, thus, critical to the functioning of Pettit’s dual-aspect model. Inequality and the private distribution and administration of social goods corrupt because they devalue the state in the minds of citizens and undermine the norm of equality of influence in public discourse. Principles of political equality and freedom lose their power to generate and substantively infuse the type of political activity essential to protecting the political power of ordinary citizens. The result of this cultural shift over time, I suggest, will be to allow for the slow and imperceptible dismantling of the constitution.

Importantly, the theory of corruption I offer does not depend on an image of the powerful as bent on domination or usurpation of the state.<sup>26</sup> In many instances, the powerful will, indeed,

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<sup>26</sup> Machiavelli often identifies the nobles or the few with a desire and intent to oppress (D I.5). Indeed, this is the interpretation underlying McCormick’s populist reading of Machiavelli’s republicanism (2011). The sociological theory of corruption I derive from Machiavelli, however, requires only that we accept the notion that the few cannot be expected to constrain the growth of their own power. As I flesh out more fully in the following chapter, it is the unceasing concentration of power (not a desire to oppress the people) that undermines republican politics.

intentionally exploit the power they obtain over others through wealth dependence to manipulate or delude dependent-recipients for their own political and material interests. This was the case in Machiavelli's Florence, where the *ottimati* exploited their wealth and social status consciously in their extension of patronage and the proliferation of a corresponding ideology that praised liberality and fidelity as virtues.<sup>27</sup> In circumstances such as these, where there is clear evidence of intent to restrict the choices available to dependents-recipients by manipulating or deceiving them, we should have little trouble labeling it an instance of domination (OPT, 234). But let us not forget the rhetorical lessons of the republican tradition regarding the two-sided nature of dependence (Sparling 2015; MacGilvray 2011). Just because we can label a relationship an instance of domination does not mean it cannot also function as a source of corruption that threatens a republic's contestatory culture. The choices hidden from view or misrepresented by the dominant party might very well be those pertaining to the availability of public forms of action and organization for the articulation and address of grievances.<sup>28</sup> In those cases, relations of resource dependence will both limit freedom *and* inhibit the democracy-preserving forms of contestation essential to the stability and legitimacy of Pettit's democratic republicanism.

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<sup>27</sup> See Clarke (2013) and Padgett (1993).

<sup>28</sup> This power is in many ways analogous to what Steven Lukes has called power's third dimension (2005). Unlike the first two dimensions of power, which restrict action, the third dimension of power operates through the imposition of internal constraints on the mind. Lukes describes it as "the power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things..." (28). In this now classic work, Lukes shows how political institutions and leaders can exercise considerable control over the political process by influencing what people choose to care about and how forcefully they articulate their cares through the manipulation of information distribution and decision-making processes. Through the manipulation of these processes, says Luke, ostensibly democratic social and political institutions and practices are imbued with an "inarticulate ideology" that has the effect of stunting the political consciousness of the public (47).

That instances of resource dependence will be exploited by the dominant party for self-interest, however, does not mean that this will occur in every case or even in most cases. At times, the private distribution of resources will involve no concerted or coordinated effort on the part of any particular benefactor or group of benefactors to manipulate or deceive the population of dependent-recipients. They will be honest and sincere attempts to improve the lives of others and promote honorable social goals. Yet, I argue, the systemic proliferation of structures of dependence generated by private resourcing of social and public goods may still threaten democracy. This is because the mere presence of opportunities to satisfy one's strategic preferences through the dependence upon concentrated wealth may have consequences for people's common-sense assumptions regarding viable forms of collective action and organization. In Machiavelli's Florence, though it was undoubtedly the case that many citizens came to identify with the person and party of Cosimo de' Medici, the real threat to the Florentine republic came from the normalization of patronage seeking behavior. What brought down the Florentine republic was the culture of acquiescence that defined the Florentine socio-political habitus and inhibited the popular consciousness and public forms of action and organization Machiavelli believed essential to a healthy and virtuous republican order.

For Pettit's republic, the problem is the same. In conditions of growing inequality in which the wealthy and powerful few systemically engage in the private distribution of resources for social and political ends, citizens can develop the habit of satisfying their ends through dependence upon hierarchical forms of organization predicated on the consolidation of wealth and decision-making power.<sup>29</sup> Again, not all citizens will engage with these formations of power.

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<sup>29</sup> Even Pettit's "enthusiastic crusaders" (1999, 250) may be drawn to these private forms of organization and collective action as the best or most efficient means of creating social change not recognizing the systemic threat to democracy this poses over the long term.

Yet, its presence in the system can still have consequences for the political habitus of a republic insofar as its role in public life becomes normalized as it did in Florence. It may be sufficient that citizens simply go about their business in achieving their interests in a world in which relations of resource dependence dominate the public space such that they don't really look to other, arguably more challenging, modes of collective action through which they could satisfy their ends. The normalization of these kinds of relations may be enough to undermine Pettit's "trump card" of popular resistance.

## **Conclusion**

Pettit's theory of republican democracy quite rightfully draws our attention to the fact that the success of any republican project is dependent upon the presence of a citizenry individually and collectively virtuous and vigilant enough to check the tendency of power to consolidate. What I have sought to do in this chapter is to bring to light the specific threat posed by inequality and concentrated wealth to Pettit's democratic republicanism. Building on Machiavelli's sociology of corruption, I argued that the structures and in turn culture of dependence that develops in conditions of concentrated wealth corrupt not only because they weaken the moral strength of citizens to do what they know is right, but, more insidiously, because they obscure the threat to freedom posed by concentrated wealth and, in turn, undermine the disposition of citizens to respond to claims against such power. Further, I argued that inequality may have this effect despite a lack of intent on the part of the powerful to deceive or manipulate ordinary citizens through the private distribution and administration of social welfare goods.

Pettit's contestatory-deliberative system, which is intended to generate norms of equality and freedom that can constrain both claim and policy making, is, in a sense, an attempt to cultivate the virtuous behavior it depends upon. In envisioning a deliberative process as a system that places normative constraints on citizens and public officials, Pettit's constitution expresses the republican idea that citizens' characters are fundamentally shaped by the context in which they act.<sup>30</sup> Pettit's constitution does this, however, only with respect to a narrowly defined political context. It is applied, in other words, only to the explicitly political action of claim making in public. Further, the objective of the deliberative system is to constrain those who could, in the absence of such normative constraints, successfully make claims that ignore the legitimate interests of others. It acts, in other words, as a constraint on the powerful. The system *depends* on the presence of citizens willing and able to contest these claims. Yet, it cannot function on its own to foster the kind of vigilance on which it depends and is, therefore, vulnerable to the corrosive effects of inequality.

In the interest of abiding by the principles of individual freedom and equality, Pettit refuses to go beyond that bright line drawn by liberalism between the public and the private, state and society. However, it is, as Machiavelli suggests, in the ostensibly "private" space of civil society in which so much of the action takes place. While the interaction of citizens and state officials in state designated loci of contestation, deliberation, and will formation are certainly integral in determining citizens' perception of the state and their role in politics, the value citizens place on the republican constitution is mediated through a myriad of interactions that occur outside these specialized spaces. Those interactions through which citizens are able to

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<sup>30</sup> In so doing, it registers the "internal complexity of republican freedom—the claim that the cultivation and practice of virtue *depends* on the control of arbitrary power, and vice versa..." (MacGilvray 2011, 188).

improve their welfare, to achieve success, and to move ahead, I have been arguing, are particularly fruitful sites of meaning making and cultural reproduction. It seems to me that if we wish to maintain a citizenry vigilant against concentrated power, we may need to revisit some of the assumptions upon which contemporary political theory is built.

