A Discourse on Machiavelli's New Rome[1]

DAVORIN ŽAGAR

Faculty of Liberal Arts, Adolfo Ibáñez University, Santiago, Chile

Summary

In the first part of the paper the author presents the key theses of Vickie Sullivan's reading of Machiavelli. Sullivan argues that, in order to prevent corruption, Machiavelli innovatively reworks elements of Christian teaching for entirely temporal purposes and offers a specific, modern solution, 'new Rome', in the form of an irreligious, fearful republic which early and effectively punishes the ambitious few seeking to establish tyranny. In the internal realm of the city, the Florentine reduces class desires of the plebs and the greats under the common goal of acquisition. A bellicose, tumultuous republic satisfies the desires of all the social actors, resulting in a lasting political order. In the second part the author critically engages with Sullivan's interpretation, drawing on Claude Lefort's interpretation of Machiavelli. Surprisingly, Lefort's groundbreaking work on Machiavelli has been absent in Straussian readings of the Florentine. By highlighting the authentically democratic nature of Machiavelli's project, in contrast with Sullivan's reading, an entirely different 'new Rome' arises on the horizon.

Keywords: Christianity, Corruption, Lefort, Machiavelli, Sullivan, Tyranny

Introduction

Machiavelli's new Rome is a term used by Vickie Sullivan in her well-known book *Machiavelli's Three Romes*: *Religion, Human Liberty, and Politics Reformed*[2] to describe the Florentine's innovative solution to 'the problem of a divided city' (*cf.*

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[1] I am grateful to Professor Vickie Sullivan who kindly invited and generously received me as a Fulbright visiting scholar at Tufts University, Department of Political Science, in 2017/2018. I dedicate this paper to our diligent group of students in the seminar *The Political Thought of Machiavelli*, held during the spring semester of 2018.

[2] The book was first published in 1996, as a reworked doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Joseph Cropsey at the University of Chicago, and was republished in 2020.

Sullivan, 1996, pp. 124, 146). The subject of this paper is Sullivan's skillful textual interpretation of *The Prince* and, particularly, *Discourses*. Her careful, subtle analysis of Machiavelli's texts stands out as one of the most original and provocative readings in the secondary literature on the Florentine. In the first part of this paper, I examine Sullivan's interpretation of Machiavelli's thought by closely following and deciphering the twists and turns of her discourse. Her reading is grounded on Leo Strauss' *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958). Straussian elements are originally transformed, best exemplified in her conceptualization of Machiavelli's 'new Rome' as an irreligious, fearful republic derived from a wholly temporal interpretation of Christianity. According to Sullivan, Machiavelli's 'new Rome' innovatively appropriates harsh and cruel methods of Christian teaching to confront Christianity itself, since Machiavelli sees Christianity as a type of tyrannical rule over men. Therefore, Sullivan argues that the Florentine strategically employs Christianity for entirely secular purposes, to confront tyrannical aspirations of the particularly ambitious few.

In the second part of the paper, I provide a critical consideration of Sullivan's conceptualization of 'new Rome' which is grounded upon the premise of essential similarity between the greats *and* the plebs, both classes being driven by the desire for acquisition. In a dialogue with Claude Lefort (2012), I elaborate an alternative understanding of class conflict in Machiavelli which enables reimagining the Florentine's 'new Rome' in an authentically democratic way. Lefort insists on the fundamental difference in desires that motivate the actions of the greats and the plebs. This stands in sharp contrast to Sullivan's position (see especially subsection 1.4) and sheds another light on Machiavelli's *entire* project. I maintain that Sullivan's fundamental discovery of 'new Rome' can be properly evaluated and critically confronted only when we first consider the essential nature/orientation of Machiavelli's entire political project. This squarely places us within a fundamental dispute found in the secondary literature between aristocratic and democratic (anti-elitist) readings of Machiavelli, especially when we choose to focus on the different conceptualizations of the social conflict in Machiavelli. Such an approach is important for two reasons. First, the Lefortian way to approach class conflict in Machiavelli presents an advantageous site from which to put some pressure on Sullivan's entire framework of interpretation (subsections 1.1-1.7), that is to ultimately problematize and critically assess the function of religion in the Florentine's thought. Second, the paper establishes a surprisingly missing but necessary dialog between two mutually opposed, but, at the same time, substantially interrelated camps: Straussian (aristocratic and conservative) and Lefortian (popular and democratic).

1. Sullivan's Interpretation of Machiavelli

Sullivan's reading of Machiavelli can best be grasped as a critical dialogue with Strauss' *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958). Strauss' detailed and exacting interpretation, based on the difference between exoteric and esoteric teachings, resulted in the depiction of the Florentine as the first modern philosopher, whose texts should be read as a twofold covert attack on the great traditions of classical political philosophy and Christianity. The problem of Christianity and, more generally, Machiavelli's treatment of religion stand at the core of Sullivan's analysis. The centrality of the problem of Christianity in Machiavelli becomes obvious already at the beginning of *Discourses* where the weakness of the modern world is linked with the 'present religion' that has led the world to 'ambitious idleness' (D, I. Preface: 6).[3]

1.1. The Florentine's Twofold Critique of Christianity

Sullivan's analysis of Machiavelli's critique of Christianity is carefully designed. Our interpreter first examines the Florentine's attack on the Church as an institution, especially its clergy (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 29-35). At the beginning of *Discourses* we discover that the bad customs of the churchmen are the main source of corruption in Italy (D, I. 12: 38). The Florentine proceeds with his harsh attack on the harmful temporal influence of the Church by accusing it of preventing Italy's unification (*ibid.*). In order to hold its 'temporal empire' (*ibid.*), which it gained in the context of confrontation between Italian city-states and the Holy Roman Empire (*cf.* Skinner, 1978, pp. 3-22), unarmed priests of the Church necessarily rely on mercenary and foreign arms which are the main cause of the ruin and disgrace of Italy (P, 12: 49, 53). The Church cannot have a leading role in the project of unification of Italy, since the Church *is* the source of Italian ills (P, 12: 52): its lack of arms makes Italy dependent on foreign powers (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 19-20, 27-29; *cf.* P, 12-13). In D, I. 55: 111, under the label of *gentlemen*, Machiavelli harshly criticizes the Church nobility (*ibid.*, pp. 30, 125, 129). These *gentlemen* live *idly* from their possessions and represent a formidable danger when they oppressively command their subjects from 'castles'; such was, as Machiavelli emphasizes, the case of the 'town of Rome'.

Once the reader is convinced on Machiavelli's critique of the Church, Sullivan makes a further, more subversive step and discusses Machiavelli's criticism of

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[3] References to Machiavelli's works are presented as follows: first the title of the work is signified (by a capital letter), followed by the book number (if there are several books in one work), then the chapter number, and finally, after the colon, the page number. In case the work consists of only one book (as in *The Prince*) the way of quoting is the same, but naturally without labelling the number of the book. I have used the University of Chicago Press editions of *The Prince* (1998) and *Discourses on Livy* (1998) in Mansfield's and Tarcov's translation for the latter, and in Mansfield's for the former.

