
Original Article

Revisiting the violence of Machiavelli

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Abstract In this essay I focus on the conceptualization of political violence in Machiavelli's *The Prince* and explore the extent to which the appropriation of his ideas on the role of violence by the discipline of International Relations (IR) does justice to the complexities, nuances of his discussion on the theme. Despite deep ontological, epistemological schisms among various approaches in IR, I suggest, one can discern an implicit consensus among scholars concerning Machiavelli's political language on violence, in that, they remain wedded to an instrumental ontology of violence. Taking as my starting point this implicit consensus and probing its limits, I draw on the works of scholars who explore the rhetorical dimension of Machiavelli's political theory and argue that his theorization of political violence both complicates and remains in excess of such an ontology: a surplus constituted by the symbolic, affective dimension of violence. On such a reading, Machiavelli emerges not only as a political theorist who grasps the violent foundations of modern political authority, but also as a thinker, whose perceptive account figures political violence as a discursive medium.

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Introduction

Machiavelli's 'piccolo libro' unveils his unorthodox views, which gained him well-deserved infamy in the past millennium.¹ Despite its favorable reception when it first appeared in print in 1532, by the middle of the century there was already an anti-Machiavellian movement taking shape, with the Church putting the book on the index of prohibited texts (Soll, 2014, p. 31). Machiavelli's scandal stemmed from his 'dramatic break with previous political doctrines anchored in substantively moral and religious systems of thought' (McCormick, 2014, p. xxiv). By orienting political thought away from 'transcendentally valid or divinely sanctioned conceptions of

justice' toward the 'effectual truth' (*verità effettuale*), the author of *The Prince* seemed to disrupt 'all previous, socially respectable forms of political reflection' (ibid.).

The teachings of *The Prince* would perhaps be more tolerable if it were not Machiavelli's forthcoming – what is generally interpreted as brutally realistic – views on the role of violence and cruelty in the consolidation and enhancement of political power, of building new laws and political orders, of preserving established ones. After all, *The Prince* advocates crime and cruelty, promotes force, war, violence to resolve conflicts and praises cunning to fool your adversaries in the bid to power. As Wolin (2004, p. 197) observes, in the past as it is today, 'it has been and remains one of the abiding concerns of the Western political theorist to weave ingenious veils of euphemism to conceal the ugly fact of violence' in political life. One of the aspects that rendered Machiavelli's political theory so novel was the way in which it casted aside these euphemisms and confronted the economy of violence undergirding political rule and order (ibid.).

Given the centrality of violence to Machiavelli's political thought, it is not surprising to see his commending influence on the discipline of International Relations (IR), which takes as its primary focus questions surrounding the phenomenon of violence, the use of force, war, conflict. Paradoxically, however – and this will be my central claim – the violence of Machiavelli is largely taken for granted by IR scholars. His discourse on cruelty is treated as a self-evident narrative that needs no further theoretical analysis and reflection. Despite deep ontological, epistemological schisms among various approaches – most prominently among realist and critical scholars – I suggest, one can nevertheless discern an implicit consensus regarding Machiavelli's discourse on political violence. To be more precise: Even deconstructive efforts 'to take Machiavelli seriously' (Walker, 1995, p. 30) and challenge the premises of a tradition of thought that posits Machiavelli's doctrine as the foundation of realist philosophy remain wedded to an unproblematic/un-deconstructed view of Machiavelli's theorization of political violence. Disciplinary discussions mainly revolve around an *a priori* understanding of the relation between politics and violence formulated in purely instrumental terms. Even when the complexities and nuances of Machiavelli's discourse are made the focal point of analyses, violence becomes *political* violence through an *a priori* liberal framing that takes as its departure point the bifurcation of violence into legitimate and illegitimate, public and private forms. In the first section, I provide a brief overview to substantiate this argument on how IR scholars understand Machiavelli's arguments about violence.

In the remaining sections, I offer a reading that elaborates how Machiavelli's violence exceeds the flat ontology of instrumentalist, positivist accounts and liberal presuppositions on the distinction between lawful and unlawful violence (Winter, 2009). Exploring that surplus, I suggest, requires attending to Machiavelli's account of political foundation and engaging with 'the rhetorical force' (Kahn, 1994) of princely violence in the constitution and consolidation of the esthetic space of politics.