## Chapter 4:

### Machiavelli's Mixed Constitution and the Virtue of Suspicion

The idea that political equality serves as the foundation of liberty is a guiding principle of contemporary liberal and democratic theories alike. Contemporary democratic scholars seeking to reform liberal democracy's current configuration ground their arguments in expressly egalitarian principles. Though often criticized by democrats for his attempts to depoliticize aspects of contemporary representative government, Pettit's latest republican reform proposal abides by this strict ideal of equality.<sup>1</sup> Legitimacy demands, according to Pettit, a constitution that provides citizens with the equal opportunity to influence the direction of government policy through a constitution that incorporates contestatory measures. This, he argues, is the only way to ensure that the state is not a dominating force in the lives of its citizens. Like Pettit, contemporary democratic theorist and critic of republican political theory Nadia Urbinati (2014), understands the problem facing contemporary liberal democracies as a problem of access. As a scholar of representative government, she astutely draws our attention to the significance of opinion as a form of power and, as such, her reform proposals are focused on expanding political equality as a principle beyond equal voting or even equal access to contestatory institutions to facilitate the equal opportunity of citizens to "form, express, voice, and give their ideas public weight and influence" (28). For Urbinati, democracy means that each and every citizen has an equal and meaningful chance to take part both in lawmaking and in the formation of opinion

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<sup>1</sup> Pettit's argument regarding the need to depoliticize certain issues by removing them from the democratic decision-making process is presented in an essay published in 2004. For criticisms of the argument, see for example Urbinati (2009) and Markell (2008). Pettit has since moved away from the language of depoliticization.

generated through the political interactions made possible by representative institutions. This, she argues, is an imperative, not because a free and inclusive public opinion will somehow achieve better outcomes, but because the right to participate is foundational to our status as free citizens.

Urbinati's democratic theory commendably draws attention to the significant role public opinion and its formation plays in contemporary politics. In doing so, she contributes to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to weaken our fixation with the state and with formal sites of interaction among citizens and between the citizen and the state. To equalize the influence of citizens in opinion formation, however, her theory merely extends the strategy of separation to the spaces where opinion formation takes place. In doing so, it seeks to insulate the practices of opinion formation from the undue influence of wealth. It is, according to Urbinati, the only just solution to the problem of oligarchy. Yet, any democratic structure built on the principle of political equality (even one that attempts to equalize access beyond the vote) must assume that the normative foundations of the system are strong enough to withstand the attempts by a few to undermine it. It must assume the presence of citizens capable of discerning attempts made by a powerful few to chip away at the walls guarding the public space and determined enough to overcome the significant obstacles to resistance. What if Machiavelli was correct about the structuring effects of socio-economic inequality on the associational life of a republic and its tendency to undermine the principles of equality and freedom in public life? What if the problem facing contemporary liberal democracies like the United States isn't solely one of access, but also one of corruption? This sense of corruption is what I have been calling resonance—that is, the receptivity of citizens to contestatory claims regarding those structures and forms of organization that threaten citizens' equal access to the public forum and the

integrity of the system more generally. In that case, an open and accessible public forum that adheres to individualistic and egalitarian principles in patrolling its borders may not be enough to protect the democratic political system from the endogenous threat posed by socio-economic inequality. If we understand the problem facing democracy today as one not only of equality, but also of corruption and resonance, I shall argue, we are led to the conclusion that something more must be done to orient citizens to the threats posed by the structures of dependence generated in a free and pluralistic society.

In this final chapter, I explore Machiavelli's radical suggestion that it was the institutionalized disunion between the few and the many that kept Rome free. In doing so, I draw on John McCormick's populist interpretation of Machiavelli's political theory, which highlights the central importance of class conflict and measures of elite accountability in Machiavelli's republicanism (2011). Machiavelli's greatest contribution to republican discourse, according to McCormick, is his advice on the way in which a republic should and can control elites. To counter the disproportionate social power held by the few as a result of their wealth and status, the people must be armed and empowered politically. Through a careful analysis of Machiavelli's treatment of ancient Roman institutions in the *Discourses*, McCormick demonstrates Machiavelli's support for direct and robust modes of popular participation like the tribunate, accusations, and popularly judged political trials as a means of curtailing the unequal power socio-economic elites enjoy in a free society.

McCormick sees in Machiavelli a ferocious populism meant to hold elites to account and protect the people from domination. In her critique of McCormick's work, Urbinati voices concern regarding the polarizing effect of the populist orientation McCormick attributes to Machiavelli (2015, 180-181). For Urbinati, Machiavelli's adoption of the Roman class-based

institutional structure is an attempt to institutionalize a pre-procedural or pre-constitutional will of the people against the naturally oppressive few. Indeed, at times McCormick depicts Machiavelli's republicanism as doing just that—empowering the more decent and good majority of citizens against the corrupt few driven solely by a desire to oppress others.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there are moments in which McCormick emphasizes, instead, the constructive effects of the Roman constitution on plebian identity and judgment.<sup>3</sup> This chapter develops this second line of argument. The many, I shall argue, are indeed the source of freedom in a well-ordered republic. This is not, however, because they are naturally decent; although they may very well be. Rather, what matters for freedom, I contend, is that the many exist, by definition, at a remove from economic and political power. This, I shall argue, makes them better suited to the task of guarding the republic's freedom than the few. However, this level of remove is also what makes the many vulnerable to corruption. Only in a republic structured so as to shield the many from the tendency toward corruption endogenous to a free society can they be relied on to uphold the constitution and its laws. In praising the poverty and disunion in Rome, I will argue, Machiavelli

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<sup>2</sup> According to McCormick (2011), Machiavelli commits unequivocally to the moral superiority of the people over the nobles characterizing them as *onestà*—that is, honest, decent, and good (24). What this entails, according to McCormick, is a “fundamental disinclination to injure others” and a capacity for “superior moral judgments” (25). For a similar view, see Najemy (2010). McCormick sums up Machiavelli's attitude towards elites in this way: “he resents, despises, and distrusts them” (2001, 198).

<sup>3</sup> McCormick writes: “Machiavelli explicitly endorses class-specific constitutions on the belief that they promote the class-consciousness and class-contention that animates energetic popular engagement and effective political accountability. Only with great difficulty can the people ignore, forget, or rationalize the privileges that elites enjoy at their expense and use to their disadvantage when, on the other hand, government organs reflect those differences, and, on the other, the people's own magistrates such as the tribunes of the plebs, constantly remind them of the persistence of socioeconomic and political inequality within their polity” (2011, 12). On the constructive influence of the constitution on popular judgment, see (McCormick 2011, 80).

draws attention to those features of the Roman constitution that shaped the many into a people capable of protecting the constitution that empowered and secured them.

Machiavelli's class-based institutional structure is a response not to the problem of influence or voice, then, but to the problem of resonance. I begin the next section by analyzing Machiavelli's social ontology. Keeping Machiavelli's sociological theory of corruption in mind, I suggest, we can perceive the value of his social ontology for his critique of the classical mixed constitution adhered to by his contemporaries and civic humanist predecessors. In the following section, I turn to Machiavelli's thought on the Roman mixed constitution in the *Discourses*, in particular his praise of Roman poverty and the disunion of the nobles and plebs, and argue that they are intended to establish and maintain an ethos of suspicion that orients ordinary citizens to the threat posed by unaccountable formations of power. Yet, by empowering the plebs as a class, the Roman constitution also contributed to the formation of a people out of a collection of individuals and factions with diverse and often conflicting interests whose most significant commonality was their remove from economic and political power. In this way, the constitution cultivated in the Roman plebs both a habit of vigilance and a habit of acting through public modes of action to achieve their interests. In other words, it made them virtuous.

### **(Re)Introducing the Few/Many Distinction**

Contemporary political theorists generally shy away from theorizing human nature or drawing distinctions among social groups regarding their capacity for political action.

Recognizing that attempts to define what it means to be human or virtuous have resulted in exclusionary practices, democratic theorists today instead focus on securing equal access to the

public sphere for all citizens.<sup>4</sup> Machiavelli, a republican writing five hundred years ago, shared no such concern with respect to theorizing human types. His critique of Florentine political practices and the civic humanist ideology that legitimized them is grounded on the famous distinction he makes between the two humors of citizens that he insists are present in all societies. In the nobles, writes Machiavelli, “one sees a great desire to dominate” and in the ignobles “only desire not to be dominated” (D I.5). Later, when advising a prince upon whom he should found his power, Machiavelli distinguishes a “small part” of a city that “desires to be free so as to command” from “all the others who are infinite” that “desire freedom so as to live secure,” advising a prince to rely on the latter group (D I.16). Similarly, in the *Prince*, Machiavelli advises the prince to rely on the people: “for the end of the people is more decent than that of the great, since the great want to oppress and the people want not to be oppressed” (P IX). Finally, in the *Histories*, Machiavelli distinguishes between those two humors “that are naturally wont to exist in all cities between the powerful and the people,” between “the people who want live according to the laws and the powerful who want to command by them” (FH II.12).