Christian theology. Christianity as a religious doctrine produces devastating political effects by making the world a brutal place to live in. Highest demands of morality as standards for political action often lead to extreme cruelty. For instance, in P, 17 the reader is invited to recognize that an insistence on mercifulness, which can be translated into Christian terms of love and charity, paradoxically, most often results in much greater cruelties than cruelty that is 'well-used' (*cf.* P, 8: 37-38). As exemplified by Borgia's actions in Romagna (P, 7), such a well-used cruelty can produce merciful results (Sullivan, 1996, p. 47).[4] These early signs already clearly indicate that Machiavelli rejects morality as understood in Christian (or classical) terms.

Furthermore, the Florentine ascribes a disastrous undermining of the strength of the world to Christian teachings. Christians (moderns) proclaim the idea of primacy of the eternal city in respect to the earthly one. In order to gain promised heavenly rewards in the form of salvation of the soul and eternal glory, Christians are obliged to reject the ancient way of life and to reject earthly glory (*ibid.*, pp. 37, 71). According to Sullivan's reading, Christian religion should be approached as a type of rule over men. Christ is a type of prince, who imposes a particular form of modern, moral, Christian education (*cf.* Sullivan, 2018, p. 276). 'Modern education' has made the world a weak place to live in, since in opposition to the Ancients and in accordance with the proclaimed goal of entering the heavens, it gives advantage to 'humble and contemplative' over active and strong men (D, II. 2: 131; *cf.* D, III. 27: 275). Following the example of Christ who suffered and died for the sake of humanity, Christians reinterpret humility as a virtue, while still remaining proud in renouncing their arms due to God's protection (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 50, 178). The Christian unworldly way of life leads citizens to disregard their earthly fatherland which completely delivers them to the rule of wicked men (priests), to whom they remain obliged (D, III. 1: 212; *cf.* D, II. 2: 131). The priests rule over their flock by

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[4] However, Borgia made an error in judgment by allowing the election of cardinal della Rovere to the papacy (Julius II), which resulted in his defeat (P, 7: 33). At this point we are told that Cesare made such a bad judgment because of wrongly believing that 'the new benefits will make old injuries be forgotten'. In these words, Sullivan finds an exemplification of Christian doctrine of forgiveness bringing disastrous political consequences (1996, p. 42). Wicked Borgia did not know how to be entirely wicked (*cf.* D, I. 27). Borgia is discredited by Machiavelli (*ibid.*, p. 24) because he was not able to break with the Christian doctrine altogether (*ibid.*, p. 41). Furthermore, in P, 11: 46 our author explicitly states that Borgia was the pope's instrument and therefore Sullivan interprets Machiavelli as showing that Cesare's deeds ultimately benefitted the Church (*ibid.*, p. 22). If Borgia was to be successful in the attempt to found a wholly new state in central Italy, he had to break dependency on the papacy in a most radical way: 'He [*Borgia*] could have kept *anyone* from being pope' (P, 7: 33). For a subversive reading of Borgia's unfulfilled potential directed against his notorious father and the College of Cardinals, see Scott & Sullivan (1994).

imposing fear of eternal damnation and by preaching that believers should leave the punishment to God. However, the wicked priests themselves, paradoxically, do not believe at all in what they preach (*ibid.*), using the Christian teaching to secure their own tyrannical rule (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 30-31; 2012, p. 52).

1.2. From the Tyranny of Caesar to the Tyranny of Christ(ianity)

Christianity is a type of tyrannical rule over human beings (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 38, 49, 53, 75, 157). It draws its strength from the weakness of the world that it has fostered, thereby securing its domination. In contrast to the tyranny of Christianity,[5] the Florentine presents himself as a defender of human liberty and dignity (*ibid.*, pp. 38, 49, 53, 58). Pernicious political consequences of the tyranny of Christian Rome bring Sullivan to a central question of her overall interpretation: how did the weak Christians manage to subvert strong, pagan Rome (*ibid.*, pp. 55, 99)? As a result of formulating the problem which undergirds Machiavelli's political thought in terms of such a question, all of a sudden Christianity looks significantly stronger than it initially seemed, and *vice versa*, in one and the same movement, pagan Rome necessarily seems weaker. In order to break through towards Machiavelli's solution – 'new Rome', one is invited to understand the fundamental link between pagan and Christian Rome. Sullivan argues that Christianity emerged out of pagan Rome, and hence a simple return to the Ancients is neither possible nor desirable.[6]

The figure of Caesar provides the link between Christian and pagan Rome. According to Machiavelli, Caesar was more than 'the first tyrant in Rome': he was such a tyrant 'that never again was that city free' (D, I. 37: 80), meaning that the city is still not free (Sullivan, 2018, p. 278). Caesar's ascendancy meant the dissolution of the Roman republic and the establishment of the empire. His command was prolonged and others ruled in his name (D, I. 10: 32). Sullivan argues that Caesar's tyranny was successfully continued by Christ himself, who improves on the methods of his great predecessor (1996, pp. 62, 100). Chapter D, I. 33 contains the key for linking Christ and Caesar.[7] At this decisive point, Machiavelli discusses the

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[5] Behind Machiavelli's 'virtuous tyrant' in D, II. 2: 130, who expands by arms, for his own utility, such that 'he alone' profits from acquisitions, Sullivan discerns the Christian God. The belief in the Christian God leads to a new type of war led for the glory of God (1996, pp. 53-55).

[6] In D, II. 2 Machiavelli explicitly states that 'the Roman empire, with its arms and its greatness, eliminated all republics and all civil ways of life' (D, II. 2: 132). Therefore, the Florentine's initial appeal to the Ancients (D, I. Preface) is only provisional, since the Ancients *are* the cause of the weakness of Christian states in Modernity (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 58, 71, 80, 99).

[7] Although Machiavelli avoids mentioning explicitly the example of Christ in the framework of D, I. 33, Sullivan argues that Christ fits perfectly in Machiavelli's description in the chapter. Numbers should not be disregarded: Christ was 33 years old when he was crucified (Sullivan, 2018, p. 279).

problem of a virtuous youth, who addresses the passions of the people as a whole, by 'way of love'. Through promises of private benefits such an ambitious individual acquires adherents who *adore* him (*cf.* D, I. 5: 18), 'leading to tyranny' (D, I. 33; *cf.* D, I. 46). Corruption of society is caused by inequality which sets in when an individual rises above other leading men. Such (usually rich) individuals are able to gather many partisans, which eventually leads them to political preeminence (D, I. 17, D, I. 34, D, 1. 55; *cf.* D, III. 28). They seize extraordinary authority by private modes and favors which represents a threat to the life and liberty of the republic (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 58, 85-86; 2004, pp. 58-61). Especially dangerous are the ambitious few (demagogues), since they draw on the modes of their predecessors and, in addition, invent new effective means to seduce the credulous (people), in order to establish tyranny.

1.3. Defects of Ancient Rome

We now turn to Sullivan's presentation of Machiavelli's assessment of the deficiencies of ancient Rome that led to modern weakness. In order for a republic to endure, it is essential that it timely and effectively deals with potential tyrants.[8] However, the Roman constitution did not contain the required mechanisms to prevent corruption and to appropriately punish transgressors (*cf.* D, I. 31, D, III, 1: 211). Through gradual corruption of the citizens, the Roman order, especially the procedures regarding elections and proposing of laws, eventually became decisively deficient (D, I. 18: 50). The republic failed to invent new ways to thwart the newly emboldened ambitious and as a result, a free way of life was subverted, which subsequently opened the path to the tyranny of Christianity.

