

Yves Winter

# The Prince and His Art of War: Machiavelli's Military Populism

EVEN IF THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN WAR AND POLITICS HAVE OF LATE BECOME MORE blurred, they remain at the heart of the political imaginary of the modern liberal state. Defended as a bulwark against the militarization of society by some critics and denounced as a fantasy by others, the differentiation of war and politics is widely regarded as a cornerstone of the modern political order. Conceptually, it makes possible the ideology of a social order governed by law and legitimate authority rather than force and violence; institutionally, it stipulates the separation of instruments and practices of government and warfare, sundering the kinds of knowledges and rationalities appropriate to each.

Niccolò Machiavelli is frequently cited as a political theorist whose work collapses the distinction between politics and war (Wood 1967; Brown 2004; Galli 2009). Commentators have argued that Machiavelli treats politics as an analogue of war (Dietz 1986; Lefort 1986; Merleau-Ponty 1960; Faraklas 1997) and as fundamentally inseparable from war (Sasso 1958, 422; Fournel and Zancarini 2000, 7).<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I propose to investigate this ostensible civil-military continuum in light of Machiavelli's military writings, specifically his *Art of War* (2003, henceforth cited as *AW*). Machiavelli's *Art of War* shares the fate of many historical military treatises: even if it has recently garnered more interest (Hörnqvist 2010; Lynch 2010), it is often ignored and neglected by readers focused on the more obviously political texts. A re-examination of Machiavelli's military writings complicates

the picture of the war-politics relation: it is not war that functions as the paradigm for politics but vice versa. Machiavelli treats war as a profoundly political practice and the military as the site of potential political upheaval and popular revolt.

My interpretation of Machiavelli's military writings highlights two features. First, war for Machiavelli is not a unified field of action that is superposed onto politics but a disparate and heterogeneous patchwork of practices, routines, and disciplines. The art of war, in turn, consists in carefully orchestrating, coordinating, and representing bodies and movements, a practice, in short, that relies more on public performances and the production of appearance than on brute force. Second, Machiavelli's substantive recommendation to recruit a popular militia (as opposed to mercenary forces) is part of his populism—his political project of mobilizing the plebs as a political force against the Italian nobility. Rather than treating the military simply as an instrument of defending existing social and political arrangements, Machiavelli positions it as a dynamic force and potential catalyst for popular revolt. In this way, Machiavelli's analysis suggests another imaginary, a nonliberal order in which war and politics neither blend together nor are they entirely severable.

## THE PRINCE'S MILITARY CHALLENGE

Machiavelli begins *The Prince* (1998, henceforth cited as *P*) with a typology of principalities and the modes by which they are acquired. Dominion, he writes, is acquired by arms, either one's own or those of others. Good arms (*buone arme*) are essential not only for conquerors (for whom of course, they are indispensable), but also for principalities or republics protecting themselves against conquest. Good arms, along with good laws, are the "principal foundations" of states; and "because there cannot be good laws where there are not good arms," Machiavelli says he "shall leave out the reasoning on laws and [instead] speak of arms" (*P* XII, 48). If we look to *The Prince* to find out what Machiavelli means by "good arms," we find that the term seems to be synonymous with military autonomy and defensive capacity. In chapter x, Machiavelli

proposes categorizing states according to their military capabilities, distinguishing between those able to “put together an adequate army” and those that “always have necessity of others” (43). The emphasis on military autonomy continues through chapters XII and XIII, where Machiavelli delivers his well-known attack on mercenaries and auxiliary soldiers. Mercenaries, Machiavelli tells his readers, reciting a familiar *topos* among Renaissance humanists (Skinner 1978, vol. 1, 75–77, 163), are useless, dangerous, and corrupt. Machiavelli considers them so ineffective that he blames them for Italy’s defeat at the hands of Charles VIII in 1494. The undisciplined and disloyal Italian mercenary armies were unable to offer effective resistance to the well-organized French troops, allowing Charles to “seize Italy with chalk” (P XII, 49).

Having reached the conclusion that in order to be secure, principalities need their own arms, Machiavelli then proceeds to the specifics of how princes should approach war. In the opening salvo of chapter XIV, he challenges princes as follows:

Thus, a prince should have *no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but that of war* and its orders and discipline; for that is the only art which is of concern to the one who commands. . . . And the first cause that makes you lose [your state] is the neglect of this art; and the cause that enables you to acquire it is to be a professional in this art [*professore di questa arte*] (P XIV, 58; emphasis added).

By exhorting the prince to be a *professore* — an expert or professional — in the art of war, this passage establishes the paradigmatic status of the *arte della guerra* for the *arte dello stato*. War is the object of a specialized kind of *arte*, a type of knowledge and expertise Machiavelli describes as vital for the prince and as a principal component of the art of the state. If the art of war is “the only art” that matters to the prince and if the prince is to have “no other thought” than war, then the art of war either mirrors the art of the state or at the very least, it is sufficiently similar that it serves

as the primary training ground for princes. For military expertise to be the only kind of knowledge relevant to the prince, statecraft must be like war in some significant respects. *The Prince* does not specify how war maps on to statecraft, but by positioning war as the only relevant skill for one who commands, it implies that there is a privileged subject position or vantage point – the military commander or general – from which the knowledge of war is apprehended. By urging the prince to become an expert in the art of war or perhaps a military commander, chapter XIV of *The Prince* appear to authorize a synecdoche, where the relation between prince and military commander stands in for the politics-war nexus (Dietz 1986, 782; Lefort 1986, 401; Merleau-Ponty 1960, 267).

