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Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising

Yves Winter[1]

Abstract

In his *Florentine Histories*, Machiavelli offers an ambivalent portrayal of the revolt of the textile workers in late fourteenth-century Florence, known as the tumult of the Ciompi. On the face of it, Machiavelli's depiction of the insurgent workers is not exactly flattering. Yet this picture is undermined by a firebrand speech, which Machiavelli invents and attributes to an unnamed leader of the plebeian revolt. I interpret this speech as a radical and egalitarian vector of thought opened up by Machiavelli's text. The revolutionary address reveals an untimely and not entirely self-conscious political radicalism, a plebeian politics that repudiates the logic of oligarchic privilege and is simultaneously not available for subsumption under the mantle of civic republicanism.

Keywords

Machiavelli, Ciompi, Florentine Histories, popular movements, labor struggles

Of the eight books that compose Niccolò Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*, the better part of Book III is dedicated to the uprising of the Florentine wool workers known as the "tumult of the Ciompi" in 1378. And while this is not the only episode of social conflict chronicled in the *Florentine Histories*, the insurrection occupies a special place. During the summer months of 1378, the

[1]University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

Corresponding Author:
Yves Winter, Department of Political Science, University of Minnesota, 1414 Soc Sci Bldg, 267, 19th Avenue S, Minneapolis, MN 55455
Email: ywinter@umn.edu

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lowest stratum of the Florentine working class overthrew the governing elites and instituted a revolutionary regime. For the first time in its history, Florence was ruled by a radical insurgent government that included both artisans and manual laborers, drawn primarily from the textile industry.[1] Even though the uprising was defeated after six short weeks, its memory cast an enduring spell on Florentine history.[2] Alarmed by the unprecedented political and economic mobilization of the plebs, the Florentine elites developed a lasting fear of the rabble manifest in successive generations of humanist writers.

Most historians that preceded Machiavelli (and most that followed him, up until the nineteenth century) had little sympathy for the workers, describing the uprising as instigated by the devil, as a result of moral depravity, or as the work of a mob manipulated by intrigue and conspiracy.[3] Leonardo Bruni considered the insurgents a bunch of violent and "impoverished criminals" whose "only goal was plunder [and] slaughter."[4] And Poggio Bracciolini thought the revolt was divine punishment for the sins of the city and of its citizens.[5] In all likelihood, Machiavelli was the first historian who saw the causes and motivations for the uprising in the workers' social and political conditions. Unlike Bruni and Bracciolini, both of whom he criticizes for disavowing the role of civil discord in Florentine history (FH P, 6), Machiavelli treats the Ciompi revolt as an unambiguously political movement.[6]

In this essay, I offer a fresh interpretation of how Machiavelli depicts this insurrectionary moment. Focusing on a speech attributed to a leader of the revolt, I will showcase a deeply radical and egalitarian line of thought opened up by Machiavelli's text. The wool worker's speech (reproduced in full in an appendix to this article), summons a plebeian politics and calls for a violent overthrow of oligarchic and plutocratic structures of power. Yet even though the Ciompo's speech is central to Machiavelli's narrative of the uprising, many interpreters disavow the political radicalism of this address on the grounds that it conflicts with Machiavelli's views as stated elsewhere. My essay challenges this neutralization of political radicalism, accentuating the thesis of Machiavelli's populism that has recently been bolstered by the "democratic turn" in Machiavelli scholarship, and extending the argument for a populist and egalitarian reading of Machiavelli from the *Discourses* and *The Prince* to the *Florentine Histories*.[7]

To read the subversive speech as a piece of serious political commentary even though it conflicts with the historical narrative in which it is set is merely to apply the interpretive circumspection exercised by scholars with respect to Machiavelli's other writings. It is by now standard practice in Machiavelli scholarship to read his political texts, above all *The Prince*, in the context of its dedications. Close attention to the addressees of these texts is necessary in

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order to make sense of the obvious tension between Machiavelli's commitment to popular politics and the seemingly tyrannical advice dispensed in *The Prince*. Did Machiavelli dedicate *The Prince* to Lorenzo because he wanted his old job as Florentine secretary back? Were his intentions to advise princes or to undermine them by revealing the secret mechanisms of power?[8] Is the counsel offered in *The Prince* genuine, or is it supposed to lead to the Medici's downfall?[9] Recently, similar questions have been raised with regards to the *Discourses*,[10] but political theorists have not paid the same kind of attention to the rhetorical situation of the *Florentine Histories*. That is surprising, because after all, the *Florentine Histories* were commissioned by and dedicated to Giulio de' Medici who by the time the work was finished had become Pope Clement VII. If we take Machiavelli's popular politics—and his ambivalent relation to the Medici—as a hermeneutic key, there are good reasons to be wary of treating the historical narrative in the *Florentine Histories* as a transparent reflection of his authorial intentions.[11]

My interpretation offers an account of Machiavelli's text that goes against the grain of the moderate republican version, but my aim is not to substitute an ostensibly more faithful rendering of Machiavelli's political beliefs for the ones currently on offer. The question of Machiavelli's "true intentions" has no determinate answer, for the polysemy of his text makes securing a single meaning unfeasible. While every text is marked by a constitutive openness, this is especially true for Machiavelli's writings, steeped as they are in contradictions, tensions, and paradoxes. The jagged surface of Machiavelli's text opens radical and egalitarian paths of thought, lines that may not have been intended by the author or even fully discernible to him. Pursuing these lines of thought allows us to excavate a layer of political commentary and argument that is obscured by the attempts to reduce the meaning of the *Florentine Histories* to a single and uniform expression of Machiavelli's authorial intentions.

Drawing on the interpretive tradition that reads Machiavelli as a thinker of the revolutionary situation, I propose to read the subversive speech as a prescient, untimely, and not entirely self-conscious vector of historical possibility.[12] Summoning a revolutionary political subject that is historically absent, the speech has a utopian and phantasmatic character and functions as a mode of political representation that is not reducible to the immediacy of a political present. My essay is structured in five sections. Because interpretation is not a linear but a recursive pursuit, each section examines a different facet of the speech and contributes an additional layer of analysis. I begin by laying out the historical context to the uprising in some detail, as this background is indispensable for a plausible interpretation of the speech. I then introduce

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Machiavelli's account of the revolt, focusing on the tension between the two voices: the exhortative voice, which the *Florentine Histories* ascribes to the anonymous worker, and the narrative voice, which the text attributes to Machiavelli. The subsequent section examines the speech's principal lines of reasoning, especially its call for popular violence. I then turn to the audience and the speaker, which I approach through the fictional and anonymous dimensions of the speech. Examining the speech as a narrative device, I show that the speech interrupts and blurs the chronology of the uprising, as if to highlight the unresolved nature of the workers' political demands.

Who Were the Ciompi?

During the summer months of 1378, Florence saw a massive popular upheaval. Leading up to the revolt was an attempted coup by the upper echelon of the Florentine elites against the guild-based government that included representatives from both the wealthy merchant patriciate as well as craftsmen and artisans. The clashes that sparked the uprising were triggered by attempts, on behalf of some of the elite's leading families, to remove non-elite guildsmen from the registers of citizens eligible to hold office. Yet the power struggle between the elites and the guilds had been a fixture of Florentine politics since the late thirteenth century and has to be seen in the context of three developments driven primarily by Florence's commercial revolution over the previous 150 years: first, the transformation of the Florentine nobility, from a warrior caste to a class of wealthy merchants and bankers; second, the rise to unprecedented political strength, through their guilds, of a coalition of artisans, shopkeepers, notaries, and local merchants; and third, the emergence of a class of low-wage textile workers with fluctuating employment and precarious livelihoods made worse by practices of outsourcing, subcontracting, and debt-bondage.[13]

Unlike other medieval economies in Europe, which were largely dominated by agrarian production, late medieval Florence—one of the largest European cities at the time—saw the emergence of a commercial capitalism based on textile production, trade, and banking.[14] The engine of Florentine growth was its wool industry, which at its height in the 1300s employed between a sixth and a third of the population and exported fabrics to the rest of Italy, France, England, and beyond.[15] As a result of the thriving trade, there was a significant accumulation of capital, which led to the emergence of a booming banking sector and the formation of an industrial and financial elite with unprecedented power. Florentine banks lent money and dictated fiscal policy not only to the commune of Florence. As major players in European

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public finance, they transacted with the papal curia in Rome and Avignon as well as with the princes and kings of Naples, England, France, and Flanders.[16]