In D, I. 37 Machiavelli describes contentions over the Agrarian law sparked by the Gracchi brothers which gradually led to the collapse of a free way of life under Caesar. This law had two principal parts. It proscribed a maximum amount of land which could be possessed by a single individual, and it demanded that the fields taken from the enemy be divided equally between the Roman people as a whole (*ibid.*). Sullivan (1996, pp. 67, 70) notes that the Gracchi brothers successfully 'aroused' the plebs' desires and appetites for possession of the lands which were very distant from their eyes (D, I. 37: 79). Therefore, behind the dominant representation of the brothers as defenders of the popular cause, our interpreter discerns a duet of ambitious individuals who successfully appeal to the masses through the promise of private benefits in the form of 'the unseen lands' (*ibid.*), which enables them to gain partisans. The brothers sow the germ of corruption eventually leading

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[8] In this context see the instructive examples of uncorrupted republic proceedings in relation to Spurius Maelius (D, III. 28), Spurius Casius and especially Manlius Capitolinus (both discussed in D, III. 8).

to Caesar's tyranny. Bloody conflicts occurred as the result of the Gracchi's actions. Two factions were soon created, one popular lead by Marius, and the other representing nobles in the figure of Sulla (*ibid.*). Later, Caesar revived these conflicts. He appealed to the people, by promising them private benefits (D, I. 33) in the context of the late, wholly corrupted republic (D, I. 17: 48, D, I. 10: 33). In such a conjuncture, Brutus' murder of Caesar only made things worse (D, I. 29: 66), since it transformed Caesar into a martyr, which prolonged his rule after his death (D, I. 10: 32; *cf.* Sullivan, 1996, pp. 74, 164).

Christ represents an example of another ambitious individual who successfully established tyranny. He imposed his political rule, a modern tyranny that endures in Machiavelli's time, by a twofold strategy of innovation and imitation. On the one hand, he improved upon the modes of his predecessor by addressing the masses with the promise of acquisition of greater private rewards than the ones of Caesar's earthly city. He promised transcendent goods which would secure the salvation of believers in the form of eternal life. In turn he became loved and adored like a God (*ibid.*, pp. 71, 75-76, 79, 101, 104). On the other hand, to such an innovation he added the already existing tool of Caesar's martyrdom.[9]

The figure of Christ establishes the link between internal and external causes of corruption. The latter are associated with the acquisitive foreign policy and corresponding influences of bad foreign customs (*ibid.*, pp. 96-101), perhaps best illustrated by the Roman capture of Capua discussed in D, II. 19-20. Sullivan argues that the case of Capua points to Jerusalem. The conquest of Capua, 'a city full of delights', diverted the charmed spirits of Roman soldiers away from the memory of their fatherland (D, II. 19: 175). Furthermore, in D, II. 20: 176, we find out that the soldiers took delight and forgot the fatherland as a result of 'rooting in *idleness*'. Such distracted soldiers decided to conspire against the fatherland and take Capua for themselves (*ibid.*). As our interpreter demonstrates on numerous occasions, Machiavelli purposely infuses the whole of Livy's *Histories* with images or meanings that remind the reader of Christianity because, in contrast to Livy (59 BC – 17 AD), he addresses the specifically modern problem of Christianity, unknown to his favorite Roman historian. By infusing his texts with Christian terms, he implies that the Roman republic already contained elements which enabled Christian Rome to arise (Sullivan, 1996, p. 147). Unlike the soldiers in the case of Capua, Jerusalem has conspired successfully. Machiavelli explicates that the conquered often avenge themselves without blood, by introducing bad customs (D, II. 19: 175). Christianity

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[9] In the continuous improvements on the part of the ambitious few, the reader is invited to recognize a pattern that delineates the contours of another potential problem: that of a new tyrant, a sort of super-Christ (*ibid.*, pp. 101, 148, 171). Machiavelli intends to prevent such a scenario.

gradually managed to conquer the Romans through 'the arts of peace' and to occupy Rome itself (*ibid.*, pp. 98-99).[10]

1.4. *The Acquisitive Nature of the Conflict Between the Greats and the Plebeians*

Due to defective internal orders, external expansion of Rome led to the establishment of the tyranny of Christianity. However, Machiavelli insists on the advantages of the model of the acquisitive Roman republic, which includes the plebs in the government and welcomes foreigners, over the model of quiet republics exemplified in the figures of Sparta and Venice which are not able to expand successfully and tend to exclude the plebs from the government (D, I. 6; *cf.* D, II. 3). Our author defends the Roman model arguing that the pursuit of empire is not a question of choice, but a supreme demand of politics (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 63-66), since it is dictated by necessity (D, I. 6: 23; Sullivan, 1996, p. 64; 2004, pp. 34-38). As part of the same line of thought, Machiavelli finds a novel theory of desire which drives the life of the city. He claims that the greats fear losing what they possess, which transforms their desire to maintain/keep into a desire for acquisition (D, I. 5: 19). On such a basis, Sullivan finds a 'fundamental similarity' between the greats and the plebeians (1996, p. 68; *cf.* P, 3: 14, D, I. 37 beginning, D, II. Preface: 125). The two classes in Machiavelli represent two forms of acquisition.[11] Sullivan argues that Machiavelli's representation of Rome is one in which the selfish passions

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[10] In D, I. 13: 40, while discussing how the Romans and, more particularly, the patricians made use of religion, Machiavelli describes the incident of seizing the Capitol by 'a multitude of slaves and exiles', alluding to the later Christian conquest (Sullivan, 1996, p. 77). *Cf.* D, I. 7: 25 where Machiavelli apparently hints at Christ in talking about the danger of an ambitious man who transcends 'beyond a civil way of life' (Sullivan, 1996, p. 79).

[11] According to Sullivan, the two classes are generally much more similar than in Machiavelli's initial presentation in the chapters D, I. 4-5 and P, 9, where it seems that the greats desire to acquire honor and glory through oppression, and the plebs desire to acquire freedom from such oppression. However, the reader is soon invited to understand that not all of the greats desire political honor/command/domination. *Cf.* D, I. 16: 46, where Machiavelli states that in 'all republics (...) never do even forty or fifty citizens reach the ranks of command'. The majority of the greats in fact seeks to gain property. On the other side, the plebs' endless desire towards freedom can in fact be satisfied by securing a certain amount of property which guarantees security and preservation (D, I. 16: 46; Sullivan, 2004, pp. 47-49). This point is best manifested in their occasional refusal to go to war (*cf.* as early as chapter D, I. 4: 17), because they suspect that war is the result of pure ambition of the greats (D, I. 39: 84). However, the greats are able to successfully manipulate/deceive the plebs into fighting through different kinds of fraud (see D, I. 13, D, I. 47-48). The greats exploit the gullibility of the plebs and successfully arouse in them a desire for property (Sullivan, 2004, p. 55).

of the people as a whole[12] are unleashed and directed towards acquisition of property through expansive, aggressive foreign politics (1996, pp. 83, 87).[13] On such a premise, Machiavelli celebrates the conflictual model of the Roman republic, characterized by 'the disunion of the plebs and the Roman Senate' (D, I. 4: 16; Sullivan, 1996, pp. 63, 65). The tumultuous republic and its inner contentions that derive from the participation of the plebs in the government are a price to be paid for the efficient confrontation with the external necessity. The plebs provide a strong and numerous army and make external expansion possible (*cf.* D, II. 3). After all, it was the armed plebs who enabled the Romans to conquer the world (D, III. 36: 292). It might seem that the glorious Roman republic was enslaved early precisely due to the conflicts between the greats and the plebeians (D, I. 37: 78-79). Still, Machiavelli defends tumults (*ibid.*, p. 80). The deep cause for the subversion of free life in Rome was the inability of the tumultuous republic to prevent internal corruption and thereby significantly extend its life (Sullivan, 1996, p. 66; 2004, p. 37, n. 6) and prevent the establishment of the rule of one. If the desire of the ambitious few for preeminence is regulated, then the desire for property of the majority can produce a strong and lasting republic.