Machiavelli’s portrayal of the humors, as many interpreters have pointed out, appears in passages rooted in human nature—something like a fixed pre-rational inclination that disposes the two different types of citizens to certain thoughts and thus shapes their beliefs, values, and behavior (Mansfield 1996; Fischer 1997; McCormick 2011; Landi 2012). This is significant, according to Mansfield, because it distinguishes Machiavelli’s notion of virtue from the classical republican conception abided by civic humanists like Bruni (Mansfield 2000). Virtue, for

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<sup>4</sup> For arguments regarding the exclusionary effects of attempting to define the virtuous citizen, see Young (1990) and Markell (2006).

Machiavelli, is not essentially voluntary, as it was for the ancients. It is not an act of will or reason. Rather, it is controlled and in turn limited by an individual's underlying disposition. Machiavelli's few cannot reason their way out of their desire to dominate others. The same is true of the people who are inclined to seek security first and foremost. Because they are not rational in nature, the dispositions of the two humors cannot be reconciled by speech or argument. They are, writes Mansfield, two human types "who do not understand each other—the one preferring security and comfort, suspicious of anyone who desires more, the other seeking out risk and demanding honor, unbelieving that anyone could be satisfied with less" (1998, 28). The people's political behavior is determined by their desire for "security and comfort" and their uneducable belief in moral goodness and the fear that underlies it (1998, 30). Their virtue, according to Mansfield, lies in the gratitude they feel towards the republic and its princes as that which secures them and their willingness to sacrifice themselves on its behalf.

For Mansfield, the people's pre-rational disposition towards goodness and morality (and the naïve crudeness that accompanies it) is attributable to the inherent temperament of most ordinary citizens. Others, like McCormick (2011), who vehemently oppose Mansfield's assessment of the humors and Machiavelli's political science more generally, nevertheless share his view on the naturalness or intrinsic quality of their character. For McCormick, the people's decency and fundamental disinclination towards domination and oppression is innate and therefore an essential, unchanging aspect of social life (see also Najemy 2010).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For an alternative view of the people, see Pitkin (1984). Pitkin describes the "common people" as primarily concerned with their own material interests. They tend to be "privatized and politically passive; whether from greed or need, they are likely to sell out liberty for security in their private pursuit of material gain. That makes them not only bad soldiers but bad citizens as well, unless they can be brought to see that public freedom, the *vivere civile*, is necessary to protect private freedom, and to that extent to lift their eyes from profit to glory" (85-86). For the

Clearly, Machiavelli rejects the classical conception of virtue as the triumph of reason over passion. Yet, the tendency of scholars to focus on the natural, as in inherent and fixed, quality of the humors obscures the extent to which Machiavelli thought both the inclination of the many to seek security and the inclination of a few to seek power and control over others disclosed itself differently depending upon the conditions at a particular historical juncture. Machiavelli's people do not, as Jurđjević points out, always act in ways conducive to freedom (2014). A people, writes Machiavelli, can be like a "brute animal that, although of a ferocious and feral nature, has always been nourished in prison and in servitude" (D I.16). Left to fend for itself, "it becomes the prey of the first one who seeks to rechain it, not being used to feed itself and not knowing places where it may have to take refuge." It is the same for a people used depending upon and being ruled by others:

[N]ot knowing how to reason about either public defense or public offense, neither knowing princes nor known by them, it quickly returns beneath a yoke that is most often heavier than the one it had removed from its neck a little before. It finds itself in these difficulties whenever the matter is corrupt. For a people into which corruption has entered in everything cannot live free, not for a short time or at all. (D I.16)

In the right set of historical conditions, the people will collude in their own domination. Yet, Machiavelli is quite clear that the people are more disposed to act in favor of freedom than the few. Just how the popular desire for security and freedom from oppression manifests itself in the behavior of citizens and the consequences of such behavior for the republic is determined not by some innate and unchanging (im)moral disposition, but by the distribution of wealth and power and the practices of action that condition citizens' lives.

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view that Machiavelli attributed a rapacious and insatiable desire for acquisition and domination universally to all citizens regardless of humor, see Fischer (1997).

For Machiavelli, the people are defined not only by their disposition to seek security and freedom, but also by their remove from social, economic, and political power. The most significant factors determining their behavior are their modest resources and their subjective understanding of the options available to them to secure their interests. The few, in turn, are defined not only by their disposition to seek domination, but also by their access to resources, which easily translates into significant socio-political power that allows them to act with great consequence in public (D I.5).<sup>6</sup> When discussing the humors in the *Discourses*, the reason Machiavelli offers for why the people are less inclined to usurp the republic's freedom is because they are "less able to hope to usurp it than the great" (D I.5). It makes sense, he states, that those who are removed from power would "have more care" for a republic's freedom "since they are not able to seize it, they do not permit others to seize it." Thus, the majority of citizens in any society do not generally pursue domination over others and *may* have a greater respect for the constitution and its laws for the simple reason that individually they are powerless and dependent upon the wills of others to act (D I.44). Unlike the great, whose superior social position and wealth empower them to control the actions of others to their benefit (to dominate others), the majority of citizens in all human societies, those that make up Machiavelli's people, cannot act with consequence in public without relying on the consent or at least participation of many others.<sup>7</sup> What this means is that non-elite individuals find themselves in a position of choosing

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<sup>6</sup> The few who fear to lose what they have are more ambitious, cause more tumults, and are more hurtful to a republic, according to Machiavelli, because "the fear of losing generates in him the same wishes that are in those who desire to acquire; for it does not appear to men that they possess securely what a man has unless he acquires something else new. There is this besides: that since they possess much, they are able to make an alteration with greater power and greater motion" (D I.5).

<sup>7</sup> Green (2016) calls this phenomenological structure conditioning the political life of ordinary citizens manyness. Manyness, to be clear, does not mean that ordinary citizens have no power, "but only that that power is mediated by membership in a larger mass (e.g. electorate, public

among different already present options when seeking to secure themselves and advance their interests. Security and honor through the domination of others is simply not open to the non-elite, as it is to the great. As a result of their relative powerlessness, ordinary citizens are inclined toward political, moral, and religious orders that offer security. Whether they do so through the protection of a prince (or princes) and a morality of *fides*, through the mystical sanctuary provided by the church and an ethics of love, or through republican orders and the public modes of action conducive to a free way of life depends in large part, so Machiavelli believed, on whether the many are ordered so as to reject attempts by the few to corrupt them.

Approaching Machiavelli's social ontology through this structural lens, I argue, enables us to perceive its value as a realist critique of certain illusory premises regarding the relationship between wealth and politics upon which both Florentine civic humanism and contemporary democracy are built. Florentines like Bruni and later Guicciardini saw nothing inherently wrong with a society structured by significant inequality in which the lower classes were socially, materially, and, in turn, politically dependent upon members of an elite class. They were concerned, rather, with fashioning a republican ideal for which powerful social elites would be motivated to use their political authority to further the common good rather than the interests of family or faction (Najemy 2000, 90; Skinner 1978, 179). Thus, virtue for these writers meant the prioritization of the common good over private or factional interests in their execution of public functions. Understood in these terms, virtue is a call for moral integrity—a matter of reasoned restraint (Mansfield 2000). This conception of virtue celebrated by the civic humanists and

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opinion, protest movement) which not only is itself highly limited in its expressivity (usually bound by binary pronouncements) but mostly neutralizes the opportunity of its individual members to achieve the self-disclosure, discretionary decision-making, and fame of political elites with far more robust opportunities for political action” (40).

Machiavelli's aristocratic contemporaries is the virtue of an elite class already in power and active in public affairs.

