

**Mark Jurdjevic.** *A Great and Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Machiavelli's Florentine Political Thought.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014. 312 pp. \$54.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-72546-1.

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Our view of Renaissance men keeps changing. In recent decades, numerous biographers have made us doubt the character of the age's luminaries. Galileo, once a scion of science, has been shown a sycophantic courtier; Leonardo Bruni, champion of Florentine republicanism, exposed as an unrepentant traitor to his adopted city.[1] In *A Great and Wretched City: Promise and Failure in Florentine Political Thought*, Mark Jurdjevic demands we think anew about another potent figure of the Italian Renaissance: Machiavelli. Wonderfully researched and deeply persuasive, this book offers us an entirely new vision of the Florentine chancellor as a man dedicated in his later years to radically reshaping his broken world. Jurdjevic not only reinterprets the man himself, but challenges our very understanding of the relationship between Renaissance individuals and the society around them.

That Jurdjevic sees a presentist, positive, and proactive Machiavelli in the last decade of his life runs contrary to the findings of most biographers. Earlier scholars agree that Machiavelli's last days were gloomy, a lifetime of misfortunes having shattered the famed Florentine chancellor's youthful optimism. Isolated and alone, Machiavelli's thoughts in his old age drifted between escapist fantasies of past Roman glory and fatalist

despair as he bemoaned the many quarrels that had torn apart his beloved city.

But Machiavelli's final years were also pregnant with possibilities. After a generation of hostility, the years from 1512 to 1527 saw a pause in fighting between the city's warring sides, with republicans eager to comprise and their opponents, Giovanni de' Medici (Leo X) and his cardinal cousin Giulio (the future Clement VII), groping for secular leadership following the deaths of Giuliano di Lorenzo and Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici in 1516 and 1519, respectively. What followed was a fierce debate within the city's ruling class about the future of the Florentine Republic and the place of the Medici within it. Would the city adopt the broad-based republicanism of the Savonarolan and Soderian regimes, the tightly hemmed-in oligarchic government of the late fourteenth century celebrated by Machiavelli's contemporary and friend Francesco Guicciardini, or some form of Medicean rule, either indirect or princely?

Machiavelli's answer to this debate is the heart of Jurdjevic's study. Beginning in 1520, Machiavelli, commissioned by the Medici, went about the work of constructing a radical political project, one that reinterpreted history, government, and humanity through the creation of two texts: the *Discourse on Florentine Affairs after the*

*Death of Lorenzo* (1520) and the *Florentine Histories* (c. 1520-25). Machiavelli hoped these two works--the former a radical constitutional restructuring of the Florentine state, the latter an equally sweeping reinterpretation of Florence's past--could salvage the flagging Florentine Republic through an inventive revision of its magistracies and councils as well as the Medici's role within them.

The political project Machiavelli proposed in the *Discourse* and *Histories* did not emerge *sui generis*, but sprung from a lifetime of political observation. In chapters 1 and 2 of *A Great and Wretched City*, Jurdjevic informs us of Machiavelli's political evolution through a close look at the Florentine's engagement with the prophet-turned-politician Savonarola alongside a critical reading of his early historical work, the *Discourses on Livy* (c. 1515-18). Machiavelli came of age during a tumultuous time for Florence, and he retained vivid memories of the excesses of Savonarola's brief regime (1494-98)--the sounds of the preacher's fiery sermons, the fear of youth gangs (*fanciulli*) who roved the city imposing Savonarola's moral code, the smell of vanities ablaze. And while Machiavelli at times disapproved of Savonarola's religious fervor (notably despairing of the Ferrarese friar in a letter to the Florentine ambassador Ricciardo Becchi), through a close reading of this letter and other texts Jurdjevic convincingly shows how Savonarola's sermons impressed upon a young Machiavelli the political power of prophecy and the possibility of providential redemption. More than a particular religious or political program, Machiavelli took away from Savonarola an appreciation of his fellow Florentines' appetite for political renewal and institutional revival.

That Machiavelli in his old age valued Savonarola less as a *man* and more as a harbinger of a revivalist *moment* reflected his growing distrust in the power of great men to change the future. As he aged, Machiavelli doubted more and more his once-strong belief in the power of a

prophetic individual, so wonderfully captured in the figure of the prince-redeemer in book 26 of *The Prince*. By the time he completed his study of Roman history in the *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli was convinced that even the greatest, most well-meaning leaders ultimately fell to avarice.

Adding to his distrust of powerful rulers, Machiavelli's study of the past made him further lose faith in the reformative power of any one social group or faction. As Jurdjevic explores in chapters 3 and 4, by the writing of the *Discourse* and *Histories*, Machiavelli no longer believed that either of the two social groups about which he wrote, the people and the nobility, had the power to reform Florence. Machiavelli had not always held such opinions; in his earlier works, he championed the commons, noting how "the people desire not to be bossed and oppressed by the rich" (*The Prince*, IX) and that they longed "not to be ruled" (*Discourse on Livy*, 1.5). However by the time he set about his project of political renewal in the 1520s, Machiavelli had come to value alike the aristocrat and the plebe with equal parts enmity and empathy. Consequently, in books 3-8 of the *Histories*, Machiavelli both expressed a "grudging admiration" (p. 86) for the martial spirit of the old Florentine knightly class and increasing suspicion of the common man's caprice.

For Jurdjevic, Machiavelli's newfound appreciation for the nobles and disdain of the people did not reflect (as some have argued) an aristocratic turn, but a prescient understanding that, given the unclear lines of social distinction in the mercantile hot-house of Florence, rank and privilege mattered less than a more fundamental quality: greed. In Machiavelli's mind, all Florentines, no matter their station, fell victim to the same social-psychological lust for power, a poisonous desire from which all faction and conflict sprang. But power alone did not corrupt, for in Jurdjevic's reading of Machiavelli the political thinker came to believe that all men, without proper law and

order, were “depraved,” “short-sighted,” “wicked,” “self-interested,” and “unreliable” (pp. 57, 64).