But what precisely is this art of war that the prince is supposed to master? The obvious place to look for a clarification of what Machiavelli might mean by art of war would be his book on the very same subject, the *Libro della arte della guerra*. As it happens, the book on the art of war is also one of the few major works published during Machiavelli's lifetime, giving it perhaps an additional imprimatur. What would someone who follows Machiavelli's advice in chapter XIV of *The Prince* and reads *Art of War* possibly learn? What kind of knowledge does *Art of War* offer that *The Prince* lacks and that is so essential for a present or future prince? And how does the perspective developed in *Art of War* shed light on the relation between war and politics more generally?

The professed aim of *Art of War* is a consideration of the “ancient modes” and “ancient orders” of military virtue (AW P, 4; I, 35) and how a return to these ancient forms of military virtue would overcome modern military corruption and perhaps solve the military crisis of sixteenth-century Italy (Pieri 1955; Bayley 1961; Vismara 1969; Anglo 2005, 528). As in the *Discourses* (1996, henceforth cited as *D*), the primary model of ancient virtue is republican Rome, whose military organization provides Machiavelli's template for an overhauled army (Raimondi 1977). At the heart of the book, then, is the problem of military organization – not exactly what a prince, hoping to learn how to command, might expect. Indeed, a prince might be disappointed to

discover that the bulk of the work appears to be written for a different audience: republicans interested in reviving the humanist ideal of a citizen army. One of the primary arguments of the book is that civilian and military life have converging ends and that the best way to control and manage the potential danger soldiers pose to civil life is to make citizens out of soldiers. But if that is true, then what, if anything, does the book yield for present or future princes?

Not much, at first sight. In part, because *Art of War* is often deemed a technical manual rather than a conceptual engagement with the question of war (Colish 1998, 1161). A highly successful and influential text throughout the sixteenth century, today the book is generally considered among Machiavelli's minor writings (Gilbert 1986; Anglo 2005, 32). Formally a dialogue between a well-known *condottiere* (named Fabrizio Colonna) and four young aristocrats, *Art of War* quickly turns into a lecture on military organization. Set in 1516 in the Rucellai gardens, a meeting point of young Florentine humanists and patricians (Gilbert 1949), the dialogue is divided into a preface followed by seven books. The first two books are about the recruitment of soldiers, the function and importance of different types of troops, and the role of drill and training. Book III presents an imaginary battle, replete with battle order and formation, tactics, and maneuvers. Book IV continues the spatial arrangements of battle, the ordering of troops, and emphasis on strategy and ruse. The following book treats the order of marching, geography, reconnaissance, and logistics, while book VI almost entirely focuses on encampment. The final book, VII, starts with a discussion of how to attack or defend towns and fortifications and the work ends with a set of general rules for warfare, presented in aphoristic form.

The further the work goes on, the more the text becomes specialized and seemingly esoteric, which has led some scholars to dismiss *Art of War* as dull and tedious (Pitkin 1984, 69–70; Gilbert 1986, 23; Negri 1999, 95). Yet hidden underneath its monotonous cadence lies a significant rethinking of war and of the politics-war nexus. Contrary to *The Prince*, which frames the relationship between war and the

art of the state in abstract and sometimes stipulative terms, *Art of War* puts forward what we might call a sociological lens that renders war as a social practice. Through such lessons as how to set up an encampment or on how wide the ditch around a fortification ought to be, *Art of War* shifts attention to the spatial coordinates of warfare, its scales and proportions. The emphasis on the seemingly esoteric details of military organization indicate that if the art of war is “the only art of concern to one who commands,” then it is *not* because war teaches a prince how to command but for other reasons.

### WAR AS A SET OF PRACTICES

In the first book of *Art of War*, Fabrizio distinguishes between two meanings of *art of war*: the “practice” (*esercizio*) of war on the one hand, and the “profession” (*arte*) of war on the other hand (AW I, 15, trans. mod.). To make war into a profession, Fabrizio declares, is no way to live honestly, and no republic or well-ordered kingdom would consent to “any of its citizens or subjects” turning war into a profession (AW I, 13). Thus in a well-ordered city, the art of war is not a career or profession but solely a *practice* or an *exercise*.

Fabrizio’s rejection of the art of war as a profession matches Machiavelli’s well-known disapproval of mercenaries. In addition to the familiar objections from *The Prince*, *Art of War* introduces a further argument against mercenaries: because all they know is how to fight wars, professional soldiers can no longer differentiate between war and peace and between friends and enemies (Lukes 2004, 1098). Because they lack the capacity to make these distinctions, career soldiers are “rapacious, fraudulent [and] violent” and responsible for “robberies, acts of violence, and . . . assassinations” that occur in peacetime (AW I, 13). The problem with career soldiers is that they fail to be citizens or subjects, a failure that the text signals through a vocabulary of violence.