1.5. From the Critique of Pagan Religion to the Critique of Religion as Such

At this point our interpreter invites us to recognize yet another element in the long chain of causation leading to the destruction of the Roman republic and the eventual imposition of modern Christian tyranny in Rome: pagan religion as such. Contrary to mainstream interpretations, Sullivan's unique, most careful reading of the section on religion in *Discourses* (D, I. 11-15) demonstrates that pagan usage of reli-

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[12] For Sullivan's sharp critique of approaching Machiavelli from the perspective of Aristotelian classical republicanism à la Pocock, see Sullivan (1992). In contrast to Pocock, she claims that, in the eyes of Machiavelli, acting upon private, selfish passions results in health and greatness of the republic.

[13] Manipulation of the plebs by the greats is manifested in the arousal of the plebs' desire for property, who originally seek security. Machiavelli wholeheartedly approves of and, moreover, recommends such a manipulation (Sullivan, 2004, pp. 51-55) which is presented as a *condition sine qua non*, because *war* is the ultimate end of politics. However, instrumentalization of the plebs for the purpose of war creates an opportunity for a *durable* and strong republic. In fact, a peaceful republic would deliver the plebs entirely to the unbearable oppression by the greats (Sullivan, 1996, p. 65; 2004, pp. 36-37). In D, I. 6: 23 Machiavelli adds a second argument in defense of an expansive republic: without war idleness would become a danger for a quiet city, because in this case a republic would become too divided. War is conducive to management of domestic conflict because an acquisitive republic creates a space for the plebs, at least to a certain degree, and through their participation in the government it defends them against unrestrained oppression by the greats and, at the same time, enables them to contribute to the greatness of the republic (Sullivan, 2004, p. 56, 78; *cf.* D, I. 37: 80).

gion as a political tool of patricians to gain popular support (see especially D, I. 14) was not, in Machiavelli's eyes, politically useful at all. Moreover, religious appeals were altogether 'inconvenient and unnecessary', and, therefore, politically harmful (1996, pp. 111, 114).[14] Numa, the celebrated founder of the Roman religion, who is initially placed above Romulus as Rome's great benefactor (D, I. 11),[15] is finally disqualified in chapters D, I. 19 and D, I. 21 as a model for imitation. Because of his insistence on the value of instrumental appeal to the divine, Numa neglected the importance of arming his subjects, which made him wholly dependent on fortune (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 116-117).[16]

Moreover, Sullivan argues that Machiavelli realized that religious appeals *as such* are dangerous political instruments. While patricians used religion to manipulate the plebs for the purposes of the martial republic's acquisition and glory, the same instrument of religion was later used by the early leaders of Christianity to undermine that very end. Christianity cleverly introduced the difference between the earthly and heavenly fatherland (*ibid.*, p. 75) and it directed its followers entirely towards the latter. Instead of military quests, Christianity preached 'ambitious idleness' which promised final victory of the weak and poor over the patricians in the next world, while at the same time, paradoxically, a new oppression appeared in the form of clergy as a new type of (tyrannical) nobility (*ibid.*, pp. 79, 115-116, 178; *cf.* D, I. 40: 88).

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[14] Particularly illuminating is the proposed reading of Terentilian law (1996, p. 111-115) first discussed in D, I. 13, where religious manipulation by the patricians was intended to restrain the desire of the plebs who requested to limit the power of the consuls. However, such a fraud was exposed by the tribunes. A different, strictly political remedy was needed to quiet the plebs and to prevent them from holding consular office. In D, I. 39: 96-97 we find out that although eventually 'the consular name was eliminated' and 'tribunes with consular power' were created, still members of the plebs were never elected to consular positions due to clever, non-religious manipulations by the patricians (*cf.* D, I. 47-48). For the disastrous effects on the use of (pagan) religion as a way of inspiring confidence in battle, see the example of Samnites in D, I. 15 and compare with the conduct of the Romans who won by relying only on their human virtue.

[15] The virtue of Sullivan's reading is to demonstrate that Machiavelli is questioning Numa immediately following his introduction in chapter D, I. 11. In this chapter we find that, as a result of Numa's introduction of religion in Rome, the fear of breaking the oaths was greater than the fear of breaking the laws. Sullivan questions the validity of such claims which highlight advantages of the 'arts of peace' and the fear of God, since 'admired' predominance of religion over politics overlaps completely with *the* (modern) problem which Machiavelli seeks to solve (1996, pp. 105-107).

[16] Sullivan claims that, in opposition to Livy's *Histories*, Machiavelli's narration of the beginnings of Rome (*cf.* D, I. 9, D, I. 11) entirely omits religion and appeals to the divine which demonstrates the redundancy and dangers of religious appeals as such (1996, pp. 113-114).

1.6. Machiavelli's Solution for the Problem of Internal Corruption

On the basis of the analysis of the origins of corruption in modern Christian republics of his day, which brought him to criticize the weaknesses of ancient Rome itself, Machiavelli offers an original solution for the problem of corruption, 'new Rome', which Sullivan finds in the esoteric part of his teaching.[17] On the premise of the analyzed dangers of religion as such, Machiavelli proposes a modern solution in the form of an *irreligious* state that will thwart the dangers of corruption and crush the modern tyranny of Christianity. However, he finds the harshest and cruelest elements of Christianity quite appealing and seeks to incorporate them into his own novel solution, under the condition that such beneficial ingredients are employed for purely and exclusively temporal purposes (*cf.* Mansfield, 1989, pp. 121-149). Christian methods are desirable and effective when they are rendered political and as such applied to a city in order to strengthen the people and secure a long life of the earthly, human republic (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 158-162, 166, 170).[18] Paradoxically, in order to preclude tyranny, Machiavelli's new Rome uses tyrannical methods of the Christian God.[19]

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[17] Sullivan highlights Machiavelli's usage of Livy. In this context, she illustrates that the Florentine consciously perverts Livy's depiction of antiquity (1996, pp. 138, 153). He employs his favorite Roman historian for his own purposes, to demonstrate that defects of ancient Rome were at the origin of Christianity's rise in Rome. At the same time, he provides his readers the building blocks for a newly improved Rome (*ibid.*, p. 137). Machiavelli uses for his own purposes the Bible as well. For instance, in order to teach his own lesson of the need to rely on one's *own arms*, in opposition to dependence on the divine, while recounting the well-known Biblical story of David and Goliath, the Florentine purposely makes a change in the original Biblical narrative by placing a knife in the hand of David (P, 13: 56; Sullivan, 1996, p. 145; Mansfield, 1996, p. 188). In Sullivan's eyes, Machiavelli self-consciously uses elements of the Christian doctrine for his own new, secular Rome.

[18] One finds a certain degree of similarity between God's sacrifice of his own son intended to ensure the possibility of eternal life and Machiavelli's celebration of Brutus, who executed and thereby sacrificed his own sons (D, I. 16, D, III. 3). However, Brutus' sacrifice was decisively different, because it was directed towards 'political eternity' of the human republic (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 156, 170).