Along with the commercial expansion arose the guild system. The guilds emerged in the early thirteenth century as self-governed associations to provide the merchants and artisans with political institutions of their own, exempt from the dominance exercised by the powerful noble families.[17] Successively more formalized as channels of political representation throughout the thirteenth century, the guilds established control over Florentine politics and enforced business-friendly industrial, fiscal, and monetary policy.[18] The 1293 constitution made guild membership a condition for Florentine citizenship; the republic became "a kind of confederation of guilds," and guilds were the political intermediaries between individuals and the state.[19]

Among the guilds, there was a clear hierarchy between the seven major guilds and the fourteen minor guilds. The major guilds represented the *grandi*, the nobility, which had successfully transformed itself from a warrior caste to a class of cloth merchants, bankers and financiers, and notaries. The minor guilds were composed of artisans and skilled craftsmen, from butchers to shoemakers, tailors, wine sellers, leather workers, and bakers. Yet the twenty-one guilds represented only a fraction of the Florentine population, for most workers, especially in the textile sector, were not eligible for guild membership.[20] Of the approximately 14,000 people working in wool manufacture in 1378, only about 200 were *padroni* who qualified for membership. The rest, including the small artisans, the skilled and the unskilled workers, were so-called *sottoposti* and not eligible for membership nor permitted to create their own association.[21]

Because the guilds exercised substantial regulatory and judicial power in the commercial sphere in addition to their political role, the workers' exclusion from guild membership contributed directly to the maintenance and reproduction of the highly unequal relations of production that fed the Florentine economic expansion. One of the reasons for the Florentine wool industry's competitiveness was its ability to market high-quality cloth at lower price points by keeping labor costs down. Cloth production was highly fragmented; merchants employed salaried laborers directly only for the initial steps in the production process—the washing, beating, oiling, carding, and combing of the wool. Subsequent manufacturing steps were contracted to artisans of varying skill levels—spinners, weavers, fullers, stretchers, menders, and dyers—who operated their own shops and were paid by piecework.[22] The guild, controlled by the *lanaiuoli*, organized and supervised the manufacturing process, monitoring the processing of textile from imported raw baled wool through the carding, spinning, and weaving into final cloth. It

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determined wages for tens of thousands of workers, distributed production quotas, functioned as broker for raw materials and labor, and directly operated some aspects of the manufacturing process. By preventing workers from purchasing raw materials or selling finished products, the guild monopolized production in a cartel-like structure.

The wool workers, known as Ciompi, were the closest thing late medieval Florence had to an industrial proletariat.[23] A heterogeneous group consisting of workers along the various steps of cloth manufacture, the Ciompi included both skilled and unskilled workers as well as small artisans who owned their equipment and operated their own shops. What united them was their subordinate position in the production process, for all of them depended on the merchants for their often unsteady employment. The precarious living and working conditions of the clothworkers, especially during economic downturns, meant that they formed a significant portion (by some estimates up to half) of the *popolo minuto*—the Florentine poor.[24] Poverty rates of 50 to 70 percent maintained pressure on wages, especially for low-skilled workers. The guilds further ensured that wages would rarely rise beyond subsistence levels by limiting production quotas and by facilitating loans to penniless workers, which indentured them to labor under unfavorable conditions.[25] "Even in times of high employment and cheap bread, their income was barely above the subsistence level," writes Gene Brucker.[26] In bad years, such as during the depression of the 1370s, they were destitute and suffered from famine and epidemics.

These economic and political grievances might not have led to a workers' uprising had it not been for the series of crippling crises that occasioned a rapid fall in wool production in the late fourteenth century.[27] The European economic and financial crisis as well as the outbreak of the bubonic plague hit Florence's export and financial industries especially hard.[28] As a result of the loss of markets and the disappearance of qualified labor, the production of cloth declined from 100,000 bolts of wool in 1308 to about 30,000 in 1373 and to less than 20,000 in 1381.[29] Yet while the financial industry saw a number of bankruptcies,[30] the wool firms fared better, in part because of their flexible business model, which allowed them to absorb shocks. By having relatively little capital tied up in materials or capital equipment and by relying on contract work, the *lanaiuoli* could stop production promptly while shifting the costs of work stoppages to their workers. The main victims of the economic depression were the 17,000 paupers in the city, whose livelihoods fluctuated with the business cycle of the wool industry.[31] While there is some debate among historians about the extent of the crisis, it is probable that during the 1370s and 1380s, the Florentine economy reached its lowest point

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since 1348.[32] An unprecedented polarization of wealth separated the growing number of urban poor from a small plutocratic elite. As a contemporary chronicler put it, the people were hungry and angry; workshops were shut; and grain had to be rationed and publicly distributed.[33]

The Three Acts of the Ciompi Uprising

The Ciompi Uprising happened in three phases.[34] The first act, in June 1378, was prompted by a power struggle within the elites, which provoked riots that mobilized the wool workers. Artisans and workers from the *popolo minuto*—the "little people"—participated in a day of protests that involved arson attacks on the *palazzi* of a dozen oligarchs and the release of inmates from the communal prisons.[35] With the help of the *popolo minuto*, the wealthy merchant patriciate managed to preempt the attempted coup by the old nobility.[36] But the elite power struggle was soon overshadowed by the wool workers, who a few weeks later—in the second act of the uprising—escalated the revolt. In late July, they overthrew the Florentine government and installed a revolutionary regime under the leadership of a wool carder, Michele di Lando. Several thousand armed workers besieged the Signoria; the Palazzo del Podesta was seized; and the public executioner was hanged by his feet in front of the Palazzo Vecchio.

Despite the bold actions, the Ciompi's political and social demands were modest. They wanted the right to form a guild and demanded production increases for the wool industry to abate unemployment.[37] On the whole, their petition remained well within the framework of the medieval corporatist system. It did not attempt to change or overthrow the regime nor to institute a more egalitarian order.[38] Yet the new Ciompi government was weak and timid and remained deferential to the political and economic elites.[39] Instead of instituting reforms, it quickly compromised with the minor guilds. Michele di Lando became a Thermidorian figure, clashing with the radical wing of the workers and thwarting their more egalitarian demands. In response to this betrayal, the Ciompi continued their revolt. In the third act of the uprising in late August, thousands of workers assembled in the Piazza San Marco. Shouting "Long live the *popolo minuto*," they demanded the resignation of Michele di Lando's government.[40] Pushing for a more egalitarian political and economic system, they demanded redistribution and called for a suspension of political rights for the aristocracy and for worker involvement in industrial decision making. On August 31, they were brutally slaughtered by a coalition of major and minor guilds with the reformist forces under Michele di Lando. It was one of the bloodiest days in Florentine history.[41] In the

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following days, the *popolo grasso* and the minor guilds formed a government that disbarred the *sottoposti* of the wool guild. By 1382, that government had fallen and control over Florentine politics was back in the hands of the oligarchic elites.

Machiavelli's Two Voices

Machiavelli's depiction of the Ciompi is ambiguous. On the one hand, he describes the men who participated in the uprising in highly unflattering terms, calling them "the lowest plebs [*infima plebe*] of the city" and a "mob" motivated by fear and hatred (FH III.12, 121; III.16, 127). He chides the more radical workers for their "ingratitude," "extraordinary insolence," and "arrogance" (FH III.17, 129–30) and heaps praise on Michele di Lando, the man who ultimately betrayed and crushed the workers. On the other hand, Machiavelli quotes a long and rousing speech, attributed to one of the Ciompi and set at a secret workers' meeting, that makes an impassioned plea for equality and issues a piercing call for revolutionary change. The speech's social egalitarianism and its call to upend the social order sit uneasy with Machiavelli's professed criticism of the Ciompi and hint at a more radical politics.

In the secondary literature, the tension between what Machiavelli says about the Ciompi in his own voice and the words he ascribes to one of their rabble-rousers has typically been resolved in favor of the former. Largely accepting Machiavelli's self-presentation in the *Florentine Histories* as admiring compromise and moderation, scholars have advanced various arguments for why the wool worker's speech cannot be an expression of Machiavelli's true views. Schematically, these arguments can be grouped into two categories: those that dismiss the speech on the grounds of its substantive political claims and normative implications, and those that emphasize the speech's formal aspects and treat it as a literary device disconnected from the Ciompi uprising.