Machiavelli’s turn to discuss war as a set of *practices* (*esercizi*) generates a new framework through which war is conceptualized and thus a different knowledge of war. The word “practice” is used to des-

ignite a broad set of activities including but not limited to military drills and exercises. Machiavelli calls such drills *esercizi* and *pratiche*, but toward the end of *Art of War*, in books VI and VII, he uses the term *pratica* more broadly, to describe military activities more generally (AW VII, 150) and even discursive practices in the dialogue itself (AW VI, 117).<sup>2</sup> To conceive of war as a practice (or set of practices) rather than an institution or a profession is to emphasize the way that it is patched together out of a multiplicity of coordinated bodies and movements. By foregrounding the local and micro-level, an analysis of practice highlights the disparate and heterogeneous nature of war, the social, spatial, and material routines and mechanisms by which war is organized, produced, and represented.

The emphasis on such bodily routines is most evident in the middle of the third book of *Art of War*, when the conversation takes a turn, as Fabrizio steps out of his role of military expert and instead turns into an embedded war reporter, providing a vivid blow-by-blow account of a fictive battle. At the helm of his battle formation, Machiavelli pictures the *velites*, a type of Roman light infantry deployed as skirmishers to disrupt enemy lines:

[T]he velites leave their places and . . . assault the enemy, whose artillery has unloaded one time. . . . And so that it cannot fire a second time, see how our velites and cavalymen have already occupied it. . . . See with how much virtue our [men] fight, and with how much discipline, through the training that has made them do so by habit. . . . See how our artillery, so as to give them room and leave the space free for them, is withdrawn through that space where the velites had gone out. . . . See how the light infantry and the light cavalry are spread out and returned to the flanks of the army. . . . See how . . . a band of enemy arquebusiers . . . are enveloped between one cavalry and the other, they cannot fire and withdraw behind their battalions. See . . . how the infantrymen are already so near to one another

that the pikes can no longer be managed so that . . . the pikes are withdrawn among the shields little by little. . . . Don't you see that while fighting [the enemy's] orders have contracted so much that [only] with trouble can they wield their swords? (AW III, 70–71)

Elaborate and ornate accounts of battles are not unusual for Renaissance texts (Gilbert 1965), but what makes Fabrizio's battle interesting is the attention to mobility and control over space. His troops defeat the enemy not because of superior weapons but by outmaneuvering the enemy lines. They outperform the enemy in terms of coordination and movement. If the mobility of the cavalry and the velites is what disrupts the enemy's ranks, the disciplined and orderly march of the infantry keeps the bulk of the brigade together. The artillery is depicted as tactically retreating in order to provide a space for the infantry. The strategy is to control troop movement and sow disorder amongst the opponents. A detailed management of space is what allows "our" army to defeat the imagined enemy. He describes how his men put their bodies between the enemies and their weapons, preventing them from discharging their artillery. Mobility, tactical retreats, and discipline are the decisive factors in battle. The enemy arquebusiers are "enveloped" (*rinvolti*) between Fabrizio's cavalry and their own, such that they cannot fire and have to withdraw. The critical moment happens when the infantry cordons tighten and the soldiers' bodies get closer and closer to each other, such that unwieldy arms like pikes and heavy swords can no longer be used. Fabrizio's infantrymen are well coordinated: when they tighten their lines, they withdraw the pikes between the shields in order to make them more manageable. But when the enemy lines contract, the enemies' pikes are too long, and the soldiers are jammed in their bulky armor, unable to wield their swords. The enemy troops are literally trapped by their own arms. The weapons have turned into fetters constraining the soldiers' bodies and movements.

The main theme of the lengthy combat report is that battles are won by bodies in motion, bodies that can spread out, return to



the flanks, envelop and entrap their opponents, enmesh them in their own gear, and overcome them through superior control over movement. Machiavelli's successful army does not have the largest number of troops or the best equipment; rather, it controls and governs the battlefield through the soldiers' bodies and their location in space. Fabrizio's troops manage and orchestrate the space of the battlefield. What seals the outcome is the asymmetry between the supple control over bodies in space and the adversaries' lack of mobility and proper orchestration of their movement.

By describing what bodies do in battle, this passage orients the reader to the corporeal dimension of war, to the fact that war requires bodies to be dressed, armed, moved, disciplined, trained, and distributed. Readers, whether princely or not, learn that battle choreography requires not only command skills but a sensibility for what bodies can do and how they move in space. This preoccupation with the body is continuous with Machiavelli's literary and poetic work, where the frailty and vulnerability of the human body are treated at length (Brown 2004, 118). In *Art of War*, this preoccupation turns into a nearly anatomical investigation of war at the level of bodily practices, providing the reader with a close-up perspective on war quite different from that articulated in Machiavelli's other writings, especially *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.

The problem of spatial management recurs in book VI when Fabrizio turns to an elaborate description of how an entire army of 24,000 infantrymen and 2,000 cavalymen should be encamped (*AW* VI, 119–125). The painstaking account specifies the precise dimensions and measurements of the encampment, including the number, widths, and even names of the streets; the positions of the various battalions as well as the logistical support; the exact space allotted to each lodgment and the number of soldiers assigned to it. Thus the cavalry and the men-at-arms are to be accommodated in groups of 10 in quarters that are 15 arms long and 30 arms wide while the infantrymen are to sleep in groups of 30. The encampment is to be laid out like a municipal or urban space with intersecting streets, gates at the northern,

southern, western, and eastern end, surrounded by a moat at least 6 arms wide and three deep. It is to resemble a “mobile city (*città mobile*) that carries with it the same streets, the same houses, and the same aspect wherever it goes” (AW VI, 125). And just as the city is a site of commerce, habitation, and production, so the encampment must make space for carpenters, smiths, horseshoers, stonemasons, engineers, and herdsmen, whose cattle provides sustenance to the army (AW VI, 124). Machiavelli’s encampment thus charts an intricate geometry of bodies; it calculates the amount of space necessary for each body and apportions lodgments accordingly; it is concerned with a distribution of bodies, how to organize them in space, and how to use this diagrammatic spatial organization to harness and calibrate the soldiers’ forces.