[19] In D, I, 25 Machiavelli explicitly announces that in the next chapter he will discuss tyranny. Strauss noticed an obvious blunder in chapter D, I. 26, since Machiavelli puts into David's mouth words which in fact Mary says referring to God's own actions (Luke, I. 53). Thereby, Machiavelli blasphemously refers to God as a tyrant (Strauss, 1958, p. 49). In the continuation, the Florentine refers to the modes proposed in the body of the chapter and describes them as 'very cruel and enemies to every way of life' (D, I. 26: 61). According to Sullivan, though, Machiavelli at the same time presents such modes as a political solution for a new prince, if he employs them for strictly temporal, rather than spiritual purposes (Sullivan, 1996, p. 159). In contrast to Strauss, Sullivan suggests and demonstrates that we should recognize the *importance* of the New Testament for Machiavelli's overall teaching (*cf.* Sullivan, 2018, p. 279).

Sullivan argues that Machiavelli transforms the Christian doctrine of original sin for the purposes of an earthly application, in the form of entirely human punishments which maintain a vigorous republic (*ibid.*, p. 162).[20] Fear instilled by human beings themselves can entirely replace religious, divine fear and produce beneficial political effects. 'Political eternity' is to be achieved by constantly pulling back the republic towards its beginnings, by renewing terror and fear through implementation of harsh and severe laws, including memorable executions 'directed against the ambition and the insolence of men' (D, III. 1: 210-211; *cf.* Sullivan, 1996, pp. 155, 164, 175). Such violent modes and actions, when properly and timely used, ensure obedience to the laws of the republic and deserve to be excused since they secure the health of the republic (*cf.* D, I. 9; Sullivan, 1996, pp. 127, 157).[21] In D, III. 22: 266 Machiavelli explicitly links harsh punishments to the benefits of revitalization of the state: a constant return of the republic towards its beginnings promises a 'perpetual republic' that represents a direct challenge to eternity propagated by Christianity (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 154-155, 175).

In the same chapter Machiavelli expresses preference for a stern type of captains and their cruel modes of proceeding which inspire fear, best exemplified in the figure of Manlius Torquatus,[22] over kind and humane captains akin to Valerius Corvinus who seek to inspire love (*cf.* D, III. 19-22). This latter type of captain can gain partisans who adore him, and through the promise of private benefits prepare 'the way to tyranny', best exemplified in the case of Jesus Christ (D, III. 22: 268; *cf.* D, I. 33, D, III. 24 end, D, III. 28 beginning). On the other hand, the willingness to apply severe and spectacular punishments and executions, which is characteristic of the

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[20] Our interpreter considers Machiavelli's praise of extremely harsh methods of punishment of the multitude that occurs in D, III. 49: 309 as the Florentine's positive evaluation of the Christian doctrine of original sin. Machiavelli approves punishing at random one out of every ten individuals when a multitude has 'sinned', in order to induce the greatest fear. According to the original doctrine of sin, all Christians are considered to be in the state of sin, hence corrupted, but not all of them will be punished (eternally damned), due to God's grace. Fear becomes productive, since it curbs and restrains the people. Similarly to the claim that all men are guilty, Machiavelli claims that 'all men are bad' (D, I. 3: 15) and that they can be made good through harsh laws which cause fear (*cf.* Sullivan, 2018, p. 277).

[21] Machiavelli explicitly recommends executions every ten years so as to secure the health of the republic and to prevent that the memory of these 'excessive and noble executions' evaporates from the minds of the people, allowing thereby corruption to creep in, as it ultimately happened to Rome itself (D, III. 1: 210-211). In contrast to Livy's *Histories*, the Florentine purposely exaggerates the cases of executions in Rome (D, III. 1) in order to highlight timely, harsh punishments as the solution for his own Rome (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 157, 169). Late action when dealing with corruption can be fatal (*cf.* D, I. 33: 73).

[22] For Manlius' 'praiseworthy' actions, see D, II. 16, D, III. 22 and D, III. 34: 288.

Manlian type of captain, makes it impossible for him to attract 'partisans', and for the ambitious individual under that captain to err with impunity (Sullivan, 2004, pp. 77-78). The Florentine exalts Manlius 'in such an extreme fashion' (*ibid.*, p. 88) that the latter becomes an exemplary figure, his hero *par excellence* (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 153, 156; 2004, p. 74), because he was 'always harsh to everyone', 'loving only the common good' (D, III. 22: 267).[23]

Furthermore, in Machiavelli's eyes, ingratitude towards leading men (D, I. 28-32) should not be considered a vice, since it is necessary for the longevity and strength of the republic (Sullivan, 2004, pp. 66-68). In Machiavelli's judgment, even heroic captains such as Scipio are rightly suspected of corruption (D, I. 29: 66-67). Permanent suspicion of the captains in combination with fear of potential harsh punishments discourages potential tyrannical ambitions of leaders and makes them 'good'. In a mixed republic, 'infinite most virtuous princes' (D, I. 20: 54), driven by the thirst for glory, constantly guard one another (D, I. 30: 68; *cf.* Sullivan, 1996, pp. 167, 170).[24] In one and the same movement, such a mixed republic enables greatest territorial expansion (D, I. 20: 54) and precludes rule by one. Consequently, a conquering republic armed with mechanisms against corruption gains advantage over principalities (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 160-161; *cf.* D, I. 58: 118).

1.7. Machiavelli's Prophecy

In the figure of Machiavelli Sullivan discerns 'a new type of ruler': as the Prince of Fear and War, Machiavelli overcomes Jesus as the Prince of Peace (*ibid.*, p. 172). In order to combat the tyranny of Christianity, Machiavelli seeks to innovatively combine the ancient and the modern knowledge (*cf.* D, I. Preface; P, Preface) in such a way as to come up with a fundamental correction of the Ancients in the form of 'new Rome'. As the initiator of the new epoch,[25] a new Romulus, Machiavelli seeks to gain followers who will continue his project (*cf.* prefaces of D, I and D, II) of 're-ordering Rome' (D, I. 10: 33). Therefore, he appeals to the people (Sullivan, 1996,

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[23] In D, I. 11: 35 we find out that fear derived from religion can be replaced by fear of a prince in a monarchy. Since Machiavelli speaks about princes in a republic (e.g., D, I. 12, D, I. 20), Sullivan concludes that these harsh princes can sustain an irreligious republic (1996, p. 161).

[24] According to Sullivan, in D, I. 2 Machiavelli offers a solution for the Polybian 'natural' cycle of regimes in the *specific* form of a mixed regime: a *conquering* state, which will unleash and channel the passions of citizens towards foreign acquisition. In such a state composed of elements of principality, aristocracy and popular government, 'one guards the other' (D, I. 2: 13) and as a result curbs the unconstrained ambition of 'dissolute sons' (Sullivan, 1996, p. 94), which was the cause of regime change in the first place (D, I. 2: 11-12).