Once rendered on these terms, the question becomes, how, as a sign, political violence circulates in this esthetic space and how it operates as a signifying practice (Winter, 2009) in the production of political subjectivities; how, in other words, beyond being a mute and dumb instrument – a ‘characterless force of some abstract compellence’ – political violence operates as ‘a discursive tool’ ‘whose force is part and parcel of productive efforts to remodel political environments’ (Kelly, 2013, p. 2).

Caught between Foxes and Lions: Stupidity of Machiavelli’s Violence

Chapter 18 of *The Prince* is one of ‘the most tortured, studied, vilified, and disparaged’ texts not only in the works of Machiavelli, but in all of modern thought (as cited in Lukes, 2001, p. 562). In this chapter, he directly addresses the prince with a warning: ‘You should know, then there are two ways of contending: one by using laws, the other, force’ (p. 61). The chapter elaborates why it is necessary to ‘imitate beasts as well as [employ] properly human means’ to found, consolidate and retain one’s power. The beastly side that Machiavelli tells the prince to possess and deploy is constituted by an amalgam of the fox and the lion. These two beasts a prince needs to possess as ‘both natures’ because, as he explains, ‘one without the other is not effective’: ‘The lion is liable to be trapped, whereas the fox cannot ward off wolves’ (ibid.). Fox is the cleverest of all animals – it can recognize traps, resort to subtle methods to trick and deceive. While fox embodies fraud, lion stands in for ‘impetuosity and violence’ (as cited in Lukes, 2001, p. 562). As the king of the forest, it symbolizes brute force, the ability to kill. If the foxy strategy is to get one’s way by deceit, resorting to unethical means, lion’s method is to brutalize, resort to dumbing force to coerce.

Although Machiavelli’s advice to the prince is to emulate both the fox and the lion, in political theory and political philosophy, as Lukes (2001, p. 561) highlights, it is the fox, which has received the greatest attention. As he rightfully points out, ‘[w]e obsess over the extent to which such exquisite qualities such as integrity and charity succumb to trickery and deceit’ or ‘whether one could detect a moral residue’ in Machiavelli’s thought (ibid.). Is he licensing a blank check for the use of violence if deception, emulation, artifice fails? Or is his warning about the importance of emulating the fox merely a cautionary advice stemming from his conception of politics in modernity as a realm of contingency? While conversations mostly revolve around these questions, the lion is dismissed as ‘an uninteresting and unimportant accessory’ (Lukes, 2001, p. 562).

The reception of Machiavelli’s political discourse follows a similar path within IR. The part of the half-beast represented by the lion is treated as an accessory, a superfluous aspect of his political thought. What the lion stands for – violence, force, cruelty – is treated as something that is self-explanatory, an aspect that requires no further theoretical elaboration. How Machiavelli conceptualizes the relation between

‘realistic’ demands of power politics and ethical concerns becomes the terrain over which the legacy of Machiavelli is debated.

It is Machiavelli the fox that determines Carr’s praise for the Italian thinker. According to Carr (1981), Machiavelli deserves to be registered as a father figure of realist approaches to world politics for revealing the way in which ‘politics is not ... a function of ethics, but ethics of politics’ (p. 62). Likewise, Beitz (1999, pp. 186–187) suggests that Machiavelli the fox deserves to be placed in the realist camp because of his ‘cautionary view about the role that normative considerations should be allowed to play in practical reasoning’. Noting ‘Machiavelli’s love of the dramatic act of political violence’, for Donnelly (2004, p. 24), it is Machiavelli’s ‘low opinion of human nature’ that determines his approach to politics and violence. Portrayed as a ‘love[r] of dramatic violence’, Machiavelli is figured as a thinker for whom power and security constitute the primary political priorities and political success overrides all other considerations (ibid., pp. 24–26).