Analyses of the speech's political claims have led a number of scholars to dismiss it on substantive grounds. Readers committed to the "republican" Machiavelli typically concede that he was sympathetic to the moderate strand of the uprising but insist that he rejected the more radical insurgency. According to this interpretation, Machiavelli supported the workers' struggle for political representation and for equality before the law but opposed the demands for redistribution and for participatory democracy in matters of manufacturing and production.[42] Commentators have focused on the speech's ostensibly corrupt account of justice,[43] on the resentment and fear and the

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lack of a coherent political perspective,[44] and on the allegedly un-Machiavellian appeal to socioeconomic equality[45] as reasons for why the speech is, in Hanna Pitkin's words, "not an articulation of Machiavelli's views."[46] This strand of interpretation sees the radicalism of the speech as a symptom of a failed political system.[47] Popular violence is the effect of pent-up grievances that have no institutional outlet; it emerges as the pathological result of the repression of voice, generated by a despotic political system that fails to provide adequate representative institutions that would allow complaints to take a discursive form. And Machiavelli is seen as an advocate of moderation and compromise whose account of the uprising has primarily pedagogical value: it functions as a historical parable, instructing the reader that the absence of representative institutions results in radicalism and violence.[48]

Scholars who treat the speech as a rhetorical exercise contend that reading the speech as an address by an uneducated wool worker to an audience of laborers constitutes a category mistake. This argument comes in two shapes: the first concerns the historical veracity of the speech. The fabricated nature of the speech has led some readers to dismiss it as an extravagant but politically meaningless ornamentation of Machiavelli's text.[49] A second version of this argument treats the speech as a skillfully crafted satire, one that is only coincidentally related to the Ciompi revolt. According to this interpretation, the speech is an instance of Machiavellian irony. In view of the numerous allusions to maxims and ideas from *The Prince*, the speech should have been delivered by a prince rather than by an uneducated plebeian.[50] By treating the speech as a piece of political satire, this reading effectively disconnects the speech from the historical context of the uprising and interprets it as a mockery of the inept Florentine elites who are outshined by an illiterate wool worker.

Despite the split between substantive and formal assessments, both strands of interpretation share a common denominator. Whether it is through conceits of authorial intent, historical veracity, or ironic inversion, the major interpretations of this speech succeed in neutralizing the radically egalitarian and democratic implications of the Ciompo's oration. As Mark Hulliung writes: "political radicalism in the modern sense has nothing to do with Machiavelli's striking account of the plebeian cause."[51] Machiavelli, we are told, may have harbored some sympathies with the demands for representation but was ultimately repulsed by the radicalism and violence of the plebs.

There are, however, good reasons to be skeptical of the portrait of Machiavelli as a moderate. For once, Machiavelli frequently deploys the rhetorical figure of dilemma and the humanist technique of argument on both sides of an issue (*in utramque partem*).[52] As Nancy Struever and Victoria

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Kahn have both shown, the tensions and contradictions in Machiavelli's text are rhetorical ways of problematizing moral and political issues, prodding readers to consider a question from multiple angles and refusing facile answers to complex problems.[53] Thus to discount the speech in favor of Machiavelli's disparaging description of the Ciompi is to disregard half the story. Second, the neutralization of the speech's radicalism may well be an effect of the bifurcation between the substantive and rhetorical interpretations of the speech. Most commentators tacitly rely on the premise, that what Machiavelli says about the Ciompi is more reliable than what he has them say. But why should we regard Machiavelli's narrative voice (as opposed to the orator's) as a faithful reflection of his authorial intentions? Implicit in this view is a naturalization of narrative as a discursive form, the mythical idea that narrative—as opposed to direct speech—is a neutral medium for representing historical events.[54]

The ambiguous portrayal of the Ciompi in the *Florentine Histories* ensures that Machiavelli's "true" authorial intentions and political beliefs remain opaque. The *Florentine Histories* provide no resolution of the tension between the exhortative voice ascribed to the anonymous Ciompo and the narrative voice, which the text attributes to Machiavelli. To narrate is to tell a story, and to narrate history is to give historical events and processes the shape of stories. But not every event lends itself to being narrated: not every event presents itself as a linear and sequential story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Speeches mark interruptions in the historical chronology of the work and provide Machiavelli with the opportunity to insert a new voice into the text without completely breaking the narrative illusion. Struever has identified such modifications in narrative design as an example of Machiavelli's "problematizing strategy," a textual strategy that refuses the ostensibly transparent and unambiguous nature of historical and political claims.[55] Registering the worker's speech as a shift in narrative mode provides us with the necessary interpretive leverage for a fresh appraisal, one that works through the interplay of the speech's formal dimensions and substantive political arguments while remaining attentive to the narrative sequence and its discontinuities. In this vein, Ramon Aguirre has proposed to read the speeches in the *Florentine Histories* as ways of directly addressing the reader, whereas Peter Bondanella sees them as "a means of strengthening [Machiavelli's] own theoretical arguments."[56] If we take these two ideas—that the speech is an address to the reader and that it serves to propose a theoretical argument—as interpretive starting points, we might ask how the speech functions as an address to the reader and what theoretical argument(s) it serves to strengthen.

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A Plebeian Call to Arms

Rejecting aristocratic doctrines of natural hierarchy and inequality, the Ciompo makes the most radical claim for human equality in Machiavelli's work:

> Do not let their antiquity of blood . . . dismay you: for all men, having had the same beginning, are equally ancient and have been made by nature in one mode. Strip all of us naked, you will see that we are alike; dress us in their clothes and them in ours, and without a doubt, we shall appear noble and they ignoble, for only poverty and riches make us unequal. (FH III.13, 122–23)

If all men have the same beginning, and if only clothes differentiate us, social hierarchies do not derive from nature. The claim to equality is grounded in the shared nudity of the body, the underlying sameness that is hidden by the impermanent and artificial trappings of dress and attire. If, as a philosophical argument for equality, the trope that fine feathers make fine birds does not hold water, rhetorically, it is remarkably effective and serves as the basis for a series of arguments why political violence is a necessary and legitimate response to exploitation and disenfranchisement.

The orator counsels the workers to pursue two objectives in their deliberations: one is to avoid punishment for the riots in which they were involved and the other "is to be able to live with more freedom and more satisfaction than we have in the past" (ibid., 122). To escape their condition of poverty, workers must rise up and take what is rightfully theirs.

> It is to our advantage, therefore, as it appears to me, if we wish that our old errors be forgiven us, to make new ones, redoubling the evils, multiplying the arson and robbery—and to contrive to have many companions in this, because when many err, no one is punished, and though small faults are punished, great and grave ones are rewarded; and when many suffer, few seek for revenge, because universal injuries are borne with greater patience than particular ones. Thus in multiplying evils, we will gain pardon more easily and will open the way for us to have the things we desire to have for our freedom. (Ibid.)

The recourse to violence is a matter of "necessity," for there are no alternative courses of action available, if the workers are to free themselves from their masters. Forestalling objections to violence on moral grounds, the

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speaker urges his audience to refrain from evaluating violent action according to benchmarks of conscience and instead to apply a purely instrumental standard:

> [W]e ought not to take conscience into account, for where there is, as with us, fear of hunger and prison, there cannot and should not be fear of hell. But if you will take note of the mode of proceeding of men, you will see that all those who come to great riches and great power have obtained them either by fraud or by force; and afterwards, to hide the ugliness of acquisition, they make it decent by applying the false title of earnings to things they have usurped by deceit or by violence. And those who, out of either little prudence or too much foolishness, shun these modes always suffocate in servitude or poverty. For faithful servants are always servants and good men are always poor. (Ibid., 123)

Painting the picture of a cannibalistic world in which "men devour one another," the orator calls on the workers to be bold and seize the opportunity to become "princes of all the city":

> How many times have I heard you lament the avarice of your superiors and the injustice of your magistrates! Now is the time not only to free ourselves from them but to become so much their superiors that they will have more to lament and fear from you than you from them. The opportunity brought us by the occasion is fleeting, and when it has gone, it will be vain to try to recover it. (Ibid.)