[25] For the argumentation, see Sullivan's astute interpretation of D, II. 5 (1996, pp. 132-138; 2000, pp. 14-15).

p. 130) and seeks to gain the support of the many (*cf.* D, I. 58) in order to multiply his own glory (*cf.* D, I. 9, D, I. 10: 33; Sullivan, 1996, pp. 128, 139, 159). Paradoxically, his project aimed at subversion of Christianity is inspired by Christ's own method of conquest by 'peaceful means' (*ibid.*, pp. 54, 142), through propaganda and fraud (*cf.* P, 18, D, II. 13, D, III. 48; Strauss, 1958, pp. 35-36, 41-42, 297). However, in contrast to the tyranny of Christianity, Machiavelli is honestly concerned with defending human liberty and dignity.[26] The Florentine perceives himself as a new ruler, an anti-super-Christ who prevents tyranny. Instead of securing private benefits for his numerous adherents, he rather promises 'public greatness of a city' (Sullivan, 1996, p. 180). His promise of a perpetual republic, however, cannot be fulfilled. The decay is inevitable: 'Since all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall' (D, I. 6: 23).[27] Machiavelli's prophecy of an immortal republic stands in fact at the origin of a new world consisting of multiple expansive, aggressive military republics which strive for predominance over each other, resulting in eventual decay of a number of such republics (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 175-176).

2. Discourse on Machiavelli's New Rome: Lefort *vs*. Sullivan

The key innovation of Sullivan's interpretation of Machiavelli is contained in the critique of religion as such, which enables her to delineate contours of Machiavelli's novel solution to the problem of corruption: 'new Rome'. However, there are some parts of Machiavelli's text which do not receive enough emphasis in Sullivan's reading. By highlighting such places, it is possible to open another perspective on Machiavelli's 'new Rome'. Rather than directly confronting the challenge of the 'irreligious republic' as Machiavelli's preferred solution for the problem of internal corruption, I propose a more indirect route to interrogate Sullivan's position. In this part of the paper my intention is to critically engage with Sullivan's reading primarily through the interpretative lenses of Claude Lefort's groundbreaking democratic interpretation of the Florentine (1972). By juxtaposing their respective understandings of the social conflict based on the distinctive theory of desire, we inhabit an advantageous site for critical exploration of Machiavelli. Moreover, I claim that such an entrance point to Sullivan's work provides a crucial critical pressure point that enables the reader to slowly break through her discourse to eventually liberate another figure of Machiavelli. Toward this purpose, I think that the social conflict, to use Foucault's phrasing (1978, p. 103), is an 'especially concentrated

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[26] *Cf.* P, 25 (especially first and last paragraph), D, II. 1 beginning.

[27] *Cf.* D, III. 17: 257, where Machiavelli explicitly denies the possibility of ordering a perpetual republic.

point of traversal', a single point through which all the important aspects of Machiavelli's work (including religion, politics and so on) inevitably need to pass. The bone of contestation between our two interpreters, at its most fundamental level, is the very nature of Machiavelli's project (aristocratic *vs*. democratic).

I assert that Sullivan's innovative view on Machiavelli's critique of religion, as such, should be read as a further radicalization of Strauss' aristocratic perspective on the Florentine's political texts. In contrast to Strauss, Lefort identifies the 'difference principle' as a crucial, authentically democratic component of Machiavelli's thought. When the difference principle is put to work in Machiavelli's texts, its effects can be compared to a lump of sugar immersed into water. As the 'difference principle' dissolves and infiltrates Machiavelli's discourse, the text attains another flavor, the reader develops a different sensibility for it, and the entire structure of Sullivan's interpretation is suddenly seen in a different, critical light. Ultimately, my approach thrusts us into a position that identifies the significant 'religious dimensionality' of Machiavelli's modern republic.

2.1. Democratic Façade of Machiavelli's Aristocratic Teaching?

There is no doubt that for Sullivan Machiavelli *is a type* of democrat. On more than one occasion she recognizes Machiavelli's appeal to the masses and the need to secure their support in order to maintain the new order (D, I. 58: 118, D, I. 9: 29, D, I. 17: 48). Moreover, she characterizes Machiavelli's teaching as 'a true defense of the people' (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 180, 80; 2004, p. 40). Our interpreter recognizes Machiavelli's courageous, continuous defense of the tumults in Rome (1996, p. 72) and his dedication to 'democratic republicanism' (2004, p. 10). In Sullivan's reading the Florentine's democratic face is best exemplified in his defense of the participation of the plebs in the government, through the tribunate of the plebs. However, one must carefully assess the status of Machiavelli as a democratic, popular thinker in Sullivan's interpretation. The Florentine's 'love' for the multitude (D, I. 58 beginning) is only a necessary inconvenience (*cf*. D, I. 60), originating from the demands of unabashed imperialism (Sullivan, 2012, p. 57) which requires numerous, armed soldiers. Sullivan argues that Machiavelli subjugates the people by using them as a means to the ultimate ends of politics, those of war and empire (1996, p. 179; 2004, pp. 38-43). However, in the background of the relentlessly acquisitive, 'unrepentantly bellicose republicanism' (2004, p. 22) that one observes in Sullivan's reading stands a theory of desire which may not be necessarily Machiavelli's own.

2.2. Machiavelli's Theory of Desire

Our interpreter argues that Machiavelli gradually breaks down the initial distinction between the classes (domination *vs*. freedom, *cf*. D, I. 4; P, 9) and ultimately equates

the desires of the mighty to the desires of the plebs/common people.[28] The two classes embody forms of *having*. The Florentine's praise and defense of a tumultuous republic full of conflicts corresponds to a celebration of the citizens' passions for acquisition. Therefore, it is on the firm foundations laid by Strauss (1958) that Sullivan constructs a new, harsh, unconventional Rome. The most ambitious greats remain the true princes of Machiavelli's republic (*cf.* Sullivan, 2004, p. 43). They are driven by glory, rather than by moral virtue. The (infinite) rest of the citizens (mostly) desire property.[29] The Florentine designed a republic that will serve as an outlet for selfish passions of the people as a whole, directed towards foreign expansion in order to effectively cope with the necessity of war over a long period of time. One might add that good results of such a new Rome are derived from 'collective selfishness' (Strauss, 1988, p. 42; *cf.* Ribarević, 2016, p. 25). In the final analysis Machiavelli 'is not a principled supporter of either side in Rome's tumults' (Sullivan, 2004, p. 49).[30]

However, there is another way to approach Machiavelli's theory of desire which creates a possibility of a different 'new Rome'. Lefort (1978, 2000, 2010, 2012) has argued that chapters D, I. 4-5 bring forward a *twofold* revolution in the (classical) theory of desire (*cf.* Žagar, 2017). Similar to Strauss and Sullivan, Lefort recognizes Machiavelli's novel understanding of the desire of the Grandees for acquisition. However, this finding brings Lefort to highlight the novel understanding of the desire of the plebs in Machiavelli as well. Lefort argues that, in the eyes of the Florentine, the plebs' desire, which was previously mistakenly condemned as pure aggression against the order and unconstrained appetite directed towards acquisition, is in fact a defensive, negatively directed desire not to be oppressed and commanded by the Grandees (2012, pp. 225-231). Therefore, in addition to Machiavelli's scandalous praise of the conflict between the plebs and the Senate, which is at the source of all the laws and freedom of the Roman political community (D, I. 4: 16), the Florentine in D, I. 5 adds yet another, decisively subversive element to

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[28] In D, I. 37: 78 Machiavelli says that the people wanted 'to share honors and belongings with the nobility as the thing esteemed most by men'. Moreover, as that chapter continues, Machiavelli shows that most of the greats cared more about property than honors because they did not want to give up their property (that is, land) to the people (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 69-70). However, it is important to note that regardless of the end (property or honor), men as a whole desire to acquire more (*cf.* D, I. 5: 19, P, 3: 14). See above n. 11.