In the *realpolitik* appropriation, Machiavelli’s discourse on political violence is rendered synonymous with the use of force among states. Enabling this theoretical move is the formulation of the relation between politics and violence in purely instrumental terms: violence conceptualized as a tool in the service of advancing political interests. It acquires political significance only as an instrument in the means–end relation. Figuration of violence as such is premised on the *a priori* assumption about the strict ontological division between politics inside the sovereign state and politics outside. Because for Machiavelli external milieu is ‘fundamentally different from the domestic environment’, it is argued, it requires different means: ‘at home, relations among citizens are regulated by the law, but abroad, relations among states are regulated by force’ (Cesa, 2014, p. 2). Lacking any overarching common good, the international realm is a purely strategic realm, where each has to fend for its own, where promises are never kept, and consequently, where ‘the use of violence is the rule, and not the exception – hence, the need to be always well armed’ (ibid., p. 3). As far as the discussion on political violence and world politics is concerned, what matters is the extent to which violence serves as an instrument in accomplishing the strategic aims which is defined within the realm of politics. ‘Outside’ the story goes, requires that violence be carried to its extreme form, finding its primary expression in the form of war. ‘In international politics’, writes Waltz (1979, p. 113), for instance, ‘force serves, not only as the *ultima ratio*, but indeed as the first and the constant one’. In these appropriations, Machiavelli’s economy of violence is reduced to a means to achieve a political end, a central means in the available inventory of political devices that would ensure the survival of the state in an anarchical environment. Political violence is equated with the direct application of physical force in order to coerce a political opponent. It relies on a positivist understanding of violence by sequestering it to the realm of what can be observed and figuring it as direct, physical harm or injury inflicted upon the opponent. In this framework, the ontological status of violence as a blunt instrument in the service of politics erases the



inherently *political* nature of violence and renders the concept of political violence itself an oxymoron (Frazer and Hutchings, 2011; Kelly, 2013).

It is on these ontological and epistemological presuppositions that dominant approaches in IR treat political violence as war. Not surprisingly, Thomas (2011) finds that in the most widely read textbooks of IR, which distinctly address the problem of violence in the context of international politics the term violence is rarely mentioned, and, most often, it is not used at all. For instance, in Art and Waltz's widely read co-edited volume *The Use of Force: International Politics and Foreign Policy* many terms such as force or war are used, but never the concept of violence; in Waltz's *Man, State, and War* the term violence is used only 11 times, whereas in Mearsheimer's *Great Power Politics* the term violence is not even used a single time (*ibid.*, pp. 1818–1820).

To sum up, it is through the caesura between violence and politics (that is, violence gaining political significance only to the extent it serves a political outcome), through *a priori* epistemological assumptions that delimit the meaning of violence to the use of physical force to coerce an opponent that Machiavelli's discussion of political violence makes its way to disciplinary debates within IR. Conceptualized as war, violence at the international level is leveled to an instrument deployed in the service of the reason of the state. His discourse is collapsed to '“the professionalized war discourse” of international relations' that views the world as a realm of 'perpetual conflict, or perpetual conflict in abeyance, between individually willful states' (Curtis, 2006, p. 98). In these formulations, Machiavelli becomes the arduous defender of the state's primary consideration; someone who licenses doing anything 'lawful or unlawful, gentle or cruel, laudable or shameful ... to follow out to the ends whatever resolve will save the life of the state and preserve its freedom' (Elshtain, 1995, p. 57).

Mainstream appropriations of Machiavelli's political theory in IR do not go uncontested. Problematizing the predominant interpretations of Machiavelli as the founder of the 'scientific' study of world politics, Forde (1992, p. 373) seeks to retrieve a realist Machiavelli, but as a thinker who is grappling with 'realism as a general moral theory, and take very seriously its implications for domestic as well as international politics'. In contrast, Behr (2010, p. 14) argues the taken-for-granted figures of realist thought – namely, Machiavelli, Thucydides and Hobbes – cannot be read as realists because their thoughts are 'clearly opposed to “realist” tenets' to the extent that their thinking on politics is informed by universalistic ontologies, not the particularist visions trumpeted by state centric analysis. Challenging prevailing conceptions of Machiavelli as the ruthless advocate of power politics, he highlights the centrality of ethical, normative principles to their political theory. Echoing similar concerns, Donnelly (2004, p. 4) suggests that the portrait of Machiavelli as a paradigmatic realist is misconstrued to the extent that the Florentine thinker, far from relegating moral concerns to the periphery of foreign policy 'actually give[s] a considerable place to ethics in international relations'. Writing from a poststructural

perspective, Walker (1995) in his seminal work that undertakes a deconstructive reading of *The Prince* contests the caricature of Machiavelli as a progenitor of realism – a caricature produced ‘through textualisations, reifications, idealizations and mystifications’ (ibid., p. 34). Rather than a thinker who speaks of ‘timeless essence of political life’, in Walker’s (1989) account, we encounter a Machiavelli who is ‘trying to make sense of historically specific circumstances and attempting to do so in the discursive categories then available to him’ (p. 33).