Addressing the people's virtue, the civic humanists continued to write of it in the same terms as when discussing the virtue cultivated by the elite—that is, as the willingness to serve the common good. Given the unequal and hierarchical nature of Florentine socio-political relations, however, what this translated to in effect for Florence's non-elite citizenry was a willingness to serve the republic's interests as dictated by their elite patrons and by elite-dominated executive committees (Najemy 2000). To the extent that the civic humanists devised a different set of values when speaking of the virtue of the people, they advocated qualities such as loyalty, deference, personal trustworthiness, and individual merit—values that reinforce the isolation of ordinary citizens from their peers and acquiescence to patriarchal authority (Najemy 2008, 209; Clarke 2013).

For early-modern Florentine writers, virtue was a mode of action conducive to harmony and unity. In a virtuous republic, all citizens, both elite and non-elite, act together to achieve the common interests of the republic. Notwithstanding their faith in virtue, republicans like Bruni and Guicciardini advocated a mixed constitutional structure in which non-elite citizens would participate in councils and in the electoral process as a way of inclining those in power to act in furtherance of the common good (Skinner 1978, 166). Like Machiavelli, Guicciardini distinguishes the few or the great by their ambition and their desire for worldly glory and political power. He too acknowledges that the few can be corrupted by wealth, and the luxury and reputation it affords, rather than aspiring to true glory and virtue (Pocock 2003, 134). Yet, Guicciardini's mixed constitution stands on a conception of the few as morally superior. Popular political participation is only necessary, according to Guicciardini, to ensure the impartiality of

elections and, in turn, the independence and virtue of a republic's magistrates. Guicciardini believed the many, due to their lack of power, would choose among proposed magistrates based on the strength of their character and accomplishments rather than by who was vulnerable to threats or influence.

Machiavelli's principal reproach of Florentine republicans like Bruni and Guicciardini was for their naïve (or duplicitous) arguments regarding the ability of their proposed moral and institutional mechanisms to check the ambition and self-interest of the powerful given the character of existing social relations in Florence. Florentine political life had disclosed to Machiavelli the spuriousness of the claim made by the few to moral superiority. More importantly, however, it had shown him how wrong republicans were in thinking of the many as passive, non-political, and incapable of political judgment. Although the many exist by definition at a remove from economic and political power, they are never non-political. Their actions are critical to determining the form a political society will take. In a corrupt city, where the many have become dependent on the concentrated resources and political power of a few, they may not participate directly in rule. However, they can contribute to the power of their princes when they seek their interests through private modes and dependence upon the prince's resources. Dependence, not force, according to Machiavelli, is what ultimately sustains a principality over time. For Machiavelli, the many are the source of social and political power in any society. This is why he counsels a prince to make the people friendly to him—that is, dependent on him for their security. This is also what makes the many the source of freedom in a well-ordered republic.

What if anything, do I think we should take from Machiavelli's social ontology? I find the few/many distinction to be useful as a construct for thinking about the less obvious ways in

which the distribution of wealth influences politics. Machiavelli's class based constitution is grounded on what I believe are three fairly uncontroversial ideas: first, that a republic is not wise to rely upon the virtue or moral integrity of private citizens privileged by birth or fortune to constrain the growth of their own power. Rather, a republic must assume that the few will continue to grow their power unless constrained by laws, which are themselves protected from corruption by a citizenry disposed to defend them. Second, that the strategic interest average citizens have in improving their welfare gives significant power to the class of people in a position to expend substantial resources to influence the options available to others to act and thus shape their understanding of the world and the meaning and function of politics. Finally, that the constitution of a republic can redirect the patterns of action in a society and, in turn, influence people's understanding of and participation in political action.

### **Machiavelli's Mixed Constitution**

To check the tendency of corruption, a republic must make the threat posed by concentrated and unaccountable formations of power politically salient and present in the minds of average citizens. How can a republic offset the influence enjoyed by the wealthy few on the associational life and, in turn, the political ethos of a republic? What kinds of institutions can mitigate the impact of inequality on civic vigilance? "The most useful thing that may be ordered in a free way of life," writes Machiavelli, "is that the citizens be kept poor" (D III.25). By maintaining the citizens' poor, "they cannot corrupt either themselves or others with riches and without virtue" (D III.16). Machiavelli is often interpreted as sharing in the common republican disapproval of luxury and the aspiration for material goods (Nelson 2004; Skinner 1978). Indeed, he praises the German people, his contemporary example of a well-ordered people, for their

simple life and attributes their freedom to their austerity and frugality. In the province of Germany, writes Machiavelli, “goodness and religion” continued to be great in that people were seen to observe the laws faithfully, paying their fair share of taxes without oversight (D I.55). Still, Machiavelli’s praise of Germany is more complicated than it appears in his initial writings on Germany (Rose 2015). Poverty, for Machiavelli, like his conception of inequality, is a complex concept entailing more than the mere level of material resources. Rome, Machiavelli’s favored example of a poor republic, was not particularly poor or egalitarian. Poverty, rather, identifies a set of cultural attitudes and social relations closely related to, but not entirely dependent upon, the way resources are distributed and circulated in a society (Rose 2015). In praising Roman poverty, Machiavelli is praising the skeptical attitude regarding private wealth and the suspicion of its role in public life that infused political culture in Rome.

Likewise, Machiavelli extols the Germans for their vigilance against the concentration of wealth and its translation into political power. According to Machiavelli, the German people maintained a “political and uncorrupt way of life” for two reasons: first, they did not permit any citizen to live “in the usage of a gentleman” (D I.55). Rather, they maintained “among themselves an even equality” and were “very hostile to the lords and gentlemen that live there” killing any that fell into their hands. The second reason they were able to live free is that they closed themselves off from trade, being “content with those goods, to live by those foods, to dress with those woolens that the *country provide[d]*” (D I.55; emphasis added).<sup>8</sup> Germany’s isolation, according to Machiavelli, prevented its citizens from picking up “French or Spanish or

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<sup>8</sup> In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli claims that the Germans did not have any intercourse at all with their neighbors: “[n]either have the latter gone to their home nor have the they gone to someone else’s home” (D I.55). But, in the “Report on German Affairs,” Machiavelli states that the German republics did in fact export goods to other nations, although they did not import any (Rose 2015).

Italian customs, which nations are all together are the corruption of the world” (D I.55).

Combined with its hostility to gentlemen, however, Germany’s isolation served to halt or at least delay the inevitable alterations that occurred in the underlying socio-economic and moral orders of its republic over time. By shutting themselves off to trade and intercourse with other nations and maintaining a political culture hostile to the concentration of wealth and political power, the German republic maintained its citizens’ virtue.

Unfortunately, no republic can make itself impervious to the force of history: “All things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall” (D. I.6). All republics, regardless of their attempts to isolate themselves and close off private modes of gaining reputation will, over generations, experience the kind of social change that can lead to the concentration of economic and political power.<sup>9</sup> If it is not attacked by a foreign power, a republic will eventually become “effeminate or divided” as a consequence of its idleness (D I.7). But expansionist republics open to foreign trade and immigration, like Rome and Florence, are particularly vulnerable to corruption if they are not well-ordered and continually reordered to meet the challenges of new socio-economic conditions (D I.18, D III.1). This is because there will always be, in every city, a new cohort of citizens privileged by birth or fortune who will take advantage of dynamic socio-economic conditions to augment their social and political power.

Rome was able to mitigate the effects of corruption, according to Machiavelli, by always keeping itself “ordered for war” and through its culture of honoring public and martial virtue (D III.16, III.25). This, according to Machiavelli, alleviated the pressures placed on the republic by the restless ambition of those “reputed citizens” who, to satisfy their desire for reputation and rank, would, in times of quiet, create disturbances and start new wars to the prejudice of the

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<sup>9</sup> Not even Sparta or Venice could maintain a perpetual republic (D I.7).

republic (D III.25). Military and political honor represented, for Machiavelli, an alternative mode of satisfying the ambitions of the few for domination.<sup>10</sup> Yet, this alternative could never replace the desire for wealth as a means of domination. Political and military honor without wealth cannot, as Machiavelli recognized, satisfy the ambition for domination. This is because “public modes” of acquiring reputation can, in most cases, be constrained by law so long as a republic does not, along with honor, bestow absolute authority as the Romans imprudently did in the case of Appius Claudius (D III.28, FH VII.1, D I.40).