[29] *Cf.* above n. 13.

[30] Machiavelli's new Rome takes into account the pros and cons of both classes in order to secure foreign acquisitions as the ultimate end of politics. On the one hand, ambition of the princes in the republic (particularly aspiring greats seeking glory and preeminence) needs to be firmly restrained by harsh, merciless laws and as such continuously directed towards the *greatness of the republic*. On the other hand, although the plebs partake in the government, they do not actually rule. The plebs are instrumentalized for the sake of promoting war (Sullivan, 2004, pp. 49, 55).

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his theory of conflict, when he clarifies that the *plebs* are the guardians of freedom. In the text of this chapter Machiavelli makes a *salto mortale* in comparison with its title:[31] 'he who wishes to maintain' is in fact he who wishes to acquire, and 'he who wishes to acquire' is in fact one who wishes to maintain himself, his bare existence, against the domination of the greats. In other words, one is invited to grasp the full potential of Machiavelli's statement which links *The Prince* and *Discourses*: in every city there are two *diverse* humors, that of the people and that of the greats, and while the greats desire to dominate/oppress and command the people, the people only desire not to be dominated/oppressed and commanded by the greats (D, I. 4: 16, D, I. 5: 18; P, 9: 39). I maintain with Lefort that Machiavelli is a theoretician of *difference* and that downplaying the importance of such a difference in the direction of similarity between the two classes is potentially detrimental for the plebs and for Machiavelli's political project as a whole. I believe that the greats and the plebs do not represent two forms of desire for acquisition. According to Lefort's findings, and in opposition to Strauss, class conflict in Machiavelli can be represented as a conflict of two insatiable and mutually insurmountably opposed desires: 'to have' and 'to be' (Lefort, 2012, pp. 140-141, 455; *cf.* Žagar, 2019, pp. 202-208; 313-324).[32] The two class figures are fundamentally different and cannot be reconciled since only the greats are moved by the desire 'to have'. As a result of their having, the plebs want 'to be' free from their unbearable domination.[33]

[31] "Where the guard of freedom may be settled more securely, in the people or in the great; and which has greater cause for tumult, he who wishes to acquire or he who wishes to maintain."

[32] I agree with Sullivan (2004, p. 44) that the plebs and the greats should not be understood as two fixed socio-economic classes, membership in which is derived from birth. Insistence on a *class difference* also allows for movement between the classes. In Lefortian optics, Machiavelli has in mind *political* classes, defined by *mutually opposed* desires. These radically different desires ('to have' and 'to be') are presented as an insuperable condition of political life, but the incorporation of the desires in the form of class figures in a society is, to a certain degree, circumstantial and contingent. Perhaps the clergy can serve as an example of those who are initially moved by non-domination, but who eventually start to behave in the mode of their adversaries and, as a result, in fact create new nobility/greats.

[33] It goes without saying that in the context of corruption, the plebs can be reduced to their worst figure (*cf.* the examples of Coriolanus in D, I. 7 and Clearchus in D, I. 16). As a result of 'incorrect and ambitious behavior' of the greats (D, I. 5: 4), the plebs can be moved by hatred and a desire to avenge themselves. However, although such motives of the plebs, at first sight, point to traces of the desire for the same honors and things possessed by the greats (D, I. 37 beginning), in fact, at a deeper level, one should discern a defensive desire ignited by the insolence of the greats. If the plebs become akin to the greats in certain contexts, which they inevitably do, such distortions, which equal corruption, are due to the improper workings of *political authority*. A spectrum of different figures into which the plebs can develop, some of which are detrimental to the political order, ultimately depends on the plebs' relation with political authority (e.g., D, I. 44; Lefort, 2012, pp. 269-272).

If the desire of the plebs is not 'having' but 'being', then placing both classes under the common sign of acquisition actually means siding with the greats. Elimination of difference through a supposedly single human nature oriented towards realization of self-interests embodied in honor and property in fact only serves the interests of the greats. From the standpoint of Lefort's understanding of the theory of desire in Machiavelli, unrestrained, imperial foreign politics serves as an exemplification of harmfulness of subsuming the plebs under the desire for domination. Understanding the plebs exclusively through the mirror-image of the greats, in the context of aggressive foreign politics, leads to yet another enslavement of the plebs (*cf.* Žagar, 2020, pp. 17-18). As a consequence, the society as a whole remains trapped in the narrative of domination. This is not to negate Machiavelli's vision of unification of Italy,[34] which, however, does not necessarily lead to the quest for empire that is itself an expression of the desire of the greats for domination. Instead, one could claim that the foundation of political order on the class of the plebs results in yet another advantage: it produces a *powerful* society which is capable of expanding and, primarily, defending itself, according to necessity (D, I. 6; *cf.* Lefort, 2012, pp. 232-234, 280-327; Žagar, 2019, pp. 208-210). Acquisition as such is not the supreme demand of politics (a goal in itself) or the ultimate solution for a divided city composed of fundamentally different desires. The political problem (supreme demand of politics) consists in producing a strong, free and durable order based on the premise of the conflict of mutually opposed desires (D, I. 4-5). Such an order has a twofold function of expanding the internal liberty of society, and defending such liberty by readily confronting the uncertainties derived from the external arena, which can, but not necessarily do, result in new conquests. Radically different class figures which are at the origin of the city allow for a different, less bellicose new Rome than the one we find in Sullivan's presentation.[35]

Since the desires of political classes are fundamentally different, the wise prince necessarily needs to side with the people as a class and attempt to win their

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[34] Undoubtedly, Machiavelli's texts respond to the requirements of his time. After the French invaded Italy in 1494, the situation on the peninsula changed dramatically and the very existence of the city-states was endangered. A certain type of unification was needed on the peninsula in order to have any chance to cope with the challenge of the big and powerful continental monarchies (France and Spain). Military strength and numerous armed soldiers represented necessary pre-conditions for the ability to resist oppressors and to defend independence. In this context, I have suggested reading Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *Discourses* as one single project which aims at constitution of the popular, modern, federative state that is *per definicionem* opposed to empire. See Žagar (2019, pp. 329-333, 338).

[35] For a decisively less aggressive variants of Machiavelli's foreign politics, see also McCormick (2011, pp. 56-59), Viroli (1992, p. 162), Winter (2018, pp. 161-165), and Zuckert (2017, pp. 205-206).

friendship.[36] The prince and 'the princes' (leading individuals) in a republic seek the support of the plebeians because a durable political order cannot be established on the desire for domination. Accepting the popular disposition of Machiavelli's thought as honest[37] does not necessarily lead to oversimplification of his relationship with the people. Far from simply favoring the 'good'[38] plebeians against the 'bad' greats (*cf.* Lefort, 2010, p. 568), Machiavelli sides with the plebs because of the beneficial political consequences which follow from such a choice. Only an alliance with the plebs creates space for the other class partner – the greats. In this sense Machiavelli's project is *authentically* democratic since, by rooting itself in the desire for non-domination,[39] it in fact addresses citizens as a whole. Regulation of class conflict, through the laws that arise from the desire of the plebs not to be oppressed, curbs the desire for domination, and in turn revitalizes and strengthens the entire society.