While problematizing reductionist readings of Machiavelli as the prime figure of Machiavellianism – someone asserting ‘the priority of power over ethics, about the necessity of violence and intrigue in the affairs of the state, about ends justifying the means’ (Walker, 1995, p. 34) – these contestations leave intact instrumentalist and positivist understanding of violence attributed to Machiavelli. They merely assert that Machiavelli’s license to kill is not an unqualified maxim, but that it entails a complex and varied political position on the questions of virtue, ethics and political responsibility. For instance, stating that Machiavelli’s prescriptions on ‘cruelties well-used’ are not devoid of ethical considerations, Donnelly (2008, p. 152) suggests that, for Machiavelli, ‘[i]mmoral means’ must be kept to the minimum and be judged by the standard of ‘utility for the subjects’, the common public good. Likewise, for Walker (1995, p. 34), Machiavelli’s distinction between necessary and unnecessary violence ‘may even be invoked as a link between Machiavellian sense of virtue and Weber’s ethic of responsibility’. At issue is whether or not one can trace ethical justifications for ‘the uncompromising necessities of power and violence’ (ibid., p. 34) in Machiavelli’s political theory.

While conversations overwhelmingly revolve around what to make of Machiavelli the fox, there are nevertheless rare attempts that seek to force disciplinary discussions on Machiavelli’s violence beyond its familiar terrain. Frazer and Hutchings (2011) provide one such reading by problematizing purely instrumentalist view of violence attributed to Machiavelli. They probe into the functionality of political violence and register it as a crucial apparatus for statecraft. In contrast to formulation of violence as a pure means to an end, violence is figured as political to the extent that it operates as a productive force in the constitution and reproduction of political community. As they write, ‘political violence is instrumental for statecraft to work ... not only because of its capacity to deliver certain outcomes in the sense of specific policy goals, but also because of the ways in which it keeps the conceptual space of politics, as a realm of action, open’ (ibid., p. 58). Further, they suggest that Machiavelli makes ‘a clear distinction ... between uncontrolled, privatised and illegitimate violence and controlled, public and legitimate kinds’ (ibid., p. 70). For him, what is at stake is ‘virtuous violence’ – ‘in terms of both the character of those individuals engaged in and the values embedded in it as a practice, and their impact on political life beyond war’ (ibid., p. 62). In other words, properly channeled violence – exemplified by military life – fosters the necessary qualities and virtues such as discipline,



selflessness, courage, conscientiousness required of good citizens (ibid., pp. 63–64). As they summarize, ‘life in the military camp is the way for the state to produce people of the right kind’ (ibid., p. 68).

Attending to the productive, not merely coercive, nature of political violence, exploring and elaborating how violence and politics are immanently connected in the creation and maintenance of political community, Frazer and Hutchings make a forceful and convincing argument in terms of interrupting familiar codes of interpretation of Machiavelli the lion. While challenging predominant accounts of violence in Machiavelli’s political theory and exposing its inherently political nature, however, one of the things that remain unproblematized in Frazer and Hutchings’ (2011) reinterpretation is the positivist understanding of violence formulated as ‘all uses of physical force to hurt, injure or kill’ (p. 56). Although they make a crucial and much-needed intervention by shifting the focus away from the coercive to the productive nature of violence, such a formulation retains and reproduces instrumentalist accounts to the extent that it reduces political violence to what can be observed, delimiting it to the intentional deployment by subjects. What is more, such a formulation of the meaning of violence pivots on an unwarranted demarcation between lawful and unlawful violence attributed to Machiavelli. It echoes assertions that bound his discussion to a liberal framework by suggesting that he differentiates between ‘unmitigated violence’ and violence that ‘aim[s] at stability, the maintenance of a ruler, and the overall benefit of the community’ (Minter, 1992, p. 25). In these readings, Machiavelli is claimed for the higher ground as a thinker who makes ‘strict practical and moral distinctions for its use’ and views the illicit forms in disdain (Minter, 1992, pp. 8, 25). Such a rendering forecloses the possibility to attend to Machiavelli’s discussion beyond the distinctions between lawful and unlawful violence and, thereby, leave unexplored his conception of foundational violence, which enacts the law (Winter, 2009).