The plebeian speech is a remarkable rhetorical achievement, blending sophisticated techniques of argument with emotional appeals, figures of amplification, vivid examples, and effective repetitions, substitutions, and transitions. The speech also exhibits a number of Machiavellian themes[57]: the preference for conflict over harmony; the advice to the workers to seize the opportunity and to make their own fortune; the idea of necessity as a teacher; the insight that when many transgress, they will not be punished and that whereas small misdeeds are punished, great crimes are frequently rewarded; the rejection of a Christian model of conscience as an arbiter of political action; the recognition that power and wealth often have their origins in violence and fraud and that these origins are typically shrouded in fabricated tales of merit and entitlement; the counsel that in times of crisis, boldness is prudence, and that a failure to act decisively and if necessary violently may lead to greater violence and misery down the road.

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Politically, one of the key issues raised by the speech is how to interpret its call for violence. Is the inclination to violence a symptom of the plebs's political immaturity or moral corruption? Is the popular violence a consequence of the failure of the Florentine political system to provide avenues of participation? What distinguishes the people from the *grandi*, Machiavelli is fond of repeating, is that the latter desire to oppress whereas the former desire merely to avoid being oppressed (D I.5, 18; P IX, 39). Is the plebeian desire to subjugate their masters therefore a cue that they are *grandi* in waiting, that they intend to merely invert relations of domination rather than transform them? Does the aspiration to crush and oppress their superiors, to dominate them and to loot their riches, signal that the workers are driven by the same impulses as the *ottimati* and that ambition is the fundamental anthropological constant that shapes social hierarchies and relations of domination?

In the Ciompo's cannibalistic world in which "men devour one another" and in which riches and power are obtained "either by fraud or by force," violence does indeed appear to have an anthropological rationale. Violence and fraud are what sustains the social order, an order in which the *popolo minuto* "suffocate in servitude and poverty." One might infer that violence here functions as a universal instrument for achieving political aims or, alternatively, that Machiavelli laments the universal human capacity "for mindless, savage, unpredictable violence."[58] Yet in the speech, the anthropological rationalization of violence is complemented by a conjunctural argument: since the workers have already taken up arms, they are liable to be prosecuted unless they are victorious. The Ciompi must thus pursue a double-pronged strategy: the emancipatory struggle for "more freedom and more satisfaction [*più libertà e più sodisfazione*]" must be combined with the immediate tactical need to avoid punishment. This double aim is best attained not by a retreat but by a multiplication of violence.

The theme of a political and social order based on violence and fraud resonates strongly with *The Prince*, where Machiavelli, among other things, lays out various types of violence and fraud necessary to acquire and maintain power. The problem for the new prince is to remake the entire social order or, as Machiavelli puts it, to lay good foundations, to eliminate his rivals, keep the nobles in check, and if necessary, to destroy entire cities (P, III). All the while, the new prince must strive to "appear ancient" (P XXIV, 96), that is, to create the "false title of earnings" to which the wool worker alludes. And among the examples from *The Prince*, none seems as fitting to the plebeian's call to multiply violence as Cesare Borgia, the duke Valentino, described in chapter VII. Borgia turns violence into a cathartic moment by executing his universally hated deputy and by having him dismembered and displayed in

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the town piazza. That *spettaculo* "left the people at once satisfied and stupefied" (P VII, 30), converting their hatred and vengefulness into a blend of satisfaction and awe, or in Machiavellian terms, love and fear. We know that even though the duke's state-building (just like the Ciompi's) ultimately failed, Machiavelli regarded him as an example for how to found a state (P VII, 29, 32–33; VIII, 37; XIII, 55). It may not be all that far-fetched to ask whether the speech ascribed to the anonymous plebeian leader is meant to ventriloquize the duke's actions.[59]

But ventriloquize in what sense? The plebeian politics that emerge from the speech are not merely an applied version of the advice dispensed in *The Prince*. It is true that the orator's stated ambition is for the workers to become "princes of all the city [*principi della città*]" and at various points in the speech, he indicates that it is time for the oppressed to trade place with the oppressors. But in contrast to *The Prince*, which discusses violence and deceit as strategies ostensibly useful for aspiring princes, the worker's speech treats them as sources of domination, inequality, and destitution. To be sure, the orator sees violence as a necessary tactic for the emancipatory workers' movement; that said, the recourse to violence is framed primarily in terms of shaking off existing relations of domination rather than constituting new ones. The speech's principal objective is to pierce and expose the illusions and appearances that mask the violence that secures the social order. Above all, the workers need to unshackle themselves from the ideology that aristocratic birth renders some men superior by nature and that hereditary social hierarchies have natural underpinnings. The first step in the plebeians' emancipatory struggle is to decolonize their minds, to shed their fears and to liberate themselves from the pangs of conscience that impede their action and that render them complicit in their own subjection. The speaker, then, is significantly more concerned with addressing the fears and apprehensions of his fellow laborers and with elucidating their condition than with ruling over the elites.

The objective of plebeian violence is framed in terms of "satisfaction" [*sodisfazione*], evoking both Borgia's assassination of his hated deputy that left the people "satisfied" [*satisfatti*] as well as an episode from the *Discourses*, where Clearchus "cut to pieces all the aristocrats, to the extreme satisfaction [*sodisfazione*] of the people" (D I.16, 46). The "satisfaction" the Ciompi pursue is unlike that provided by the duke or by Clearchus; nevertheless, the terminological convergence is not entirely coincidental. The emphasis on satisfaction in all three texts suggests that violence functions not merely as an instrument of coercion but also as a way to mobilize popular support in a manner that appeals directly to popular demands for redress against oppression. It is this affective dimension of the public performance of violence that echoes through the worker's speech.

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The demand for this kind of violent satisfaction may seem crude, but rather than recoil and reprimand the plebeians' vindictiveness, we should understand this demand as a phantasmatic response to social conditions. For the resentment and vengefulness fueled by the orator are not his creation; they are the psycho-social consequences of enduring oppression and exploitation. More precisely, they are an attempt to convert fear into hatred. And if popular hatred, as a political affect, is only remotely as valuable to conspirators as it is detrimental to princes (P X, 44; XVII, 67; XIX, 73; XX, 87), then that conversion makes the fear that is gripping the workers politically productive.

As Machiavelli notes in *The Prince*, the hatred against the *grandi* has a cogent political explanation: the people hate the *grandi* because they fear them and because they aspire to secure themselves against domination (P XIX, 75). To read the speech's pathos as stoking the flames of dangerous unsociable passions is to miss the point that these passions are figured not simply as depraved desires lying dormant. What emerges clearly from the speech is that it is addressed to a frightened crowd, an audience whose debilitating "fear of hunger and prison" has to be transformed into a potential for collective action. The demand for *sodisfazione* thus indicates that the constitution of an insurrectionary political subjectivity takes place in the phantasmatic field of desire and affect, and that the strategies available to potential insurgents must take this into account. To blame the plebeians for a corrupt understanding of justice is to ignore and disavow the conditions under which the desire to inflict violence on the powerful originates and the fear to which it testifies. It is also to disregard the phantasmatic structure of this desire and of the promise that animates it. By translating fear into vengefulness, the speech produces a reorganization of affect that is exactly the inverse of the one achieved by Borgia's *spettaculo*. Rather than reading them literally, we might thus interpret the call for revenge and the promise to become new princes as rhetorical *spettaculi*, in other words, as hyperbolic performances aimed at generating the capacity for political action among an audience debilitated by fear. But which audience? To whom is the speech ultimately addressed? In order to answer this question, we first need to examine another aspect of the speech: its fictional character.

How to Read an Invented Speech

The acerbic critique of the elites, the commitment to a popular cause, and the presumption that effective political action is founded on persuasion are characteristics that place this speech squarely within the tradition of popular political discourse of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[60] Yet there is no

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historical record of the worker's speech in any of Machiavelli's sources or in the archival records, indicating that the speech is most certainly fabricated.[61] How much weight ought scholars place on an invented speech? How does one interpret an invented speech? Even though as literary devices, fictional speeches are not untypical in ancient or Renaissance historiography, modern historians often sneer at this practice.[62] Felix Gilbert, for instance, writes that Machiavelli and other Renaissance historians were more concerned with "style and form" than with "facts". According to Gilbert and other modern critics, readers should not take Machiavelli's invented speeches too seriously because they are stylistic bells and whistles humanist historians used to "embellish their story."[63] Pasquale Villari levies a similar charge against Bruni and Bracciolini, arguing that the speeches in their works are purely epideictic, mere displays of eloquence.[64]

Whereas the fabricated nature of the speeches in the *Florentine Histories* leads Gilbert and Villari to dismiss them, one could appeal to the very same reasons to be especially mindful of them. It is of course true—as Hegel already pointed out—that when historians try to portray the spirit of past times, it is usually the spirit of their own age that transpires.[65] But doesn't this make the fabricated speeches rather more than less interesting for political theory? Thus, instead of berating Machiavelli's mix of fiction and historiography, we should perhaps ask what the role and significance is of fiction in this historical text and in the moment of popular insurrection in particular. To accept the fictional moment as a rhetorical requirement of the text itself allows us to ask a different set of questions: why must the most radically egalitarian claim in Machiavelli's text be presented in fictional form? And what does the fictional (and anonymous) status of this speech reveal about Machiavelli's view of the Ciompi and of egalitarian insurrections in general?