In comparison to the treatment of war in *The Prince*, this specialized discourse about war highlights a shift of focus. But it is not, as one eminent Renaissance historian has argued, a shift away from a “conceptual” to “practical” discussion of warfare (Mallet 1990, 173). Rather, these “nuts-and-bolts details of military policy” (Colish 1998, 1161) have conceptual implications. The *città mobile* of the encampment is a metaphor, or more precisely a metonymy, for a new way of thinking about war. The lessons on how to set up an encampment, how to defend a city, how wide and deep the ditch around a fortification ought to be, indicate that wars are made up of bodies and bodily practices, of spatial arrangements, and of performances. The point is not just that the *arte della guerra* which the prince is urged to master is an art of detail and a science of particulars. More important, what makes the army a functioning and effective whole is not its hierarchy, nor the skill of its captain but the coherence and cohesion that are produced through shared bodily and spatial practices. An army is a collective subject that is produced through a series of shared practices.

This shift of focus is corroborated by an analysis of the rhetoric of violence in *Art of War* compared to *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. Most conspicuous in this respect is the lack, throughout *Art of War*, of a language of violence to describe warfare. One of the noticeable aspects of the battle report discussed above is how markedly different it repre-

sents war than either *The Prince* or the *Discourses* with their emphasis on bloodshed. Especially in *The Prince*, violence functions as a rhetorical and theatrical element of the first order (Kahn 1986; Rebhorn 1988, 86ff.). In contrast, *Art of War* emphasizes coordination, training, and the movement and government of bodies. Violence is not accorded the central thematic consideration it receives in *The Prince*. The same inference can be made through a lexical analysis: in *Art of War*, the words “violence” or “violent” (*violenza* or *violento*) only appear three times in the entire book, always within the context of mercenaries. At every occurrence, the words “violence” or “violent” are used to caricature a kind of excess. Apart from these instances and in stark contrast to *The Prince*, violence is conspicuously absent from the representation of warfare. Meanwhile, the word “cruelty” and its cognates (*crudеле*, *crudelissimo*, *crudeltà*, *crudelitas*), which Machiavelli uses frequently as synonyms for violence in *The Prince*, do not appear a single time in the text.<sup>3</sup>

In *Art of War*, Machiavelli carefully reserves the term “violence” to parody what he considers a corrupt type of soldiering, especially by mercenaries. A distinct echelon of professional soldiers produces an excess of violence that can dominate political and social life. Unlike *The Prince*, which poses the problem of violence as a kind of “economy” (Wolin 2004), in *Art of War* Machiavelli’s popular militia is the solution to the potential excesses of violence and the difficulty of controlling and managing these excesses.

### **MILITARY POPULISM**

Readers of *The Prince* know that good arms make good laws (P XII, 48) and that from good arms, good friends result (P XIX, 72). Good arms (and good friends) will protect the prince against internal and external dangers, but soldiers pose a constant threat in the form of conspiracies. The difficulty for the prince is to maintain an effective military force to keep potential rivals and unruly subjects in check while preventing the military from becoming too powerful and autonomous. To strike that balance, the prince must avoid being hated by the people or being despised by the soldiers. As examples of princes who failed to

preempt that hatred, Machiavelli cites the Roman emperors Caracalla, Commodus, and Maximinus, who paid for it with their lives (P XIX, 79–81). The more powerful the army, the more troublesome the conflicting demands of soldiers and people. Italian Renaissance princes have an advantage over Roman emperors because they need not rely on powerful armies to govern and administer territories – hence Machiavelli’s advice to count on the people rather than the soldiers and avoid building up a potentially uncontrollable military power (P XIX, 81). But an even more elegant way to solve this problem and satisfy both the people and the soldiers is to make them identical – in other words, to arm the people. This is what Machiavelli recommends in chapter xx of *The Prince*, where he claims (falsely) that the histories are full of princes who have armed their subjects.

Machiavelli alludes to this passage in the final book of *Art of War*, the book that, of all seven, most resembles *The Prince* both in style and substance and thus forms the obvious starting point for readers approaching *Art of War* from *The Prince*. If republican readers of *Art of War* derive most benefit from reading the preface and book I – the places where Machiavelli develops the idea of the militia – princely readers will learn more by inverting the sequence and commencing their study with the work’s conclusion. From the conclusion, readers learn that even though Fabrizio has spent much time explaining that the art of war consists in knowing how to manage one’s troops, “[k]nowing how to govern an army [already] made . . . is not enough in Italy . . . rather, it is first necessary to know how to make it” [*Non basta adunque in Italia il sapere governare uno esercito fatto, ma prima è necessario saperlo fare*] (AW VII, 161). In current conditions in Italy, it is more important to know how to recruit an army rather than how to fight a battle. The concluding claim of *Art of War*, then, is that the crucial knowledge for the prince is not the art of commanding but of creating an army. It is the dearth of such knowledge that made possible the “great terrors, sudden flights, and miraculous losses” of the wars that began in 1494. Prior to these wars, “our Italian princes used to believe that it was enough for a prince to know how to think of a sharp

response in his studies, to write a beautiful letter, to show wit and quickness in his deeds and words, to know how to weave a fraud [. . . and they failed to] perceive that they were preparing themselves to be the prey of whoever assaulted them” (AW VII, 163).