For Machiavelli, the solution to the problem of inequality and corruption presented itself in the class-based constitution of ancient Rome. A political culture honoring the rule of law and public (that is, legally constrained) modes of seeking reputation and authority existed in Rome, according to Machiavelli, notwithstanding the significant wealth and status enjoyed by the Roman nobility, because the plebs were constituted as a class and assigned the task of guarding the republic’s freedom (D I.5). In *Machiavellian Democracy*, McCormick (2011) demonstrates the considerable political power exercised by Machiavelli’s Roman plebs. Armed and empowered under the political leadership of the tribunes, the plebs were not only able to protect themselves from physical abuse and economic and political oppression by the nobility, but were also able to participate effectively in rule.<sup>11</sup> Here, I highlight an additional and vital role Machiavelli attributes to the Roman tribunate: the defense of the republic and its institutions

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<sup>10</sup> Machiavelli writes: [n]or can one believe that any greater order produced this effect other than seeing that the way to any rank whatever and to any honor whatever was not prevented for you because of poverty, and that one went to find virtue in whatever house it inhabited. That mode of life made riches less desirable” (D III.25).

<sup>11</sup> As many interpreters have noted, protection from harm was the original intent and primary function of the Roman tribunes. See Kapust (2004) and Clarke (2014). As McCormick has convincingly argued, however, Machiavelli’s interpretation of the Roman plebian experience gives them a positive role in legislating (2012).

from attempts by powerful citizens to undermine them (D I.5-7). To accomplish this task, the Roman tribunes made use of the practice of public accusation to indict before the plebs those who had become too powerful and whose behavior appeared to be a threat to the normative foundations of the republic (D I.7). Those indicted were judged by the Roman plebs in publicly-held political trials. Critically, this meant the accusation and popular condemnation of citizens who attempted to curry favor with the plebs through the distribution of benefits and the incitement of populist indignation against the Senate and the republic (D III.8).

In empowering the plebs as “the guard of freedom” under the leadership of the tribunes, I argue, the Roman constitution shaped the political identity and activity of the many in two key ways: first, it clarified for the plebs the threat posed to the republic by the “ambitions” of the few, directing popular indignation at citizens who rightfully deserved suspicion. As Machiavelli recognized, not all power or “reputation” is dangerous for freedom (D III.28). Ambitious citizens capable of political and military leadership are, after all, critical to the republican project. The distinction between beneficial and harmful power turns not on some notion of moral virtue (whether those wielding it promote a good that is arguably public in nature), but on whether such power is constrained by law. Power is “public,” then, not only because it originates in law, but also because its exercise is mediated by mechanisms meant to limit and disperse it. The effect of the tribunes in Rome was to channel and refine popular indignation, directing it against citizens who exploited the resources they controlled to undermine the rule of law, even when it went against plebian interests to do so (D III.8).

With the guidance of the tribunes and, at times, even the Senate, the Roman plebs were, for the most part, able to distinguish the public authority governed by law from the nefarious form of reputation cultivated through the private accumulation and expenditure of wealth. To be

sure, Machiavelli acknowledges that sometimes popular suspicion in Rome led to instances of unwarranted ingratitude—a situation in which a powerful Roman citizen was falsely and unjustly accused (D III.28, III.29). The occasional ingratitude manifested by the Roman people, according to Machiavelli, was justified because it was borne from their desire to maintain their freedom and the suspicion they had of those in a position to usurp it. Unlike the ingratitude borne from avarice, practiced by princes, the suspicion and occasional ingratitude expressed by the people in Rome was “the cause of great goods” and made “it live free, since men are kept better and less ambitious longer through fear of punishment” (D III.29).

Even among republics, Rome was one of the least ungrateful. The ingratitude shown to the great in Rome, according to Machiavelli, was far less than in Athens, where freedom was continually lost and regained and demagogic leaders continually triumphed (D I.28). Machiavelli gives the example of Pisistratus, who stole Athenian freedom “in its most flourishing time and under a deception of goodness.” As “soon as it became free and recalled the injuries received and its past servitude,” however, “it became a very prompt avenger not only of the errors but of the shadow of errors in its citizens. Hence arose the exiles and deaths of so many excellent men; hence the order of ostracism and every other violence that was done against its aristocrats in various times by that city” (D III.28). The practice of ostracism, in other words, arose in response to the *successful* attempts by the few in Athens to dominate that city.

The reason unwarranted suspicion and ingratitude were rare in Rome was due to the normative constraints placed on the few. As a result of the political presence of the many as the guard of freedom, seeking reputation through the distribution of favor in Rome became a risky endeavor. Because of this, the few were forced to compete with each other and with the virtuous

among the plebs for public honors.<sup>12</sup> At times out of fear, but more often as a result of the internalization of norms, most nobles in Rome refrained from actions that made them appear too ambitious. According to Machiavelli, they “kept themselves so upright, and so hesitant to cast a shadow of any ambition or give cause to the people to offend them for being ambitious that when one came to the dictatorship he carried away from it the greater glory the sooner he laid it down. And so, since modes such as these could not generate suspicion, they did not generate ingratitude” (D I.30). As a result of the political presence of the many *as the many*, the few did what republicans have always believed them capable of doing—they learned to restrain themselves, as a class, from seeking unjust and constitutionally dangerous forms of power.

Of course, when these normative constraints on the few failed, the Roman plebs were positioned and disposed to defend the constitution. In Chapter 8 of Book III of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli offers two examples of failed attempts by wealthy and powerful Roman citizens to corrupt the people with the distribution of favor. In the first case, the noble Spurius Cassius, wishing “to take up extraordinary authority in Rome,” tried to win the plebs over to himself by conferring benefits on them including land and public money. In the second example, Manlius Capitolinus, a citizen reputed “for many good works done in favor of the fatherland,” sought to gain extraordinary power by making “tumults” against the Senate and the laws of the fatherland. In both cases, the plebs refused offers, notwithstanding their desire for things that went towards their own “utility” and their love of “things that went against the nobility.” Both attempts at using “wicked means” to put a “wicked form” in Rome were doomed from the beginning, says

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<sup>12</sup> According to Machiavelli, the “whole city” of Rome, both “the nobles and the ignobles,” was “put to war.” As a result, “so many virtuous men emerged in every age, decorated from various victories, that the people did not have cause to fear any of them, since they were very many and guarded one another” (D I.31).

Machiavelli, because at the time the city and people of Rome were not corrupt.<sup>13</sup> Because of this, the “love of the fatherland was able to do more” in all the citizens “than any other respect” and they condemned both individuals for their attempts to usurp the republic and its laws. According to Machiavelli, Roman history offers no better example “apt to show the goodness of all the orders of that republic than this.” On both these occasions, when the plebs were oriented to the threat posed by concentrated wealth, they were able to recognize elite offers of favor for what they were— attempts to corrupt them rather than instances of virtuous benevolence warranting gratitude. As such, they were able to fulfill their role as the guard of republican liberty and dispatch with these threats through ordinary republican modes.

In yet another example, however, Machiavelli seems to contradict my claims regarding his belief in the capacity of the institutionalized Roman plebs to judge virtuously when faced with a threat to republican freedom dressed up as an instance of benevolent liberality. In this instance, the plebs accepted an offer of grain by the wealthy noble, Spurius Maelius, notwithstanding the possibility that such an offer was made for the corrupt ends of cultivating private favor and acquiring princely power (D III.28). Significantly, Machiavelli observes that at the time Maelius made his offer of grain the plebs were enduring a terrible famine and were desperate for food. When faced with the choice between immediate death and a potential future threat, the plebs chose to eat and, therefore, to live. Through this example, Machiavelli shows us the limits of the people’s virtue and the constant and ineliminable pressure necessity puts on the majority of citizens of a republic. However, this does not contradict my claim that Machiavelli

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<sup>13</sup> According to Machiavelli, had either “been born in the times of Marius and Sulla, when the matter was already corrupt...he would have been able to impress the form of his ambition...and had the same results and successes as Marius and Sulla and as others later who aspired to tyranny after them” (D III.8).

believed that the people's desire for security could generally be relied on to further the common good (in situations other than extreme necessity) when that desire is mediated through an ethos of suspicion.