Since Herodotus, speeches are frequently used as explanatory devices that shed light on a character's motivation and provide reasons for the character's actions. Herodotus and Polybius reserved the use of speeches for their most important characters and would not have composed a speech for an unnamed worker. By attributing a speech to an unknown wool carder, Machiavelli positions himself closer to Livy, who employed speeches for a wide range of characters, including common soldiers and citizens.[66] We might thus find further interpretive clues in Machiavelli's commentary on Livy, in other words, in the *Discourses*. But whereas Livy used speeches to compose detailed psychological tableaus of his protagonists, the speech by the anonymous Ciompo sheds little light on the figure himself. If we look for examples where Machiavelli's use of speeches diverges from Livy's, we find an instructive

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reference to Thucydides. In book III of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli commends Thucydides for a passage in *The Peloponnesian War* that is narrated almost exclusively through a series of speeches (III.16, 255). Given Machiavelli's approval of the Greek historian's use of speeches, might he also have shared Thucydides's principles of composition? In the first book of *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides explains that he sometimes made up speeches according to what each situation required.[67] If Machiavelli's approval of Thucydides' narrative technique can be taken as an indication for his own authorial practice, we might infer that Machiavelli employs speeches as a way to reconstruct the logic of a situation.[68]

Taking the logic of the situation as the interpretive yardstick, how does the speech measure up? The speech is set at a workers' meeting, and from archival records we know that the Florentine Signoria had been concerned about such meetings, "colloquia" and "murmurationes" throughout the spring and early summer of 1378.[69] And indeed, in Machiavelli's account of the summer of discontent of 1378, the speech occupies a pivotal place: it marks the transformation of the dispersed and unorganized riots of "primitive rebels" into a coordinated uprising.[70] Yet in terms of its political content, the speech overshoots its targets.

The meeting at which the speech is purportedly delivered takes place prior to the second act of the uprising that installs Michele di Lando as *gonfaloniere*. Nonetheless, the demands of the July insurrection, while unprecedented, remained within the terms of the corporatist regime: a widening of the franchise, freedom of association, a revision of the tax code, and some emergency provisions for the starving unemployed workers—a far cry from the revolutionary call for equality and violence presented in the speech. The demands did not challenge the premises of the regime; they were wholly within the logic of corporatism, calling for the extension of guild representation to a wider range of social groups. The July uprising was, as John Najemy puts it, a "guild revolution," for the Ciompi framed their demands entirely within the corporatist discourse, even as they gave the guild ideology a "radical twist."[71] Yet as historians have noted, even these limited demands went unfulfilled by the Ciompi government. The new members of the commission or *balìa* that took power in June and July were largely drawn from small shopkeepers not from the propertyless wage laborers. Their political instincts were moderate, perhaps even conservative; and their immediate goal was not to implement a revolutionary program but to restore order and reestablish legitimacy.[72] With the exception of creating three new guilds and filling some political offices, the *balìa* of the Ciompi failed to use its extraordinary powers to advance the workers' agenda. The new petition, submitted on August 27 by the radical

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wing of the Ciompi, demanded that most *balìa* members be excluded from office for ten years for the "mistakes" they had committed.[73]

The demands in the speech and the arguments for an overthrow of the oligarchic regime thus seem out of place. The incongruity is accentuated by the speech's call for a multiplication of violence, for the popular violence in July remained remarkably controlled and low-impact. According to Michel Mollat and Philippe Wolff, the only recorded murder of the tumultuous days in July was the hanging of the public executioner, which would mark this as one of the least bloody revolutionary moments in late medieval European history.[74] The fourteenth century chronicler Stefani further reports that the rioters were careful not to loot the palaces before burning them down, because they did not want to create the impression that they were after the wealth of the *grandi*.[75] The demands articulated in the speech seem geared not toward the second act of the uprising but toward a more radical social revolution that would have involved a profound reorganization of the relations of production. The assembled workers at the July meeting are thus unlikely to be the intended audience. The speech would have been more fitting as an appeal to the radicals who revolt in the third act of the uprising and who, a few weeks after the July events, confront Michele di Lando, the Ciompi-turned-*gonfaloniere*, to demand real change. Contemporary chronicles attest that such a meeting indeed took place on August 28, 1378, in the church of Santa Maria Novella, where the *popolo minuto* discussed their demands and strategies.[76]

Placing the speech in that context could have been read as betraying sympathies with the radical faction of the Ciompi, a potentially risky move. As the Medici's court historian, it would hardly have behooved Machiavelli to champion a radically democratic and redistributionist social agenda. From his correspondence at the time, we know that Machiavelli was concerned not to offend the Medici, and it would be unsurprising, if he had censored his *Florentine Histories* so as to avoid displeasing his patrons.[77] To his young friend Donato Giannotti, Machiavelli said that "I cannot write this history . . . just as I would write it if I were free from all reasons for caution." If the reader wishes to fully understand a historical character, "let him observe well what I shall have his opponents say, because what I am not willing to say as coming from myself, I shall have his opponents say."[78] If we can trust Giannotti's pen, then Machiavelli not only censored his *Florentine Histories* but also planted "opponents" to whom he attributes his own criticisms of the oligarchs.[79] If Machiavelli ascribed his own criticism of the Medici to their (real or fictional) opponents, it is not improbable that

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he would chalk up his controversial commentary on the oligarchs and their allies to an anonymous Ciompo.

Interpreting the Anonymous Voice

As readers have pointed out, it is remarkable for such a carefully crafted speech to be attributed to an uneducated wool worker, raising the question of whether the attribution is intended to challenge the oligarchic presumption about the political incompetence of the plebs.[80] But the matter of the speech's attribution is not just a question of the speaker's lack of a humanist education. Of crucial importance is also his anonymity. The anonymous agitator appears only briefly in the *Florentine Histories*.[81] He occupies the space of a single chapter, yet this chapter is critical both in the narratological sense of plot development and in the theoretical elaboration of the revolt.[82] How are we to interpret the fact that the nocturnal speech's author, even though he is a protagonist of Machiavelli's narrative, remains unnamed? Machiavelli did not (or could not?) endow him with a story and a biography and thus make him a historical character. What is the significance of this nameless, mysterious voice, of the absence of a determinate historical identity?

Since the *Florentine Histories* were a commissioned work, the ambiguousness of this voice may be strategic: if an explicit endorsement of a proletarian uprising would have been incompatible with Machiavelli's role as the official Medici historian, the indeterminacy provides him with a measure of plausible deniability. It is, however, also possible that the anonymity of this speaker is significant in a different sense.[83] What I would like to suggest is that, in addition to the strategic objective of avoiding the suspicions of the Medici, there may be good theoretical reasons for this enigmatic attribution.

Perhaps the lack of a name and historical identity of the speech's author emphasizes the ephemeral and indeterminate status of a popular politics. In the *Discourses*, anonymous voices often designate supernatural and extraordinary accidents, raising the question of whether this voice has an equivalent status (I.56, 114). The revolutionary voice remains indeterminate and thus sidesteps the tendency to particularize the call to arms by attributing it to a specific individual with a determinate biography. By refusing to credit the pivotal moment in the revolutionary mobilization to a specific individual (whether fictional or historical), Machiavelli's text de-subjectifies and thus demystifies the logic of popular violence. Instead of creating a dramatic hero, Machiavelli leaves the place of the author—of the speech and perhaps also the subject of popular violence—vacant. Popular violence is thus figured as an event without a subject, evoking what Miguel Vatter has called

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the event of no-rule.[84] The event itself remains historically underdetermined, as if to gesture to a gap that cannot be captured by the conventional norms of historical narrative and agency. The anonymous subversive who ventriloquizes duke Valentino does not himself become the duke of the uprising. By avoiding the narrative genre of tragedy, Machiavelli refuses to generate a hero with whom his readers empathize and identify. There is pathos in the speech, but the pathos is not tied to the character's fate, to the biography of a specific individual.