Echoing similar criticisms of humanist grandstanding from *The Prince*, *Art of War* can thus be understood as an elaboration of Machiavelli’s call, in the final chapter of *The Prince*, for a new political and military form that can liberate Italy from “barbarian domination.” The primary lesson of *Art of War* from the defeat and military crisis in the wake of the Italian wars is how to create *buone arme*, or, in the language of *Art of War*, a good and well-ordered army (AW VII, 161). Making such an army, Fabrizio notes, is easy for princes who have access to a large subject population and who can draft 15,000 to 20,000 youths; nearly impossible for those who do not (AW VII, 161).

To recruit a militia of such size would have been difficult for any sixteenth-century state. While especially wealthy princes were able to raise combat armies of such size, permanent establishments were typically much smaller, and except for the kingdoms of France and Spain, no European power had a standing army exceeding 10,000 troops (Hale 1998, 65–67) For any of the Italian states of the early sixteenth century (Florence, Venice, Milan, Naples, and the Holy See), mobilizing an army of this size would have required the inclusion of noncitizen subjects. Drafting an army of that size would thus have been not simply a military but a political venture, one that has the potential to create the kind of anti-oligarchic political alliance between the prince and the people that Machiavelli so cherishes.

*Art of War* underlines the political aspect of recruitment by insisting that soldiers are to be chosen “from one’s subjects and by the authority of the prince” (AW I, 21). But soldiers are not exactly selected, Fabrizio explains. They are *produced*, through good habits and good practices. “Nature produces few hardy men; industry and training makes many” (AW VII, 158). Virtuous soldiers are forged through training. And like others who have written on how to train soldiers – from Plato through Xenophon, Vegetius, Frontinus, and Polybius –

Machiavelli stresses the role of drill and discipline (Burd 1896; Anglo 1969, 157). Hence Fabrizio rejects as corrupt the custom, attributed to Pyrrhus and Caesar, of selecting soldiers on the basis of their physical characteristics: their size, strength, agility, and anatomical proportions (Vegetius 1997, I.5–7). With training and practice, Machiavelli insists, good soldiers can be made anywhere (AW I, 20). States that lack good soldiers, he writes in the *Discourses*, “ought to be ashamed of themselves [. . . for] through their own fault, they have not known how to make soldiers of their men [*fare i suoi uomini militari*]” (D I.21, 54, trans. mod.). If soldiers are “made,” then a dearth of good soldiers cannot be blamed on a lack of suitable candidates, for skills are learned.

Readers who consider Machiavelli a civic republican, politically committed to liberty and popular government and historically informed by republican Rome, tend to interpret these lines as evidence of Machiavelli’s interest in the classic republican figure of the citizen-soldier. If military discipline and training are seen to reinforce civic-mindedness and if good soldiers turn out to be good citizens, then perhaps all citizens should be soldiers. Thus, for readers who privilege Machiavelli’s republicanism, the idea that military *virtù* fosters political *virtù* signals a revival of the classical idea of the citizen-soldier (Chabod 1958, 104; Pocock 1975, 201–03; Skinner 1978; Viroli 2000, 218).

There are, indeed, good reasons for such an interpretation. Already in the preface to *Art of War*, Machiavelli insists on the compatibility of civil and military life, mocking those who believe that war and civil life are fundamentally distinct (AW; P 3). By attributing the violence and assassinations in peacetime to professional soldiers, Machiavelli implies that the distinction between war and peace and thus between civil and military life is established and guaranteed by the proper conduct of soldiers. It is no wonder, then, that the question of how to instill appropriate soldierly conduct is a key concern of the first book of *Art of War*. Warfare must be hemmed in by civil life, which is accomplished by turning citizens or subjects into soldiers and by returning them to be citizens or subjects in times of peace (AW I, 19). A “wise republic,” Fabrizio tells his audience, “ought to use its citizens

in war” but in times of peace, it should insist that the soldiers return to their peaceful occupations (AW I, 19). The problem of civil-military relations, then, is how to make soldiers out of citizens in such a way that they can be restored to their peaceful role once warfare is over. The task at hand is not only “to keep men in the field and make them fight well” (Lynch 2003, 201) but also to get them to stop fighting.

If it were possible to unhinge military from civilian affairs, the problem of soldiers corrupting civil life would not arise. But as *The Prince* reminds us, such a dissociation would undo the state. If *The Prince* represents war as the paradigm of statecraft, *Art of War* highlights the limit of this political imaginary, because armed soldiers are a constant threat to the political and social order. The republican citizen-soldier represents a solution to this problem, because he has a stake not only in war but also in peace. But in *Art of War*, Machiavelli also intimates another line of thinking, one that is perhaps less explicitly worked out yet no less revolutionary. What if the aim of arming the people is not merely to defend existing modes and orders but to institute new ones? Rather than treating the popular army as a potential threat, it is also possible to envisage it as a catalyst of political change.