The second way in which the Roman constitution shaped the plebs is that it fostered a common political identity among the mass of non-elite citizens that transcended material or economic interests, cohering around their shared interest in freedom and the protection of the constitution that empowered them. By arming and ordering the plebs, writes Machiavelli, Romulus and the Tarquins empowered them, giving them “strength and increase and infinite opportunities for tumult” (D I.6). As a result, following the expulsion of the kings, to maintain the uncorrupt plebs “steadfast and disposed to avoid kings,” says Machiavelli, “it was enough only to make it swear that it would never consent that someone should reign in Rome” (D I.17). Culturally, the plebs had come to identify themselves as a class not only opposed to the Roman nobility but also to monarchy as an oppressive form of political organization.<sup>14</sup> Thus, when the nobles “began to spit out that poison against the plebs that they had held in their breasts” under the kings, the plebian order was able to maintain its political coherence and public orientation (D I.3). Rather than turn to particular members of the Roman nobility for protection, they devised to protect themselves through public modes, most prominently through the creation of the tribunate.

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<sup>14</sup> Yves Winter comes to a similar conclusion regarding the political ramifications of Machiavelli's popular militia based on a reading of the *Art of War* (2014). According to Winter, in advising military commanders on how to create an army, Machiavelli is in fact counseling them on how to create a “new political subject” (182) out of a peasant-people, capable “of acting as a collective” (181). Machiavelli's military strategy, argues Winter, is focused primarily on the movement of bodies in space. It “requires coordination, shared trust, and responsibility—in short, a kind of cohesion based not only on physical training but on reciprocal responsibility” from its peasant-soldiers (181). As such, it serves as a kind of “political education” such “that the emergence of such an army might lead to growing political demands on behalf of the armed plebs” (p.).

Armed and institutionalized in this way, the plebian order became accustomed to acting through public modes and the free way of life they secured.<sup>15</sup> Having come to know the good that public modes afford, they refused to abandon them—even when tempted by the private benefits of the few (D I.9).

Thus, the cohesion of the plebs as a class was maintained over time by the constitutional recognition of their role as the guard of freedom and because of the tribunes, who publicized attempts by citizens to corrupt the constitution. In addition, as a result of the legal and normative restrictions imposed on the private distribution of favor, the Roman plebs were further induced to seek their material benefit and social advancement through “public” modes of collective action rather than through dependence on particular members of the nobility. Machiavelli does not define plebian public modes in either the *Discourses* or the *Histories*, just as he does not define what it means for ordinary citizens to act through private modes. Yet, we can deduce the form of these public modes by imagining a world in which the many is empowered politically and the few are normatively and institutionally constrained from distributing and disbursing their resources in ways that undermine the constitution. Plebian public modes of action would include activity formed around an expansive range of strategic, aesthetic and political interests and ideas. What they would have in common are practices of interaction, organization, and ways of acting in concert that do not depend on the concentrated wealth and power of a few. As a result of their empowerment as the guard of liberty, the Roman plebs developed the disposition and habit of

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<sup>15</sup> “It is an easy thing to know whence arises among peoples this affection for a free way of life, for it is seen through experience that cities have never expanded either in dominion or in riches if they have not been in freedom... The reason is easy to understand, for it is not the particular good but the common good that makes cities great” (D II.2).

acting together to pursue their interests through law rather than through dependence upon the favor of the few (D I.37).

This disposition towards public modes is manifest in the “extraordinary and almost wild” tumults that occurred in Rome, during which the plebs closed their shops and ran through the streets (D I.5). It is present in the plebian refusal to enroll their names to go to war in order to obtain a law favorable to them and in the decision to leave Rome in protest (D I.5, I.44). It is also present in the numerous attempts made by plebs, and led by the tribunes, to enact an agrarian law that would have limited the amount of land each Roman could hold and required an equitable distribution of newly acquired land (D I.37). This law was never enforced in full because the nobles, with “patience and industry,” always managed to avoid its application, allowing for the accumulation over time of wealth, private power, and parties. The ill-advised and desperate attempts by the Gracchi to use the agrarian law to temper the power of the parties came too late because “the inconvenience” had grown too great by that time (D I.33). As a result, they were the immediate cause of Rome’s ruin (D I.37). Machiavelli states, however, that “if the contention over the Agrarian law took three hundred years to make Rome servile, it would perhaps have been led into servitude much sooner if the plebs had not always checked the ambition of the nobles, both with this law and with its other appetites” (D I.37).

In yet another example Machiavelli relays, the plebs refused to return a portion of the booty they had been given when the Senate commanded them to do so in order to make a religious offering of it. Rather than “defrauding the edict in any part by giving less than it owed,” the plebs “free[d] itself from it by showing open indignation” (D I.55). “This example,” says Machiavelli, “shows how much goodness and how much religion were in that people, and how much good was to be hoped from it.” It is significant to note that the Roman plebs did not

acquiesce to the order of the Senate out of respect for the Senate or the laws. The plebs did not sacrifice their own welfare or material interests for the republic or the senate. Rather, the plebs openly and even aggressively opposed the Senate's decree. Their virtue was exhibited not by obeying the law or even by opposing the law because doing so was in the best interest of the polity. Instead, their virtue lay in their habit of satisfying their quite *partisan* and *material* interests through public opposition rather than through private modes.

### **The Virtue of Machiavelli's Guard of Freedom**

The ability of a republic to prevent the deleterious changes that can occur as inequality corrupts social relations depends upon its radical openness to innovation and transformation embodied in the empowered and publically oriented many. If citizens are to be properly vigilant against domination—that is, receptive to claims against dangerous forms of power and inclined to act publicly to expose and check them—they must engage in a modality of life that orients them to the public and to the threat posed by wealth and those few who would exploit it to usurp state authority. Along with vigilance, then, comes a people empowered to enact significant change and, should it desire, impose its social and economic interest on the political. This idea has long given political theorists pause, because they fear that the identification and empowerment of the many, as the many, against elites will render the constitution vulnerable to populist rhetoric and manipulation by demagogic forces.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Democracy or popular government raises the specter of demagogory and, as Arendt (2006) famously characterizes it, the usurpation of the political by the social. This threat is particularly pronounced in a politics that emphasizes and makes present the identity of the many. For a recent elaboration of this argument, see Urbinati (2015), in which she elucidates her concerns regarding the strong populism underlying McCormick's theory of democracy. See also Urbinati (2011, 2014). For McCormick's response to these concerns, see McCormick (2015, forthcoming).

Yet, the public modality of life engaged in by the many in a properly ordered republic, while transformative and often disruptive, need not be destructive of freedom. Citizens can be both suspicious of concentrated wealth and still, as republicans like Viroli hope, “stand for constitutional legality” (1990, 158). Indeed, I argue, Machiavelli judged that it was in part *because* they were constituted as the “guard of freedom” in Rome that the plebs developed virtuous habits of mind and action. By incorporating the plebs into the constitution and tasking them with protecting it, they became, as Machiavelli writes, “hostile...to the kingly name” and “lovers” of “freedom” and the republic for hundreds of years (D II.2)

While much has been written on the questionable value of patriotism in pluralist democracies, republicans have generally adhered to its value as a motivating force.<sup>17</sup> Citizens, Viroli recognizes, are incapable of identifying directly with the normative principles of freedom and equality that define republican political life (1998). Patriotism, or love of country, rather, provides the motive force for overcoming selfish and myopic desires and doing what is in the best interest of the common. Love of country is a love for a particular place and people and for the political and social practices that instantiate the values of liberty and civic equality. It is because citizens cannot be moved by philosophical principles alone, according to Viroli, that Machiavelli always connects patriotism to security, prosperity, self-interest, and freedom (164).