In contrast to the Florentine elites, whose privileges and estates are tied to birth, this Ciompo is detached from his biological ancestry; he has neither pedigree nor patrimony. His political claim, authority, and appeal rest not on oligarchic birthright but on its absence. In a class society fundamentally shaped by patrilineal inheritance and thus by the name of the father, this worker's voice flouts the principles of succession. The rejection of naturalized social hierarchies articulated in the speech is performatively enacted in this failure to conform to the patronymic terms that sustain the social hierarchies and make possible their reproduction.

What authorizes these terms, among other things, are the stories we tell ourselves about the origins and justifications of relations of domination, including accounts prepared by historians. By interrupting the narrative sequence, this anonymous speech thus quite literally gives pause to the chain of events and to the mythical premises of heroic historiography. To claim that the anonymous Ciompo is proof of Machiavelli's hostility toward heroic historiography, such as that advanced by oligarchic historians such as Bruni would be to overstate the case. As Mark Phillips has shown, Machiavelli's account of the uprising owes too much to the narrative schema of the heroic drama, which was first grafted onto the Ciompi revolt by Bruni.[85] In Bruni's script, the revolutionary moment is figured in terms of a moralized melodrama, pitting a righteous and fearless Michele di Lando against the vile and contemptible plebs. But if my interpretation of the anonymous speech is right, then Machiavelli inserts, at a key dramatic juncture, a figure that is incongruous with the norms of both heroic historiography and oligarchic order.

Perhaps we ought to interpret this anonymous worker along the lines proposed by Antonio Gramsci in his essay "The Modern Prince". Gramsci argues that Machiavelli's prince is a rhetorical figure that stands for the collective will: it represents the process whereby a collective political will is formed through the characteristics and traits of a prince.[86] Taking *The Prince*'s last chapter as a point of departure, Gramsci draws our attention to the historical absence of the political subject that could carry out the revolutionary political act of uniting Italy. The absence of the political subject the book seeks to

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summon lends *The Prince* a utopian quality and registers the untimeliness of Machiavelli's thought. For Gramsci, *The Prince* is a political manifesto, creating a "concrete fantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will."[87] The figure of the prince is this fantasy. It functions as a cipher, a relay for the people to reflect on their political conditions, just as the anonymous Ciompo's speech provokes the reader to contemplate radical political action in the face of domination and inequality.

The woolworker's speech resembles *The Prince* insofar as it lacks a predefined addressee.[88] Incongruous with the timeline of the Ciompi revolt and undermining the heroic norms of historical narrative and agency, the revolutionary address has no determinate recipient. By calling for popular violence and for an overthrow of the political and social order while rejecting the oligarchic logic of privilege, the speech conjures a political subject that does not exist in late medieval or early modern Florence. If the speech addresses an audience that is yet to come into being, we must read it as generating a political imaginary that travels and that is neither confined to the particulars of the late fourteenth-century context of the Ciompi revolt nor to the early sixteenth-century context of the time of its composition.

Conclusion

For Renaissance humanists, the alleged excesses of the Ciompi and the threat of plebeian politics frequently served as a motif to legitimate the oligarchic restoration and subsequent Medici rule.[89] By depicting the Ciompi as pursuing a radical political project, Machiavelli challenges this oligarchic narrative and outlines the contours of a plebeian politics. At the center of this insurrectionary project is the *popolo minuto*'s claim to equality and the defense of violence as a means to overthrow their oppressors. Yet despite the naïve image of reversing political fortunes and becoming "princes of the city," the speech does not reduce the revolt to the fantasy of trading places with the powerful. For the speech challenges not only the *popolo minuto*'s oppression but also the symbolic conditions that organize that oppression. In late medieval Florence, where having a last name was a measure of social mobility, the anonymity of the plebeian voice signals the rejection of the terms that structure social inequality and status.

The repudiation of oligarchic privilege does not, however, make this speech any more subsumable under the mantle of civic republicanism. For the plebeian politics that emerge from Machiavelli's account of the Ciompi revolt are a politics of struggle and of antagonism. It is no accident that this antagonism is preserved despite the plebeian assertion of equality in the

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worker's speech and that even this claim to equality is articulated in terms of the fundamental opposition between the plebeians and their *superiori*. By insisting on that opposition, the speech tacitly dismisses the republican pieties of order, social peace, and patriotic unity. At no point in the speech does the *popolo minuto* constitute itself as a universal and make the claim to represent the people as a whole. At no point is the conflict between *popolani* and *plebe* resolved, nor does the orator give any indication that such a resolution may be on the horizon of emancipatory political action. Dismissing the promise of social harmony as myth, the speech urges the reader to consider insurrectionary politics as continuous and recurrent struggles with no guarantee for redemption. Just like Gramsci's prince, the anonymous Ciompo is engaged in the production of an untimely historical fantasy; yet unlike the prince, the anonymous worker performs this phantasmatic work not through anthropomorphic qualities or character traits but by preventing the appropriation of the woolworkers' uprising by a republican discourse of unity. By depicting the Ciompi's struggle as unavailable both to assimilation into the oligarchic idiom of privilege and to the republican credo of order and social peace, Machiavelli summons a revolutionary subject that is not only historically absent but also not susceptible to absorption into available institutional political forms.

Appendix

Full Text of the Speech

If we had to deliberate now whether to take up arms, to burn and to rob the homes of the citizens, to despoil churches, I would be one of those who would judge it was a course to think over, and perhaps I would agree to put quiet poverty ahead of perilous gain. But because arms have been taken up and many evils have been done, it appears to me that one must reason that arms must not be put aside and that we must consider how we can secure ourselves from the evils that have been committed. Certainly I believe that if others do not teach us, necessity does. You see this whole city full of grievance and hatred against us: the citizens meet together; the Signoria is always on the side of the magistrates. You should believe that traps are being set for us and that new forces are being prepared against our strongholds. We must therefore seek two things, and we must have two ends in our deliberations: one is to make it impossible for us to be punished for the things we have done in recent days, and the other is to be able to live with more freedom and more satisfaction than we have in the past. *It is to our advantage, therefore, as it appears*

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to me, if we wish that our old errors be forgiven us, to make new ones, redoubling the evils, multiplying the arson and robbery—and to contrive to have many companions in this, because when many err, no one is punished, and though small faults are punished, great and grave ones are rewarded; and when many suffer, few seek for revenge, because universal injuries are borne with greater patience than particular ones. Thus in multiplying evils, we will gain pardon more easily and will open the way for us to have the things we desire to have for our freedom. And it appears to me that we are on the way to a sure acquisition, because those who could hinder us are disunited and rich: their disunion will therefore give us victory, and their riches, when they have become ours, will maintain it for us. *Do not let their antiquity of blood, with which they will reproach us, dismay you; for all men, having had the same beginning, are equally ancient and have been made by nature in one mode. Strip all of us naked, you will see that we are alike; dress us in their clothes and them in ours, and without a doubt we shall appear noble and they ignoble, for only poverty and riches make us unequal*. It pains me much when I hear that out of conscience many of you repent the deeds that have been done and that you wish to abstain from new deeds; and certainly, if this is true, you are not the men I believed you to be, for neither conscience nor infamy should dismay you, because those who win, in whatever mode they win, never receive shame from it. And *we ought not to take conscience into account, for where there is, as with us, fear of hunger and prison, there cannot and should not be fear of hell*. But if you will take note of the mode of proceeding of men, you will see that *all those who come to great riches and great power have obtained them either by fraud or by force; and afterwards, to hide the ugliness of acquisition, they make it decent by applying the false title of earnings to things they have usurped by deceit or by violence*. And those who, out of either little prudence or too much foolishness, shun these modes always suffocate in servitude or poverty. For *faithful servants are always servants and good men are always poor; nor do they ever rise out of servitude unless they are unfaithful and bold, nor out of poverty unless they are rapacious and fraudulent*. For God and nature have put all the fortunes of men in their midst, where they are exposed more to rapine than to industry and more to wicked than to good arts, from which it arises that *men devour one another and that those who can do less are always the worst off. Therefore, one should use force whenever the occasion for it is given to us*; nor can a greater occasion be offered us by fortune than this one, when citizens are still disunited, the Signoria irresolute, and the magistrates dismayed so that they can easily be crushed before they unite and steady their spirits. As a result, either *we shall be left princes of all the city*, or we shall have so large a part of it that not only