It is in chapters 5-8, the intellectual core of the book, that Jurdjevic reveals how Machiavelli hoped to solve this universal Florentine psychosis through a sustained political renewal in the *Histories* and *Discourse*. In the *Histories*, Machiavelli envisioned a dreary political past, one in which earlier Florentine governments—by placing an individual, party, faction, or class above the public good—propagated their own destruction. The city’s numerous medieval committees, the life-blood of Italian city governance, ignited factional disputes between Guelf/Ghibelline and *popolo*/nobles in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with each faction using administrative institutions not to govern, but to disenfranchise and destroy opponents. Later governments continued the practice. In the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the oligarchic Albizzi regime mismanaged the electoral system, wilted in the face of oligarchic arrogance, incompetently legislated, and alienated the people. The Medici regime (1434-94) that replaced them behaved little better. Machiavelli informed his Medicean audience that in spite of gaining the favor of the people, the earlier period of Medici rule rested less on wise governance and more on the raw charisma of two remarkable leaders, Cosimo Il Vecchio and Lorenzo Il Magnifico. Amongst the turbulence of Italy in the 1520s, one could not hope to build solid rule on luck and magnetism alone.

But more than a cautionary warning, the *Histories* were “a study in applied history” (p. 211), an effort to warn those who wished to renew Florentine government in the present of the lasting damage of past reforms. In his mind, each change of regime did not wipe the slate clean, but left a sort of institutional scar upon the Florentine body politic. To cure the ailing republic, Machiavelli launched in his *Discourse* a comprehensive restructuring of the Florentine state. Nearly all republican councils would be abolished, a hierarchy

of interdependent committees representing each of the city’s three social groups (aristocratic elite, middle rank, and people) would legislate, and a rotating group of provosts would check power.

Whatever else Machiavelli wished to achieve in the *Histories* and *Discourse*, Jurdjevic persuasively shows that he intended his audience to read these texts together. It is this seamless interweaving of the *Histories* and *Discourse* that is the greatest strength of the book. Rather than exist independently, “the *Histories* framed and defined a political problem for which the *Discourse* provided a solution” (p. 180). So, for instance, when inveighing against Cosimo and Lorenzo’s frequent recourse to emergency measures and exile to shore up their shaky regime in the *Discourse*, Machiavelli informs his readers simultaneously about the origins of such behavior in the *Histories*.

And while the Medici in the end rejected Machiavelli’s advice and turned to the princely rule, to view the *Histories* and *Discourse* together fundamentally changes our understanding of both texts. To read the *Histories* as a prospective rather than descriptive text levels the sharp dichotomy between those scholars who adopt an optimistic (Felix Gilbert, John Najemy) or a pessimistic (Hans Baron, Gennaro Sasso, David Quint, Salvatore de Maria) view of the treatise, while doing much the same for the *Discourse*, a text Jurdjevic shows to be neither radically republican/utopian (Maurizio Viroli, Gisela Bock) nor aristocratic (Humphrey Butters).

To say that the *Histories* and *Discourse* amounted, in the end, to a bureaucrat’s white paper may seem dull, but in recasting these texts Jurdjevic demands the reader see a new vision of Machiavelli as a political thinker and (more provocatively) doer. To Jurdjevic, Machiavelli’s obsession with Florentine factionalism in the *Histories* does not furnish proof of his piteous old age, but exposes the Florentine’s inspired effort to save his beloved city. Jurdjevic’s Machiavelli

strides into the future, confident that fixing one more council or allaying another faction's fears would lead Florence into a new golden age. Nor does Jurdjevic's Machiavelli remain static; it is another one of the book's strengths that the Florentine thinker evolves throughout, from a believer in a redemptive individual in *The Prince* to a historical traveler in the *Discourses on Livy* to the policy tinkerer designing new institutions in the *Discourse* and *Histories*.

A closer look at Machiavelli's final years, moreover, alters our understanding of his contribution to those fields to which he is most closely attached: Renaissance Humanism and politics. Over the course of his life, Machiavelli adopted a negative view of human psychology and an individual ruler's capacity for just rule. As a consequence, his project in the 1520s for political renewal centered not on individual cultivation, but a reformation of social interactions themselves--on the shape and nature of councils and committees rather than the men who staffed them. That Machiavelli believed political revival could not spring forth from the individual, Jurdjevic contends, places him outside the classical or neo-Roman humanist tradition--a tradition "Cambridge school" scholars like Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock have consistently portrayed Machiavelli as championing.

Machiavelli's proto-sociology in the *Histories* and *Discourse* further reshapes the Florentine's political legacy and the place of the Renaissance individual within it. If Machiavelli is still remembered best for *The Prince*'s cut-throat political realism, we must thank Jurdjevic for adding to the Machiavellian inheritance another legacy: a prescient appreciation for the tension among political factions, charismatic individuals, and state power alongside the seemingly endless need for inventive policy solutions to such disputes. "[Institutions] will always stand firm when everybody has a hand in them," Machiavelli leaves his reader with in his conclusion to the *Discourse*, "and

when everybody knows what he needs to do and in whom he can trust, and no class of citizen, either through fear for itself or through ambition, will desire revolution" (p. 213).

#### Note

[1]. Mario Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Arthur Field, "Leonardo Bruni, Florentine Traitor? Bruni, the Medici and an Aretine Conspiracy of 1437," *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998): 1109-1150.

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