For Viroli’s Machiavelli, love of country is what gives citizens the strength to resist the ambition of the powerful (1998, 174). This passional understanding of Machiavelli’s virtue gets at something that Skinner’s rationalist interpretation misses, which is that virtuous action is never just about the triumph of reason over passion. Action, for Machiavelli, Viroli recognizes, is

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<sup>17</sup> On the danger to democracy posed by patriotism, even of a civic as opposed to national character, see Markell (2000).

always about both reason and passion. Yet, Viroli's interpretation of Machiavelli's patriotism, misunderstands or, at least, glosses over the origins and, in turn, the substance of the attachment ordinary citizens develop to the republican constitution. It is not the love of one's country that spurs citizens to act against the powerful. Rather, the disposition of citizens to guard the republic is developed through the practice of doing so, which is made possible by a constitution that empowers them and orients them to the public. Virtue is a result, at least in the first place, of action and habit, not love.

Contemporary theories of democracy, both deliberative and participatory, emphasize the way in which action in public transforms the citizen. Deliberative democrats emphasize the effects of deliberation on the capacity of citizens to judge. In a classic iteration of the argument, Hannah Pitkin argues that it is through the encounter with differently situated people in public that citizens learn to transform what begins as an expression of self-interest and desire to a claim of justice that recognizes the claims of others (1981, 345). It is through the experience of interaction in public, argues Pitkin, that citizens learn what justice means and the art of political judgment. This ability to move beyond egoism and judge with a general perspective is achieved, according to Iris Marion Young, "through the concrete encounter with others who demand to be recognized. It is the product of discussion among differently situated subjects, all of whom desire recognition and acknowledgement from others" (1990, 106). Citizens acquire this capacity for generalized political judgment, writes Young, through interaction in public with others of different identities, viewpoints and opinions—through listening to and empathizing with others. Young juxtaposes generalized judgment as dialogical and political, to an impartial perspective, which is supposed to arise from a lonely self-legislating reason that comes to adopt a view

emptied of particularity, a point of view that is the same for everyone (1990, 105-106; see also Urbinati 2009).

Proponents of deliberative democracy are right to emphasize the dialogical and interactional quality of judgment and, so too, of a society's political habitus. Yet, they are often overly idealistic with respect to the ability of political interactions among citizens to counteract or negate the effects of significant social and economic inequalities. Like Pettit's acceptability games, their prescriptions for deliberation are too circumscribed to have a significant effect on structural inequities because they take as given much of the status quo (Vitale 2006; Buck 2007). This is why participatory democrats call for the complete democratization of society as a whole. Participatory theory, like deliberative theory, foregrounds the need for a citizen-centered politics and a politics of "ordinary people of different views and interests working together to define and solve problems" (Hildreth 2012). It also stresses the educative or transformative function of political participation and its capacity to develop political consciousness and the social and political capacities of individual citizens (Pateman 1970). But, unlike deliberative theories, participatory theorists seek the remediation of social and economic injustice through the democratization of decision-making in different sectors of society.<sup>18</sup>

Both deliberative and participatory theorists are concerned with the formation of the democratic subjectivity—that is, a person with the reflexive capacity for critical thinking and the motivation for political engagement. For some, what is critical is the participation in deliberative practices and forums of interaction that promote awareness and critical engagement with public concerns (Wedeen 2008, 120). For others, what this requires is empowerment and the feeling of

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<sup>18</sup> To be sure, Young's democratic theory seeks to incorporate both deliberative and participatory measures (1990).

efficacy that comes with participation in actual decision-making (Pateman 1970). Machiavelli's concern is distinct in that he is focused on the formation of a guard of liberty—a class of citizens attuned to and disposed to act against the threat posed by the concentration of power notwithstanding the benefits they may derive from it. This, admittedly, is a narrowly defined task: one that is reactive rather than creative or generative. And yet, a “people that commands and is *well ordered*,” writes Machiavelli, “will be stable, prudent and grateful no otherwise than a prince, even one that is esteemed wise” (D I.58; emphasis added). The people, in a well-ordered republic, are not only more stable, prudent, and grateful, according to Machiavelli, they are also of “better judgment” than a prince both with respect to the election of magistrates *and* what is in the best interest of the republic. “The desires of *free* peoples,” as Machiavelli states, “are rarely pernicious to freedom because they arise either from being oppressed or from suspicion that they may be oppressed” (D I.5; emphasis added). A free people is a people empowered to guard republican freedom and prevent the concentration of economic and political power. The judgments and desires of a free people are conducive to freedom because they are mediated through a constitution that accustoms citizens to public modes of action.

Inequality poses an ineliminable threat to the public orientation of average citizens. Coordination and collective action with only limited access to resources is, quite simply, more complex and often more challenging than modes of organization and action that rely on the concentration of resources and decision-making.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the development of political judgment depends, in the first place, on the ability and willingness of citizens to overcome the obstacles that restrict access to the public. A citizen cannot be expected to develop the capacity for

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<sup>19</sup> See Green (2016, 54-61) for a discussion of the relative challenges to political action faced by those with modest resources.

generalized judgment without first developing the habit of looking to the public, to her fellow citizens, to accomplish her partisan and often self-interested ends. She must develop a particular disposition towards the fulfillment of her interests, whatever they may be, as something achievable through collaboration with her fellow citizens and through law, rather than something accomplished through dependence upon concentrated wealth and power. Only if she is willing to enter into the public space to satisfy her ends will she need to listen to her fellow citizens and thereby develop the habits of mind conducive to a democratic politics. In empowering the many as the many and tasking them with guarding the constitution and its laws from corruption, Machiavelli's class based constitution not only orients ordinary citizens to the threat posed by concentrated power. His constitution also opens up the political space for forms of collective action and doing together that democrats seeking more substantive and egalitarian modes of participation should welcome.

## **Conclusion**

Machiavelli's theory of corruption confronts us with the complex interaction of the social and political that is eschewed by contemporary democratic and republican theorists alike. His theory of the humors registers the way the distribution of wealth shapes the associational life of a polity and, likewise, how political identity is influenced by the strategic actions and commitments in which citizens engage in the hope of a better life. Likewise, it confronts us with the power the wealthy few enjoy as a result of their ability to structure the range of choices offered to the many for material benefit and social advancement. At the same time, however, his political theory abides by the longstanding republican belief that the political constitution under which we live shapes us as citizens.

For Machiavelli, the harmonious unity that inspires so much of republican theory, past and present, is a chimera: an impossibility given human nature and sociology. The choice we are faced with is not between disordered license and a harmonious unity held together by reason, but between a corrupt polity structured by inequality and, therefore, vulnerable to elite ambitions, and a polity that (re)configures social relations and shapes citizen identity through the institutionalization of class conflict. What determines the nature of a polity, according to Machiavelli, is the relationship and interaction *between* the few and the many and, in turn, whether the many are disposed to constrain the concentration of power that tends to occur in a free society. “All the laws that are made in favor of freedom,” writes Machiavelli, “arise from their *disunion* as can easily be seen to have occurred in Rome” (D I.4; emphasis added). Throughout history, republics have relied on exogenous shocks to orient citizens to the public and attune them to the threat posed by concentrated power in a republic (Piketty 2014). A republic, however, can defend itself from corruption with a politics and ethos that cultivates the habit in citizens of acting through public modes; it does so through a politics built around the disunion between the few and the many. Disunion and conflict between the classes, as Machiavelli recognized, is not only a fact of republican life, it is freedom-producing when incorporated into the constitutional framework and, as a result, made “ordinary” in the sense that it is mediated through institutions and regulated by law.

Machiavelli’s assessment of the plebian role in Roman freedom abides by the longstanding republican idea that citizen support for the principles of freedom and equality and participation in public life are what sustain the constitution of a polity. For Machiavelli, however, civic virtue does not manifest in citizens’ ability to place the common good above their own self-interest in any cognitive or rational sense. Nor does it require citizens to express

allegiance to or faith in government or express commitment to a specific set of liberal democratic values. Rather, republican resilience depends on the habit the majority of citizens develop of *acting* collectively with their citizen peers to achieve their ends without reliance on concentrated wealth. A republicanism capable of withstanding the ineliminable and often imperceptible drift towards corruption that occurs in a free and pluralistic society must make central to the project institutions that empower and orient citizens to the public. The constituting of the many as the many not only maintains citizens' vigilance against corruption and attempts by a few to dismantle the constitution; it can also (if done right) channel citizens' activity into modes of organization and collective action conducive to a more pluralistic and democratic form of politics. Paradoxically, it is only when we are molded into publically-oriented citizens by a constitution that treats us unequally that we can all hope to participate—equally—in freedom.