What I want to suggest in the following sections is that there is more to what we can learn from Machiavelli about political violence than what *realpolitik* framings or liberal presumptions allow for. To explore what this lesson entails requires that we dispense with – in Dodd’s (2009, p. 11) formulation – the ‘stupidity of violence principle’. On these terms violence becomes ‘stupid, in that it [is regarded as involving] *nothing more significant* than what can be captured and organized in a technical fashion’ (Dodd, 2009, p. 12). In what follows, I will seek to elaborate how Machiavelli’s discussion exceeds these formulations by figuring violence as an origin of meaning and gesturing toward the ‘performative aspect of violence’ (Winter, 2009) in the constitution of politics and production of political subjectivities. To do so, I will first visit a well-known scene in *The Prince* to set the stage before I turn to an in-depth examination of what the Florentine thinker teaches us about political violence beyond the familiar understandings and established frames of reference.

Staging Violence: How the Prince Kills

In the infamous Chapter 7 of *The Prince* entitled, ‘New Principalities acquired through the power of others and their favor’, Machiavelli (1998, p. 26) invites his readers to witness perhaps one of the bloodiest episodes of political foundation described in such vivid detail. As he reports, one morning the people find the body of Remirro de Orco – ‘a cruel and energetic man’ (*uomo crudele ed espedito*, Machiavelli, 2008, p. 113), who had reigned in Romagna – in two pieces (*in dua pezzi*) in the square at Cesena.² Accompanying the violated corpse was ‘a block of wood and a blood-stained sword at his side’ (Machiavelli, 1998, p. 26). In addition to the exposure of the mutilated body, the ghostly presence of only the instruments used to carry out this violent homicide amplifies the ferocity of the spectacle (*la ferocità del quale spettacolo*) (Machiavelli, 2008, p. 114). For the onlookers, who are presented only with the evidence of the act, the gruesome death is rendered even more obscure. They become witnesses to a violent spectacle ‘beyond their comprehension, and therefore all the more terrifying’ (Roe, 2002, p. 10).

The vanishing author of this scene is Cesare Borgia. For Machiavelli (1998, p. 23), his actions provide the best example for a new prince (for I don’t know what better precepts to offer to a new ruler than to cite his actions).³ In contrast to the mythical founders of new orders discussed in the previous chapter, Borgia comes to power through the fortune and arms of others. His father Alexander VI, not only acquires his son a noble title as duke, but also enlists the French in the campaign to conquer the Romagna that would eventually come under Borgia’s rule. Despite his fortunate ascendance to power, however, Borgia’s uses his ‘*grande virtù*’ (Machiavelli, 2008, p. 107) to successfully deal with the challenge of building a new principality. It is a task with real difficulties since in founding ‘*principati nuovi*’ (*ibid.*, p. 78) more than military conquest is at stake: it requires the establishment of a new social order with its novel institutions, rules and regulations, original forms of legitimation. All of these, in turn, necessitate the rooting out social structures of the previous regime and the creation of a new political imaginary that can make the new order and its laws hold. Borgia will eventually manage to overcome these challenges through his own efforts, consolidating his power and authority, bringing peace and unity to the land, and cultivating ‘peaceful and loyal’ subjects (*ibid.*, p. 58).

After ‘decid[ing] not to depend any longer upon the troops and the favour of others’ (Machiavelli, 1998, p. 25), Borgia moves onto eliminate rival factions by ‘resorting to trickery’ and fraud to pave the way of their eventual ruin and completely eradicates some through carefully planned assassinations. Although he manages to overcome his reliance on the arms of others, he still faces the additional task of consolidating his power and building a new order in a land that is ‘full of thefts, quarrels and outrages of every day kind’ (*ibid.*, p. 26). To ‘root out the disorder in the region’ and create a peaceful land with ‘its inhabitants obedient to his monarchical authority’, Borgia appoints Remirro de Orco as his governor and gives him