One of the difficulties encountered by the republican interpretation of *Art of War* is that Machiavelli does not restrict his *milizia* to citizens, explicitly including subjects (*sudditi*) as recruits for the troops. Nor does he use the term “citizen militia,” preferring to leave *milizia* ambiguous (Lukes 2004, 1101). And while the citizen-soldier model may be a compelling solution, it is unclear whether any of the Italian city-states would have been large enough to muster the requisite 15 to 20,000 troops from their citizens. Even on the broadest definition on who counts as a “citizen” (a male inhabitant with taxable wealth), sixteenth-century Florence, for instance, would not have been able to recruit a citizen-army of this size. And the trouble with armies levied not only from citizens but also from subjects is that the citizen-soldier model does not apply to urban subjects without political rights or rural peasants who often reside outside city walls. Typically impoverished or even destitute and exposed to oppressive and predatory legal

and fiscal regimes, these subject populations are not easily integrated into the nostalgic vision of the patriotic citizen-soldier. Incorporating subject populations poses the non-negligible risk that subject-soldiers may turn their weapons against their masters.

This was precisely one of the fears expressed by the Florentine *ottimati* when, in 1506, Piero Soderini tasked Machiavelli, during his tenure as Florentine secretary, with organizing a peasant militia. That militia did not include Florentine citizens and in fact had little in common with the military ideal of the citizen-soldier of the Roman republic (Hörnqvist 2002; 2010, 116). Yet creating the militia was one of Machiavelli's most significant and cherished political projects (Najemy 2006, 410; Bayley 1961, 288): it involved enlisting, arming, and training thousands of peasants of Florence's subject territories (the *contado*) and turning them into a popular military force. And while the Tuscan peasants did not revolt against the Florentine nobles, the aristocracy interpreted the presence of large numbers of armed peasants as a direct threat to its dominance (Hörnqvist 2002, 154). As the oligarchs accurately observed, such an army composed of Florence's subjects, strengthens—at least in the short run—the executive power of the *gonfaloniere* and menaces their influence (Dionisotti 1980, 3–59). What could be more useful to a prince, advised to ally himself with the people against the nobility, than such a threat? From the anti-oligarchic perspective of *The Prince*, *Art of War* can thus be read as an exposition of “military populism”; that is, as consistent with the political project of mobilizing the people and the plebs as a political force against the Italian nobility.<sup>4</sup>

Such a military populism treats the militia not simply as an instrument of defending and maintaining existing orders but as a dynamic political and social force and a potential catalyst for popular revolt and upheaval. From this perspective, we can recast the question of military *virtù*. If military virtue “necessitates political virtue” (Pocock 1975, 201) and if the training of a soldier demands the inculcation of military and political virtue, then arming noncitizen subjects may well yield some surprises. If only citizens with a stake in the polity can



be relied on to wield arms, then clearly subjects are not trustworthy soldiers. Republics that arm their noncitizen subjects would therefore have to expect demands to widen the franchise or possibly face revolts. If, on the other hand, military training is also a political education, then soldierly *virtù* might be understood as the material condition for a new form of military organization. If the peasant militia is to outperform the mercenaries, then it has to appear on the battlefield as a collective subject, able to operate seamlessly. It has to be able to move and act as a collective, which requires coordination, shared trust, and responsibility—in short, a kind of cohesion based not only on physical training but on reciprocal responsibility. What the political consequences of such an education might have been is anyone's guess. But as Chabod notes, the idea of a militia is not compatible with a political form that does not give soldiers a stake in its defense and reproduction (Chabod 1958, 16). It is hard to see how armed and well-trained subject-soldiers, inculcated with these civic virtues, are to return to their subordinate positions in peacetime. It would seem more likely that a popular army of such size would act as a force of political change rather than of stability.

Such political change might happen along territorial or domestic axes: territorially, the creation of a popular army composed of subjects raises the possibility of conquest. Territorial conquest would yield both land that could be distributed to soldiers and would also address the recruitment problem by broadening the demographic base for a mass army. Domestically, the emergence of such an army might lead to growing political demands on behalf of the armed plebs. Since the people, in contrast to the nobility, primarily desire to not be oppressed by the *grandi* (*P* IX, 39; *D* I.5, 18), they may well wield their weapons to such effect. Just as the Roman plebs turned their arms to a struggle for institutions such as the tribunate (McCormick 2011, 92–97), so the subject-soldiers of Renaissance Italy may use theirs to demand citizenship and/or establish institutions that protect them from the oppression by the patriciate.

Machiavelli does not spell out these implications, but a reticence to specify the political implications of his proposals would be neither surprising nor unprecedented (McCormick 2011, 36–61; Winter 2012). After all, *Art of War* is dedicated to Lorenzo di Filippo Strozzi, a wealthy nobleman, and the dialogue’s participants include four young aristocrats: Cosimo Rucellai, Luigi Alamanni, Zanobi Buondelmonti, and Batista della Palla. Rucellai and Buondelmonti happen also to be the dedicatees of the *Discourses*; and to Alamanni and Buondelmonti Machiavelli devoted his *Life of Castruccio Castracani of Lucca*. If these young *ottimati* and their ilk are the intended audience of *Art of War*, we would expect Machiavelli to avoid offending their aristocratic prejudices.