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will our past errors be pardoned but we shall even have authority enabling us to threaten them with new injuries. I confess this course is bold and dangerous, but *when necessity presses, boldness is judged prudence*; and spirited men never take account of the danger in great things, for those enterprises that are begun with danger always end with reward, and one never escapes a danger without danger. Moreover, I believe that when one sees the prisons, tortures, and deaths being prepared, *standing still is more to be feared than seeking to secure ourselves against them, for in the first case the evils are certain and in the other, doubtful. How many times have I heard you lament the avarice of your superiors and the injustice of your magistrates! Now is the time not only to free ourselves from them but to become so much their superiors that they will have more to lament and fear from you than you from them. The opportunity brought us by the occasion is fleeting, and when it has gone, it will be vain to try to recover it*. You see the preparations of your adversaries. Let us be ahead of their thoughts; and *whichever of us is first to take up arms again will without doubt be the conqueror*, with ruin for the enemy and exaltation for himself. From this will come honor for many of us and security for all. (FH, III.13, 122–24, my emphasis)

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Notes

1. John M. Najemy, "Audiant Omnes Artes: Corporate Origins of the Ciompi Revolution," in *Il tumulto dei Ciompi: Un momento di storia fiorentina ed*

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europea, ed. Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1981), 59.

2. Gene Brucker calls the Ciompi uprising "more traumatic, and its consequences of greater significance, than the other revolutionary spasms which the city experienced." Gene A. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 46–47; John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200-1575* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 156–87.
3. It is not until the nineteenth century that liberal historians, such as Corazzini and Falletti-Fossati began to look at the Ciompi in more sympathetic light. Giuseppe O. Corazzini, *I Ciompi: Cronache e documenti con notizie intorno alla vita di Michele di Lando* (Florence: Sansoni, 1887); Carlo Falletti-Fossati, *Il tumulto dei Ciompi: studio storico-sociale* (Rome: Ermanno Loescher, 1882). See Gisela Bock, "Civil Discord in Machiavelli's Istorie Fiorentine," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 193–94.
4. Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People*, trans. James Hankins, 3 vols., vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), IX, 9.
5. Poggio Bracciolini, *Historia Florentina* (Venice: Johann Gabriel Hertz, 1715), 78. The idea of a divine punishment is taken from Alamanno Acciaiuoli's chronicle. See Donald J. Wilcox, *The Development of Florentine Humanist Historiography in the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 149–51.
6. I cite Machiavelli's works according to the following translations: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), for which I use FH; *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), abbreviated as P; *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), abbreviated as D. For Italian references or my own translations (where indicated), I have relied mostly on the following edition: Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere storiche, politiche e letterarie*, ed. Alessandro Capata (Rome: Newton, 1998).
7. John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See also Sebastian de Grazia, *Machiavelli in Hell* (New York: Vintage, 1989); Claude Lefort, "Machiavel: la dimension économique du politique," in *Les formes de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).
8. See, e.g., Garrett Mattingly, "The Prince: Political Science Or Political Satire?," *The American Scholar* 27 (1958): 482–91; Hans Baron, "Machiavelli: The Republican Citizen and the Author of 'the Prince,'" *English Historical Review* (1961): 217–53; John Langton, "Machiavelli's Paradox: Trapping or Teaching the Prince," *American Political Science Review* (1987): 1277–83; Jean-Jacques

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Rousseau, *The Social Contract, and Other Later Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Benedictus de Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley, Complete Works (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002).

9. Mary G. Dietz, "Trapping the Prince: Machiavelli and the Politics of Deception," *American Political Science Review* (1986): 777–99.
10. See McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 36–46.
11. See John M. Najemy, "Machiavelli and the Medici: The Lessons of Florentine History," *Renaissance Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1982): 551–76.
12. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 125–205; Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 1999); Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 37–97; Gopal Balakrishnan, *Antagonistics: Capital and Power in an Age of War* (London: Verso, 2009), 265–79.
13. Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 76.
14. Raymond de Roover, "The Commercial Revolution of the Thirteenth Century," *Bulletin of the Business Historical Society* 16 (1942): 34–39.
15. Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 265.
16. For figures and details, see Robert Davidsohn, "Blüte und Niedergang der Florentiner Tuchindustrie," *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft* 85 (1928), 227.
17. Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 40.
18. Marvin B. Becker, "The Republican City State in Florence: An Inquiry Into Its Origin and Survival (1280-1434)," *Speculum* 35, no. 1 (1960), 44, 47; Michel Mollat and Philippe Wolff, *The Popular Revolutions of the Late Middle Ages*, trans. A. Lytton-Sells (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), 144.
19. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 343.
20. Mollat and Wolff, *The Popular Revolutions*, 158. For a detailed study of the Florentine population a few decades after the Ciompi insurrection, see David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
21. In 1345, a worker named Ciuto Brandini was sentenced to death for forming a *fratellanza* of wool carders. See Niccolò Rodolico, "The Struggle for the Right of Association in Fourteenth-Century Florence," *History* 7, no. 27 (1922), 181–84.
22. Gene A. Brucker, "The Ciompi Revolution," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston, IL:

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Northwestern University Press, 1968), 319; Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 300, 317–19.

23. On the condition of the woolworkers, see Franco Franceschi, *Oltre il "Tumulto": I lavoratori fiorentini dell'Arte della Lana fra Tre e Quattrocento* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1993).
24. Gene A. Brucker, "The Florentine *Popolo Minuto* and Its Political Role, 1350-1450," in *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200-1500*, ed. Lauro Martines (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 157.
25. Najemy, "Audiant omnes artes," 72–73.
26. Brucker, "The Florentine *Popolo Minuto*," 160.
27. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 277.
28. C. M. Cipolla, "Revisions in Economic History: XII. The Trends in Italian Economic History in the Later Middle Ages," *The Economic History Review* 2, no. 2 (1949), 181.
29. Davidsohn, "Blüte und Niedergang," 245, 250.
30. See Otto Meltzing, *Das Bankhaus der Medici und seine Vorläufer* (Jena: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1906), 16–78.
31. The figure is Vilani's. See Herfried Münkler, *Machiavelli: Die Begründung des politischen Denkens der Neuzeit aus der Krise der Republik Florenz* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2004), 165. For details on wool production in fourteenth-century Florence, see Hidetoshi Hoshino, *L'Arte della lana in Firenze nel basso medioevo: Il commercio della lana e il mercato dei panni fiorentini nei secoli XIII-XV* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1980). For an alternative perspective on the real income of workers, see Charles de la Roncière, "La condition des salariés à Florence au XIVe siècle," in *Il tumulto dei Ciompi: Un momento di storia fiorentina, ed europea*, ed. Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1981).
32. See Gene A. Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society, 1343-1378* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), 28.
33. Stefani, quoted in Davidsohn, "Blüte und Niedergang," 246.
34. Brucker, "The Ciompi Revolution," 315.
35. These arson attacks were instigated not by the workers but by the guilds. Louis Green, ed. *Chronicles of the Tumult of the Ciompi*, vol. 7, Monash Publications in History (Clayton, Australia: Monash University, 1990), 78. See also Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society*, 368.
36. See Niccolò Rodolico, *I Ciompi: Una pagina di storia del proletariato operaio*, 3rd ed. (Florence: Sansoni, 1980), ch. 1; Victor Rutenburg, *Popolo e movimenti popolari nell'Italia del '300 e '400* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1971), 163ff.
37. The petition submitted to the Signoria on July 21 had six main components: (1) abolition of the tribunal of the *arte della lana*; (2) abolition of the penalty of

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amputating a hand for non-payment of debts; (3) official recognition of and political representation for the *popolo minuto*; (4) two-year debt amnesty; (5) amnesty for everyone involved in the uprising; (6) change of the regressive tax system.