‘full powers’ to accomplish the task for him. De Orco succeeds in realizing Borgia’s desire ‘to introduce efficient government’ and ‘restore order and peace’ by not hesitating to resort to brutal means (ibid.). As Machiavelli reports, ‘recognizing that the severe measures that had been taken had resulted in his becoming hated’, Borgia seeks ‘to dispel this ill-feeling and win everyone over to him’ (ibid.). He wants to ‘show that if any cruel deed had been committed they were attributable to the harshness of his governor, not to himself’ (ibid.). One morning, he places the body of his governor in two pieces in the town square. Facing only the bloody result with no trace of what actually happened, the people are both ‘satisfatti e stupidi’ (ibid.) – in shock and awe.⁴

Although Machiavelli provides a general sense about the possible political motivations driving the course of events that would eventually culminate in the staging of this ferocious spectacle, the assassination of De Orco, nevertheless, leaves myriad of questions unanswered, which the ‘stupidity of violence principle’ can only take us so far in answering. It is certainly true that Borgia strategically uses political violence as a means to conquer Romagna and eliminate his rivals in the province. The cruelty unleashed against the governor De Orco can also be seen as part of the effort to further centralize political power and monopolize the means of violence after purging his rivals. Yet, as McCormick (2011, pp. 5–6) notes, the meaning of the spectacular violence unleashed in the town square in Cesena leaves the reader with more questions that it answers: Does Cesare fear that such hatred will be directed to De Orco or Cesare himself? Is he more disturbed by the reputation De Orco has acquired for himself more than the hatred he aroused in the people? Perhaps most importantly, since Cesare and Remirro are *both* described as cruel by Machiavelli, why should the duke’s cruelty be more preferable? Beyond lacking clear answers to these questions, Machiavelli’s (1998, p. 26) swift move in the next paragraph to ‘continue from where [he] left off’ to recount Borgia’s political travails registers this digression even more ambiguous.

These lingering questions gesture toward the notion that Machiavelli might be telling us that there is more to violence; a surplus that exceeds the flat ontology of instrumentalist, positivist accounts. Exploring that surplus requires attending to Machiavelli’s account of the esthetic constitution of the political (Birmingham, 2013) and engaging with ‘the rhetorical force’ of princely violence in political foundation (Kahn, 1994). The question becomes, how, as a sign, political violence circulates in that esthetic space and how it operates as ‘a signifying practice’ (Winter, 2009) in the production of political subjectivities.

Political Aesthetics and Dramatic Violence

In Chapter 9 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1998, p. 34) begins his discussion with a general observation and speaks of two contradictory desires ‘found in every city’.

On the one hand, he writes, there is the desire of ‘the people [who] do not want to be dominated or oppressed by the nobles’, and, on the other, the desire of ‘the nobles [who] want to dominate and oppress the people’ (ibid.). Machiavelli’s political thought grapples with the paradox of political foundation amidst this irreconcilable antagonism constituted by two clashing and heterogeneous desires defining the social (Vatter, 2000; Lefort, 2012). In his commanding interpretation, Lefort (2012) registers this antagonism – what he terms as a ‘social abyss’ that cannot be sutured – central to Machiavelli’s political thinking.⁵ This abyss depicts the irreducible conflict between the desire to rule and not to be ruled.

What awaits the prince is a choice between these two antagonistic forces. Standing along the abyss and facing the impossibility of the reconciliation, the advice offered to the prince by Machiavelli is to align himself with the common people. This is because, as Machiavelli (1998, p. 35) explains, a ruler who receives the help of the nobles ‘will find it harder to maintain his power than one who becomes a ruler through the help of the people’. After all, it is easier to satisfy the people, whose ‘aims are more honorable than those of the nobles’ since their only want is ‘to avoid being oppressed’ (ibid.). In Lefort’s (2012, pp. 181–182) formulation, what is required is a politics ‘that is in keeping with the being of society, welcomes opposites, is rooted in time, arranged in such a way as to stand alongside the abyss on which society rests’. This is what a political founder like Borgia – a political figure, who exemplifies civil principality for Machiavelli (Kahn, 1994) – accomplishes.