A populist interpretation of *Art of War* explains the absence of the terminology of citizen-soldier as well as the repeated references to princes and subjects. Perhaps more important, the populist reading is consonant with the analysis of war in terms of practices, bodies, and movement. That analysis shifts the focus away from the general to the particular and away from the commanding officer to the movements and actions of popular soldiers. And finally, the populist interpretation is also supported by Machiavelli’s hostility to cavalry—traditionally an aristocratic branch of service—and by his emphasis on the more popular infantry (see also *P XXVI*). By recruiting not only citizens but subjects, by undoing the traditional hierarchy of cities over the countryside, and by prioritizing infantry over cavalry, Machiavelli articulates the principles of an army that has the potential to emerge as a new political subject (Althusser 1999, 89).

## **WORDS AND DEEDS**

How does the focus on bodies and practices reposition the role of the military captain? What can the prince learn from Fabrizio, our *professore* of the art of war? According to chapter xiv of *The Prince*, the prince needs to focus on the art of war, because the art of war is the only art “of concern to one who commands.” But in *Art of War*, we find that this art is concerned less with commanding than with coordinating and

managing the bodily performances and spatial practices of a popular army. Fabrizio thus prides himself not on his ability to command but on knowing how to “govern” his subjects (*governare i miei sudditi*) (AW I, 19). The role of the military leader is primarily one of arranging and governing bodies and of generating illusions and appearances that sustain the collective subjectivity of the popular army.

In the battle scene of book III discussed earlier, firepower is only marginally relevant to success. In Fabrizio’s description, the artilleries of both sides either miss their targets or do little harm. The artillery is withdrawn in order to increase the liberty of maneuver for the foot soldiers. The same goes for the pikes that are withdrawn in order to maximize flexibility and movement in the field. Superior bodily coordination and regulation of movement allows the adversary’s forces to be turned against themselves so that they need not even be confronted directly. The battlefield resembles a stage on which a precise choreography must be enacted. War is a performance, or perhaps a dance: “For just as he who dances proceeds with the time of the music and while going with it does not err, so an army, while obeying that music in moving, does not get disordered” (AW II, 57).

But this dance requires “music” or a rhythm, and in Machiavelli’s dialogue the music is provided by Fabrizio, whose narrative voice is simultaneously the one that recounts and directs this theatrical display of movement. Its cadence provides a rhythm for the maneuver, just as the “pipes,” “fifes,” and other musical instruments did for the ancients (AW II, 57). The repeated injunctions to the reader to “see” and “look” indicate that in addition to the meter supplied by the narrative voice, a visual tableau is being created here, and that Fabrizio orchestrates the moves. Fabrizio’s task, then, is to coordinate an audio-visual display and to produce a sensory spectacle.

Machiavelli juxtaposes this management of appearances against the figure of brute force, symbolized by the Swiss pikemen and halberdiers, whose military success was built on a crude lineup in deep columns and squares. While he elsewhere commends the Swiss for being well armed and free (P XII, 50) as well as masters of modern war

(D II.16, 162), in *Art of War* Machiavelli qualifies this praise, insisting that even though the Swiss have perfected the use of the pike and the formation of the phalanx, their goodness is “in many parts defective” because it is based on brute force (AW VII, 162). Not the use of force but the management of appearances constitutes the art of war. Thus Fabrizio never advises a captain to use overwhelming force; instead, he always counsels shrewd deception and schemes of duplicity.<sup>5</sup> The best way to attack a city, Fabrizio says in book VII is to produce a “terrible” display; in other words, to perform a fear-inspiring spectacle. “For many times cities are lost through fear alone, without any other experience of force” (149). To produce fear without expending force is the hallmark of a great military captain. A captain should contrive to divide the enemy’s forces, to trick the enemy by using ploys and shams, and to improve his strategic position by influencing all the elements that affect the balance of forces. A military leader must further be on guard against deceptions and tricks and ought never to trust any appearance on the battlefield. As Barbara Spackman argues, Machiavelli’s warfare “has little to do with brute force and much to do with brute semiosis” (Spackman 1993, 180). The “most important strategies are those that create the illusion of force and that aim to conquer through the use of appearance, rather than through the use of brute force” (Spackman 1993, 184).

Another word for conquest through the use of appearances is of course “persuasion,” and the fluid and unstable boundary between the force of words and the force of things on which Machiavelli plays suggests that the military commander must be a rhetorician. Indeed in book IV, Fabrizio underlines the importance of oratorical skill for the successful leader of a popular army. Such leaders should imitate the example of the ancients, where “excellent captains needed to be orators” (AW IV, 98; on the captain as orator, see Raimondi 1977; Burkhardt 1988, 18). Fabrizio, who serves as both captain and orator in the dialogue, imitates precisely this example. Fabrizio’s name indicates that he is a *fabbro* of war, someone who knows how to *fabbricare* a military. A *fabbro* is a blacksmith, and blacksmiths know how to forge

objects and shape matter or *materia*, a metaphor Machiavelli employs to describe new military recruits (AW I, 21). Incidentally, blacksmiths are one of the primary categories of recruits Fabrizio proposes for a citizen army. To have blacksmiths among one's troops is useful, he tells his audience, "since it is a good thing to have one soldier from whom you take a double service" (I, 26). Just as his namesakes, Fabrizio does double duty in the dialogue, serving as a military expert and orator.