38. Whether these demands were radical or moderate is subject to ongoing controversy. For Rodolico, they signal the revolutionary character of the movement; Rodolico, *I Ciompi*, 119ff. For Rutenburg, these are not revolutionary demands, merely a call for recognition under a feudal system, Rutenburg, *Popolo e movimenti popolari*, 198. Brucker and de Roover consider the program neither revolutionary nor egalitarian but simply an attempt to restore the ideal of the medieval corporation, Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*; see also Brucker, "The Ciompi Revolution," 342, 345, 353. Raymond de Roover, "Labour Conditions in Florence Around 1400: Theory, Policy, and Reality," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 309. For Mollat and Wolff, these are relatively moderate demands, and Goldthwaite calls the event a "popular taxpayers' revolt," Mollat and Wolff, *The Popular Revolutions*; Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 328. Najemy considers the program both revolutionary and sophisticated, Najemy, "Audiant omnes artes," 60. Stella argues that for the time, the demands were radical and would have completely transformed the political organization of Florence. Alessandro Stella, *La révolte des Ciompi: Les hommes, les lieux, le travail* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1993), 62–65.
39. Ibid., 53–59.
40. See Stefani's chronicle, in Green, *Chronicles of the Tumult of the Ciompi*, 90.
41. Mollat and Wolff, *The Popular Revolutions*, 156.
42. See Hanna F. Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 310–14; Bock, "Civil Discord," 195; Martine Leibovici, "From Fight to Debate: Machiavelli and the Revolt of the Ciompi," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 28, no. 6 (2002), 657–58.
43. Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 313; Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 304.
44. Leibovici, "From Fight to Debate," 655.
45. Bock, "Civil Discord," 189, 195. For a competing analysis of Machiavelli's take on equality, see Lefort, "Machiavel: la dimension économique du politique," 226–27.
46. Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 314.
47. See, e.g., Leibovici, "From Fight to Debate," 650.
48. Maurizio Viroli goes so far as to call the speech a "radical critique of populism." Maurizio Viroli, *Machiavelli's God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 195.

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49. Felix Gilbert, "Machiavelli's Istorie Fiorentine: An Essay in Interpretation," in *History, Choice, and Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977), 137.
50. Mark Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 92.
51. Ibid., 89.
52. Virginia Cox, "Rhetoric and Ethics in Machiavelli," in *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli*, ed. John M. Najemy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 182–83; Federico Chabod, *Scritti su Machiavelli* (Turin: Einaudi, 1964), 200.
53. Victoria Kahn, *Machiavellian Rhetoric: From the Counter-Reformation to Milton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Nancy S. Struever, *Theory as Practice: Ethical Inquiry in the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 147–81. For a dialectical analysis of *The Prince*, see also Michael McCanles, *The Discourse of Il Principe* (Malibu, CA: Undena, 1983).
54. See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
55. Struever, *Theory as Practice*, 148.
56. Ramon Aguirre, "Machiavelli's Use of Fictive Speeches in the Istorie Fiorentine" (PhD dissertation, University of Oregon, 1978), 42; Peter E. Bondanella, *Machiavelli and the Art of Renaissance History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 96.
57. Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, 311; Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*, 89–92; Bock, "Civil Discord," 194.
58. Wayne A. Rebhorn, *Foxes and Lions: Machiavelli's Confidence Men* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 99.
59. See Nino Borsellino, "L'anonimo sovversivo," in *Letterature e critica: Studi in onore di Natalino Sapegno*, ed. Walter Binni, et al. (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974), 323.
60. Najemy, *A History of Florence*, 59.
61. See the notes by both Carli and Fiorini in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Istorie Fiorentine*, ed. Vittorio Fiorini (Florence: Sansoni, 1962), 311n. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Le opere maggiori*, ed. Plinio Carli (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1967), 299n. As Brucker points out, the archival records of the revolutionary regime are rudimentary and do not include minutes of worker or council meetings. Brucker, "The Ciompi Revolution," 318. As for the narrative evidence, neither of the five contemporary chronicles collected by Gino Scaramella mentions the speech. See Green, *Chronicles of the Tumult of the Ciompi*.
62. Until the nineteenth century, historians seem not to have been troubled by the fabricated status of Machiavelli's speech and kept replicating it in their histories of Florence. See for instance Henry Edward Napier, *Florentine History*, 6 vols., vol. 2 (London: Edward Moxon, 1846), 422–25. Among later historians, however,

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his blend of "fact" and "fiction" contributed to pinning on Machiavelli a reputation as a poor historian. See Bock, "Civil Discord," 185n14.

63. Gilbert, "Machiavelli's Istorie Fiorentine," 137.
64. Pasquale Villari, *The Life and Times of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Linda Villari (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), 95.
65. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 17.
66. See Aguirre, "Machiavelli's Use of Fictive Speeches."
67. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Steven Lattimore (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), I.22, 13. Whether Thucydides abides by his own rules is of course another question. See John Wilson, "What Does Thucydides Claim for His Speeches?," *The Phoenix* 36, no. 2 (1982): 95–103.
68. See, e.g., Brucker, "The Ciompi Revolution," 318; Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 327.
69. Najemy, "Audiant omnes artes," 62.
70. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959).
71. John M. Najemy, "Guild Republicanism in Trecento Florence: The Successes and Ultimate Failure of Corporate Politics," *American Historical Review* 84, no. 1 (1979): 66; Najemy, "Audiant omnes artes," 65.
72. Brucker, "The Ciompi Revolution," 330–33.
73. Nicolai Rubinstein, "Il regime politico di Firenze dopo il tumulto dei Ciompi," in *Il tumulto dei Ciompi: Un momento di storia fiorentina ed europea*, ed. Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1981), 105–06.
74. Mollat and Wolff, *The Popular Revolutions*, 149.
75. Stefani, *Cronaca Fiorentina*, in Green, *Chronicles of the Tumult of the Ciompi*, 82. Stefani further relates how he saw someone "with a hen and a piece of salted meat in his hand" forced to throw both into the fire.
76. Ibid., 92.
77. Machiavelli wrote to Francesco Guicciardini that he would pay ten *soldi* to have Guicciardini look over his shoulder to ensure he does not offend his sponsors. Letter to Francesco Guicciardini, August 30, 1524. *The Letters of Machiavelli: A Selection*, trans. Allan Gilbert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 206.
78. Letter from Donato Giannotti to Antonio Michieli, 30 June 1533, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Chief Works, and Others*, trans. Allan H. Gilbert, 3 vols. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 1028. For the original letter, see Luigi A. Ferrai, "Lettere inedite di Donato Giannotti," *Atti del Reale Instituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, 6, no. 3 (1884): 1582.

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79. Cohn quotes the passage but fails to attend to the implications of the planted "opponents." Samuel Cohn, Jr., "The Character of Protest in Mid-Quattrocento," in *Il tumulto dei Ciompi: Un momento di storia fiorentina ed europea*, ed. Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1981), 201.
80. Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics*, 306. See also Hulliung, *Citizen Machiavelli*, 89.
81. In addition to the nocturnal address by the Ciompo, there are five other anonymous direct speeches in the *Florentine Histories*: an address to Duke Walter by a delegate from the Signoria in 1342, II.34, 91–93; an address of a citizen to the Signori demanding reform in 1371, III.5, 109–11; inhabitants from the Seravezze valley addressing the Ten of War in 1429 , IV.21, 167–68; supporters of the Lucchese in 1437, V.11, 198–99; ambassadors of the Milanese to Francesco Sforza in 1448, VI.20, 251–52.
82. See Borsellino, "L'anonimo sovversivo."
83. Harvey Mansfield speculates that the anonymous speaker could actually be Michele di Lando, but in the context of Michele's collaboration with the *popolo grasso*, this identification is not persuasive. Harvey C. Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17.
84. Miguel E. Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000).
85. In contrast to the fourteenth-century chroniclers, who described the unfolding of the revolt as a sequence of collective actions taken by highly volatile crowds, Bruni recounts the episode by inflating the roles of two key figures: Salvestro de'Medici and Michele di Lando. Phillips contends that Machiavelli retains Bruni's narrative pattern but privileges Michele over Salvestro. Mark Phillips, "Barefoot Boy Makes Good: A Study of Machiavelli's Historiography," *Speculum* 59, no. 3 (1984): 598–603.
86. Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, 125ff.
87. Ibid., 126, spelling adapted.
88. See Balakrishnan, *Antagonistics*, 267.
89. John M. Najemy, "Civic Humanism and Florentine Politics," in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 83–85.

About the Author

Yves Winter is assistant professor of political science at the University of Minnesota. His research focuses on theories of violence in early modern and modern European political thought. He has published essays in *International Theory, Political Theory, New Political Science*, and *Widerspruch*, and he is the coeditor of *Gouvernementalität und Sicherheit: Zeitdiagnostische Beiträge im Anschluss an Foucault* (2008). Currently, he is working on a book manuscript on Machiavelli and violence.

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