If the prince is to found its political authority in the people, political power needs to transform the popular desire for ‘political freedom as no-rule’ (Vatter, 2000) by convincing them that the civil prince exists for their welfare and not merely to rule. To construct for itself the appearance of goodness, beneficence, it enters the path of simulation and dissimulation (Vatter, 2000, p. 117). Political authority, thus, found itself by producing ‘an image of a political space in which the people do not feel oppressed and the prince rules lawfully through the appearance of being good’ (Birmingham, 2013, p. 18). The alliance between the prince and people is constituted at the level of the image, of appearances, of representation, upon a shared ruse.⁶ Political foundation is, therefore, a theatrics of power. In this drama, violence, much more than being a ‘stupid’ – a dull and mute – instrument emerges as ‘a signifying practice ... a way of inscribing power relations in the symbolic order’ (Winter, 2009, p. 15). As a signifying practice, violence establishes the imaginary bond between a prince and his people, between political authority and its subjects. If the production of a shared ruse between the Prince and the people is one aspect of signifying violence in the service of the founding new orders, its other face is entangled with ‘foundational erasures’: the erasure of the preexisting right as well as the way of life that is given shape by that right (Cocks, 2014, p. 51). Since political founding does not occur on historical *tabula rasa*, the new authority – in order to be authoritative – has to clear away what existed before (ibid.). Circulating as a sign in the symbolic



order, violence works toward erasing from social memory not only ‘the order of things it materially erased’, but also the very fact that it erased it (*ibid.*, p. 52).

Borgia’s consolidation of his political power and De Orco’s assassination needs to be read in this light: as a theatrics of power within which violence operates as ‘a communicative strategy’ whose ‘strategic objective is to reach an audience beyond the victim, a third party that is not directly injured by the violent act’ (Winter, 2009, p. 122). In the first act – Borgia’s delegation of power to De Orco – representation is figured as ruse since the delegation actually conceals the fact of representation (Kahn, 1994). Put differently, in this act of dissimulation, Machiavelli points out ‘a strategic detachment of violence from political authority’ (Winter 2009, p. 112), which allows power to present itself as untainted by social antagonism and conflicts. In this way, it communicates to the people that the prince is the independent third term above and beyond society.

In the second act – the assassination of De Orco – Machiavelli stages political violence as a ‘spectacle’ – a ‘theatrical and cathartic’ moment (Kahn, 1994, p. 34), which works toward ‘pacifying the subjects’ by the display of violence – the killing and dismemberment of De Orco. Political violence is figured as a discursive moment that reaches out to the audience, speaking to their emotions and affects, to their hatred, their desire for vengeance. As Kahn (1994) writes, ‘it reestablishes justice not from the perspective of the prince but from that of the people’ (p. 34). To that extent, its ‘objective is not to eliminate a rival or coerce a resistant population, but to exploit the semiotic dimension of violence in the production of signs and subjectivities’ (Winter, 2009, pp. 121–122). Violence is figured as a cathartic moment that satisfies the audience, gives them pleasure. Interpreting the assassination of the governor as a sacrificial ritual, McCormick (2011, p. 7) observes that it is in keeping with Christian tenet that ‘one individual be sacrificed for the sake of everyone else; one person, Jesus Christ, must pay for everyone else’s sins’.⁷ Hence, the governor’s bloody execution ‘stupefies [the people] into accepting the appearance that the duke is less than fully complicit in the cruel policies that Remirro deployed to deliver good government’ (*ibid.*, p. 9). It purges the people’s hatred and pacifies them by establishing justice as ruse. The spectacular violence in Cesena is the way political power disavows its own violence through retribution and sacrificial killing of De Orco (Winter, 2009). Violence enhances Duke’s power not through coercion but through tapping into the performativity of violence.