The coordination of bodies and the orchestration of space needs to be sustained by captains who know how to speak and troops that know how to listen. The address to the troops "takes away fears, inflames spirits [*accende gli animi*] . . . fills with hope, praises, vituperates, and does all of those things by which the human passions are extinguished or inflamed" (*le umane passioni si spengono o si accendono*) (AW IV, 98). Military historians have frequently reproached Machiavelli for having failed to appreciate the revolutionary character of firearms (Hobohm 1913; Gat 1988; Cassidy 2003; for a spirited defense of Machiavelli against that charge, see Gilbert 1946). Yet the pyrotechnic metaphors (to *inflame* and *extinguish*) signal that Machiavelli was by no means uninterested in the role of combustion in warfare. It is just that the combustion of primary interest is not the one that happens in the barrel of the gun but in the governing of bodily affects. By focusing on the passions, *Art of War* signals to readers of *The Prince* that the relation between the general and his troops is equivalent to that between the prince and his subjects, an analogy that is reinforced later in book VII (160–162). Just as the prince is called to govern his subjects through love and fear (*P XVII*), so the military commander mobilizes the soldiers' forces through their passions.

## CONCLUSION

At this point, it appears as though we have come full circle. Machiavelli's account of the military captain's role as producing projections, appearances, and illusions approximates the art of war once again to the art of the state, as portrayed in *The Prince*. One of Machiavelli's important lessons in *The Prince* is that politics is a space of appearances and the

political agent an actor on stage. A successful prince, after all, need not have moral qualities; he must merely “appear to have them” (P XVIII, 70). In other words, he must be a “great pretender and dissembler” (*gran simulatore e dissimulatore*) (P XVIII, 70), a performer who generates the appearance, not only of a public persona but also of the relations of power and domination that accompany it.

Theatricality, it turns out, is constitutive not only of Machiavelli’s politics (Brown 2004, 146–50; Jacobson 1986, 34ff.; Merleau-Ponty 1960) but also of his understanding of war. In contrast to a long tradition of political and military theory that treats war as brute force and as the crude deployment of violence, Machiavelli insists on war’s representational dimensions. Just as the prince is called on to imagine politics as a field of appearances, so the captain must conceive of war as mediated by sensation and perception. It is thus not only the prince, who must become a *professore* in the art of war, but the captain who needs to be a *professore* in the art of the state in order to master the performances required to govern an army of soldiers. If *The Prince* instructs the reader to read Machiavelli’s *Art of War* in order to become a *professore* in this art, *Art of War* points the reader to *The Prince* in order to learn about the art of the state – the paradigmatic skill set required for the art of war.

But in the architecture of *Art of War*, the captain’s vantage point only represents one of two angles and Machiavelli supplements this perspective with an analysis of war as a social practice and an argument for a popular army. The popular militia that Machiavelli champions may well evolve into an unpredictable and rebellious political subject with the potential to undo the political order it is intended to serve. The relation between war and politics is hence mediated not through the synecdochal relation of prince and general but through the juxtaposition of two distinct perspectives: that of the prince who is summoned to create an army to liberate Italy and that of his armed subjects whose shared practices may initiate a political education that exceeds the prince’s control. The point raised by many interpreters about the convergence of war and politics thus needs to be recast. For

princes, politics may be a kind of war, but for soldiers, war is also a kind of politics. And while war and politics are compatible at the top, they are potentially incompatible at the bottom. Princes may be generals, but soldiers are not by default citizens. In *Art of War*, the popular army is not simply a tool of the prince to gain and maintain power but emerges as a mechanism that imbues subjects with the kind of *virtù* that can be mobilized for civil and uncivil activities.

Positioning the war-politics nexus in light of Machiavelli's military writings highlights the political facets of the practices, routines, and techniques that make up warfare. By complicating the war-politics differentiation that is so central to the political imaginary of the modern liberal state, Machiavelli's *Art of War* casts doubt on the possibility of maintaining stable and tight separation of military from civil affairs, highlighting instead the myriad ways in which the individual soldier and the military as a whole are fundamentally political constructs. And qua political constructs, they are also prospective sites of political upheaval and transformation.

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## NOTES

1. For counterarguments, see Pitkin (1984), de Grazia (1989), and Philonenko (1971).
2. This use of the term *pratica* should be distinguished from the term's more specialized meaning in the Florentine government of the time. There a *pratica* referred to an advisory commission, a citizen assembly

that was empowered to debate but not to vote on policies (Najemy 2006, 147–48).

3. A cursory comparison indicates that in *The Prince* the cognates of “violence” and “cruelty” appear in at least 25 passages, and in the *Discourses* they turn up in 40 to 50 different contexts.
4. I borrow the term “military populism” from J. G. A. Pocock (1975, 333), but on my reading Machiavelli’s populism is broader based, more socially inclusive, and politically more democratic than what Pocock allows for (see McCormick 2011, 8–10).
5. See *D* III.14, 252, where Machiavelli recounts the example of Gaius Sulpitius, who in a war with the Gauls managed to frighten the enemy troops by deceiving them about the numbers and ferocity of his soldiers.

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