## Conclusion

I began this dissertation by pointing out two secular trends—rising inequality and declining civic engagement and support for liberal democracy—that have some in academia, as well as some outside it, worried about the resilience of contemporary liberal democratic politics as we know it.<sup>1</sup> It is unquestionably the case that, as the wealthy are getting richer, they are spending increasingly more on politics—in campaign contributions, lobbying efforts, and in the funding of think tanks and advocacy and marketing campaigns. The effect of this on the state, suggests Sitaraman, is a form of “intellectual-capture” whereby political officials naturally start thinking in a way that serves the interests of wealthy elites (2017, 253; see also Lessig 2011).<sup>2</sup> We are trending, it would seem, in a plutocratic if not outright oligarchic direction. If republicans like Pettit are correct (and it should be clear at this point that I think they are) that the only defense against oligarchy is a citizenry disposed to resist it, then suspicion of excessive wealth and its employment by private citizens and corporate entities to affect public ends (broadly construed) is a critical feature of a virtuous, that is, freedom-producing, political habitus. Such attitudes are essential to protecting the rule of law and the constitutional dispersion of power it requires against the drift of corruption. Such attitudes have, in fact, existed historically in democracies like the United States, even during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries

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<sup>1</sup> In May of 2017, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democratic change through the sharing of knowledge and expertise, brought together scholars seeking constitutional responses to what it called the “crisis of representation” and oligarchic democracy. The focus of the workshop was the combined effects of rising inequality and declining civic engagement on liberal democratic resilience.

<sup>2</sup> “If most of the people they talk to, most of the people they learn from, and most of the information they have access to is consistently skewed in favor of economic elites, it is not surprising that eventually they start to believe it” (Sitaraman 2017, 253).

at the height of the gilded age (Horvath and Powell 2016, 119; see also Fraser 2015 and Barkan 2013). Notwithstanding the significant inequality that existed during the first gilded age, elites attempting to influence the public in any way were forced to contend with and, in turn, shaped by an “engaged public, a suspicious government, and a muckraking press that cast a critical eye” on their “efforts” and “goals” (Horvath and Powell 2016, 119). They had to be careful not to step over the line between dutiful citizen and would-be usurper of democratic and state authority. Today, some are raising the red flag regarding the influence of the wealthy on public life. There are those like Diane Ravitch (2012) and Joanne Barkan (2011) who condemn elite interventions into public education and the education reform movement not only for its failed policies, but also for its approach to reform which combines an attack on public control of education with measures meant to coopt parents into the cause of privatization (see also Russakoff 2015). These examples notwithstanding, for the most part both citizens and political leaders celebrate the likes of Zuckerberg and Gates for their beneficence and their impact on social and public good. As the power of the wealthy grows, so too, it seems, does our admiration of them.

How do we (re)generate a suspicious attitude regarding the concentration of economic and political power, and how can we maintain it when inequality begins to corrupt associational life? Machiavelli, as I have sought to demonstrate, follows republican constitutional thinking since Aristotle and Plato in conceiving the constitution of the polity as broadly educative and integral to the formation of citizens. Unlike republicanism influenced by Aristotle, however, Machiavelli’s popular republicanism is not aimed at promoting one particular conception of the good life. It does not expect citizens to participate in public life solely for its own sake or for the good of the community alone. Rather, its more moderate and, I believe, more attractive goal is to control for the ineliminable threat inequality poses to freedom by shaping individuals into

citizens suspicious of unaccountable formations of power and disposed to seek their ends, whatever they may be, through public modes of action such that they do not undermine their own capacity as a people to secure themselves.

Contemporary liberal democratic theorists, at times, demonstrate appreciation for the idea that the political arrangements under which we live shape the incentives, interests, identities, and capacities of citizens to participate effectively in civic life (see, for example, Macedo et al. 2003). Yet, current representative institutions and liberal democratic practices do little to engender suspicion of concentrated wealth. Political liberalism offers few resources to engage the problem of growing inequality and its consequences for citizens' relationship to politics.<sup>3</sup> The liberal democratic constitution does, in fact, generate suspicion, taking aim primarily at intrusions by the state into the "private" sphere and at the risk of domination by the tyrannical majority. Though this liberal formation of suspicion is valid in many respects, motivating vigilance against the unjust treatment of minorities and of encroachment by state authorities into citizens' private lives, its foundation in the distinction between state and society means that it can, and often is, exploited in contemporary political life to justify the outsized influence of wealth and corporate power. The line, as it is currently drawn, between public and private in contemporary discourse in the United States allows wealthy individuals and corporate entities whose actions have an enormous impact on many people and who intentionally seek an outsized influence over state policy and public opinion to define their activity as private and, therefore, outside the reach of regulation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> But see Green (2016) for the argument that liberalism can and should evolve in a direction in many ways similar to the republican one I am articulating here.

<sup>4</sup> On the public/private distinction as an ideological concretion, see Geuss (2003). The main place the distinction between public and private occupies in the general scheme of contemporary liberal discourse, according to Geuss, is "in the context of a defense of the 'private sphere' from

To be sure, not all attempts to influence the public by those in positions of socio-economic power are intended to undermine the state. I recognize that my own inclinations on this point may be more aligned with Machiavelli's favorite aristocrat, Guicciardini, than with Machiavelli, who consistently tied the elite use of private modes to a desire to dominate the state. Guicciardini, on the other hand, believed in the inherent goodness of citizens, even those who have acquired, or are born with, significant wealth and power. However, it is precisely because the private investment by the few in social welfare and public goods are, in many cases, not insincere masks for the pursuit of self-interest that a proper understanding of the effects of inequality, and structures of dependence generated thereby, on democracy is so critical. Machiavelli's theory of corruption suggests the corrosive effect of elite liberality and munificence on the political habitus, irrespective of bad intent.

Notwithstanding the worrisome trends of increasing inequality and declining citizen engagement, it remains, in the current moment, difficult to defend the position that a formally inegalitarian politics is somehow constitutive of freedom. There are those, however, like McCormick (2011, forthcoming) and Green (2016) who have begun the project of problematizing the liberal democratic conception of political equality, arguing that it restricts our thinking about the institutions and practices of politics necessary to realize freedom. This dissertation is intended as a contribution to this project. My goal is to call attention to certain "realities" regarding the relationship between wealth, social influence, and political power and suggest that a constitution that makes class a salient feature of political life can promote a political ethos and citizenry capable of maintaining the liberal democratic project over time.

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encroachment by the public, where the public is construed as the coercive apparatus of government, the heavy, pervasive hortatory blandishment of administrative agencies, or the subtle pressure of public opinion" (113).

All normative theories rely on a conception of reality. Contemporary democrats, for example, emphasize the ontological reality of plurality in their critique of reason (Young 1990). The notion that reason can unify thought, Young rightfully contends, ignores the social and bodily distinctions that have and will continue to have political import in human society. Yet, many theorists today still discount the complexities of the relationship between the social and the political when they imagine a possible world in which politics is completely insulated from the effects of wealth. Was Machiavelli right about Florentine corruption? Am I right to suggest a correlation between rising economic inequality and declining civic engagement and support for liberal democracy? According to Green (2016), so long as we continue to privilege the family as a social unit and protect the right to property, we must confront the fact that social and, in turn, political inequalities will continue to be a permanent and ineradicable feature of society. This makes intuitive sense. Because of this unavoidable feature of liberal democratic society, Green argues, justice demands that those on the losing end, the many, are compensated with regulations and burdens placed upon the class of citizens he labels the “superrich.” While I am in the end concerned with justice (as most political theorists ultimately are), my primary concern in this dissertation is with the resilience of liberal democracy. In a society in which inequality goes unchecked, we do ourselves a disservice by ignoring its effects on the associational life of a republic and, in turn, the average citizen’s relationship to politics and the state. We must, I suggest, keep the possibility of corruption, understood in Machiavelli’s terms, in view when thinking about the age-old problem of wealth and politics. This is not only a matter of justice; the very survival of the liberal democratic project may depend upon it.

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