Conclusion

In his dedicatory letter addressing Lorenzo de’ Medici, Machiavelli (1998, p. 3) writes: ‘And if Your Magnificence, from the heights of your exalted position, should sometimes deign to glance down towards these lowly places, you will see how much I am unjustly oppressed by great and cruel misfortune’. His observation constituted

the starting point for this discussion, where I argued that Machiavelli is ‘unjustly oppressed by great and cruel misfortune’ on the question of political violence by his interlocutors in the discipline of IR. As I tried to show, overwhelming focus on Machiavelli’s understanding of the relation between ethics and politics in IR comes at the price of engaging with the question of political violence with the presumption that violence for Machiavelli means nothing beyond being a mere instrument wielded by political actors to achieve certain ends. Drawing on Kahn and Winter’s exegesis of *The Prince*, I suggested that Machiavelli teaches us that political violence is more than a mute instrument, a blunt tool; that it is itself a signifying practice that needs to be read and deciphered in relation to the constitution of the political as an esthetic space. Violence as a sign circulates in that space, producing political subjectivities and enacting political orders. Further, by exposing the intimate link between politics and violence, Machiavelli offers us a way to attend to political violence beyond questions of legitimacy and legality by attending to foundational violence that establishes the law.

Engaging Machiavelli on the phenomenon of violence exceeds exegetical concerns. At stake, in this interpretive endeavor, is a critical engagement with our contemporary global predicament, where systemic and non-systemic forms of violence weave the world in a web of terror. Responses to ensuing forms of violence are abundant in global politics – whether it be in the form of humanitarian relief efforts or of suspension of civil liberties in the name of securing populations against spectacular forms of violence. All these responses are informed by particular understandings of what violence is, what it entails. What is at stake for critical inquiries is to probe into political violence beyond taken-for-granted formulations and problematize accounts of violence as something one just knows when one sees it (Bufacchi, 2011, p. 1).

Despite the half millennia that separate us from Machiavelli, what makes his discussion on violence so important is the challenge he poses to predominant understandings that inform both political practice at large and disciplinary discourse of IR in particular. He invites us to attend to the meaning of violence beyond what can be seen, beyond its articulation as a blunt tool to injure bodies and coerce subjects into submission. Rather, he suggests that we attend to the symbolic, productive aspects of political violence if we want to take stock of the stakes in political violence. It is a lesson that we need to pay heed to and explore further in depth.

About the Author

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Notes

- 1 The article draws on both Italian and English editions of *The Prince*: Machiavelli (1998) and Machiavelli (2008).
- 2 As Roe (2002, p. 11) notes, in some translations, including the first printed version of 1640 by Edward Dacres, the meaning of 'in dua pezzi' is formulated as decapitation and was translated accordingly. The ambivalence of what the two pieces might mean adds to the enigma faced by the witnesses/readers about what this gruesome act entailed, leaving the imagination to fill in the missing pieces.
- 3 It is worth noting that both the status of Borgia as being exemplary and Machiavelli's judgment of his actions is a controversial topic. As McCormick (2011) notes, while 'no less a luminary than Jean-Jacques Rousseau insisted that Machiavelli's use of Borgia was instructively ironic', other interpreters contend that, for Machiavelli, Borgia 'serve in anything less than an exemplary role' (pp. 1–2).
- 4 As Kelly (2013, p. 2) notes, the US National Defense Strategy document *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* quite perceptively underscores the productive nature of violence as it focuses on the 'visual and affective power of spectacular violent act'.
- 5 While taking as their premise the irresolvable antagonism constitutive of the political, Lefort (2012) and Vatter's (2000) interpretations of the 'social abyss' are not equivalent. For Lefort, this struggle is a class conflict pitting the people against the nobles; for Vatter, it stands for an irreconcilable antagonism between political foundation and political freedom understood as an event – that is, a disruption of constituted political form (Vatter, 2000, p. 13).
- 6 As Birmingham (2013, p. 7) explains, ruse is not 'a conscious intention to deceive', but an 'effective strategy' that 'must be understood against the background of Machiavelli's understanding of the political as an aesthetic space'. This understanding hinges on the ontological and epistemological assumptions, which dismantle the distinction between being (which is assumed to contain the truth) and appearance. In Machiavelli's formulation – what he refers to as 'the effectual truth of the matter' (*verità effettuale della cosa*) – truth is understood as 'an effect of disruptions, alterations, and discontinuities in a field of forces marked by the double desire of the people and the prince' (ibid.).
- 7 Martinez (2010, p. 209) also registers the cathartic aspect of the assassination as he writes: 'With its suggestion of sacrifice (the bloody knife and wooden butcher's wedge for splitting carcasses were left alongside the body parts), the scene seems the climax to a political sacra rappresentazione [religious drama] with a purgative effect that recalls the catharsis prescribed for tragedy in Aristotle's Poetics'.

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