2.3. Florentine Republic: Contextualist Aspects of Class Conflict

Further evidence for my claim that the greats *as such* represent the main problem for the strength and health of a society as a whole is substantiated in this section by an analysis of the historical context of Machiavelli's time and the reasons that

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[36] The same formula applies to the republic since desires are always the same, regardless of the type of political regime (*cf.* P, 9, D, I. 4-5). It is important to highlight that Machiavelli urges us to clearly differentiate between a deleterious form of populism and a type of populism that is constitutive for state-building projects. On the one hand, the harmful, ego-driven form of populism under the cover of the protection of the plebs is in fact reduced to a mere manipulation and eventually leads to tyranny (Caesar), while on the other hand, populism which is constitutive for the state represents a type of alliance with the people as a class that, although it necessarily includes partial deception of the plebs (P, 18: 71), is never entirely reduced to it. Rather, it is used to curb the domination of the few and to expand the horizon of freedom for the entire community. Against this background it is possible to understand the difference between two Caesars that Machiavelli discusses in his texts and to explain why duke Valentino (Borgia) is presented as a model to be imitated (P, 7: 32-33) and the Roman general is dismissed as a tyrant (for example, D, I. 10).

[37] See especially P, 9: 41.

[38] See above n. 33.

[39] In dialogue with the Cambridge School scholars (see especially Skinner, 1998; Pocock, 1975; Viroli, 1998), Pettit (1999) ascribes to Machiavelli the republican notion of 'freedom as non-domination'. However, I claim that the desire of the plebs to be free from domination does not lead Machiavelli to promote a predominantly passive, reactive behavior of the plebs. The political instance needs to take into account the radical difference between the two political classes and side with the people. This in turn opens up the perspective of gradual transformation of the plebs' negative desire not to be oppressed into a positive desire to be and become, to live and to thrive, which effectively restrains the domination of the greats. For a more institutional (structural) approach to the democratic face of Machiavelli's political teaching, see McCormick (2011, 2018) and Pedullà (2018).

stand behind the collapse of the Florentine Republic in 1512. Some early indications in Machiavelli's text challenge the presumption that the fall of the Florentine Republic was primarily the result of devastating effects of Christianity as a type of tyrannical rule over men. In this regard, the very beginning of *Discourses* strikes us like a thunderbolt. Lefort (2012) has noticed that in the opening lines of D, I. 1, while discussing the beginnings of cities, Machiavelli makes an obvious mistake, arguing that regardless of whether Florence was built by soldiers of Sulla, or by the inhabitants of the mountains of Fiesole, 'it was built under the *Roman Empire*' (D, I. 1: 8 – my emphasis). The Florentine's claim is directly opposed to the humanist representation of Florentine history. In the context of the struggle against Visconti, Leonardo Bruni purposely reinvented Florentine history and highlighted the direct connection of Florence with the period of Sulla, and therefore with its antecedents who were *free citizens* (Lefort, 2012, pp. 489-498; Clarke, 2018, pp. 78-86). By opposing a humanist narrative, Machiavelli in fact criticizes the disastrous effects of civic humanists' attempts to relate Florence to republican Rome. In the eyes of the Florentine, such a strategic move was understood as an ideological tool designed to *subjugate* the *patria* under specific, conservative, mythological representation of Roman society, grounded on the discourse of moderation, stability, concord and unity. As a response to the 'frightening' experience of the Ciompi rebellion (FH, III),[40] humanists developed a conception of a homogeneous society inspired by a certain conservative image of republican Rome which served contra-revolutionary purposes. It aimed at delegitimization of conflicts and the protection of class privileges of the greats, who ever more firmly imposed control over the political regime.

In the aftermath of the revolt the 'middle class' allied with the rich patrician families and, thereby, at last submitted to their 'natural' leading role (Najemy, 1982, 2003, 2006). The actual subsequent expansion of the non-elite (society's middle ranks) participation in the government did not result in their *effectual* share in the power, since their inclusion was grounded on the premises of a clever ideology of the elites (*ibid.*). The 'benevolent' elites included the middle ranks on the grounds of their *individual* political virtue/worth and/or ethics of civic duty to loyally *serve* the fatherland and *obey* 'the common good' (*ibid.*). 'Civic republicanism' inaugurated by the Florentine humanists consolidated the domination of the

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[40] In 1378, Ciompi, the lowest strata of Florentine society ('popolo minuto'), who were previously entirely excluded from political participation, overturned the existing (oligarchic) regime, took power in their own hands and instituted a revolutionary Ciompi government which lasted until 1382. The significance of this event for a 'democratic' reading of Machiavelli has been particularly powerfully emphasized by Winter (2018, pp. 167-191). See also McCormick (2018, pp. 69-105).

elites who established firm control over the political regime. The non-elite middle rank citizens were successfully submitted to the order of unity and consensus.[41] In exchange for the possibility to hold political offices, 'the patrons' of the new order precluded the promotion and representation of separate class interests, differences and divisions which characterized the previous guild type of republicanism (*ibid*.). The lower classes were completely eliminated from participation in the political arena while, at the same time, dominant imagination rendered conflicts and excess as something extremely harmful and dangerous. The greats successfully took over the institutions of the republic and eventually usurped political power, making the state their property and using it to serve their acquisitive interests under the veil of homogeneity, wholeness, oneness, harmony, civic virtue, a matrix in the framing of which Christian discourse has undoubtedly played an important part (Lefort, 2012, pp. 471-472, 502). From such a perspective, Machiavelli's defense of conflicts aims at the legitimization of the plebeian desire to resist the greats*,* as a political class.

This contextualist framework demonstrates that Machiavelli's political problem cannot entirely be reduced to the threat of Christian religion, or the Church (and its nobility) or, more generally, to the most ambitious few of Florentine society. Rather, the Florentine's political teaching seems to be grounded on the need to regulate and restrain the greats' desire for domination. The greats as a 'class' use a whole range of strategies, methods and discourses in order to cover and mask class *difference*. By downplaying the centrality of the 'difference principle' herself, Sullivan implicitly sides with the greats. The irreligious, acquisitive republic is in fact tailor-made for the satisfaction of the desires of the greats.

2.4. Terror as Machiavelli's Preferred Solution – Revised

At this stage of the analysis, we are equipped with the necessary theoretical tools to claim that a republic must be sensitive to the *difference* between the classes to eliminate corruption which is in stark contrast to Sullivan's fearful republic *insensitive to difference*. To elaborate this point, I engage in a critical examination of Manlius' exemplary status for Machiavelli's (allegedly) particularly cruel type of republicanism. I identify some important clues in *Discourses* that illustrate Machiavelli's definite discreditation of Manlius as a commendable republican model who deserves to be imitated.

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[41] By approaching Machiavelli from a suggested historical, socio-economic perspective, it is possible to argue that after 1382, the greats as 'a new whole' represented a problem, because the desires of the 'middle class' merely reflected those of the rich patrician families. In the light of such positing of the problem, the inner distinctions between the greats (including those suggested by Sullivan) lose their significance. Fear of the plebs unites the whole of the greats.

In D, III. 37: 294, there is a serious charge against Manlius. Our author condemns his rash policy of risking all of his fortune without using all of his forces in the war against the Gauls. At the end of this chapter, Machiavelli directs the reader's attention to D, I. 23, where he already discussed the same rash and inconsiderate policy in the case of the Roman king Tullus, and concluded that 'this affair could not have been worse' (D, I. 23: 57). Manlius committed a very grave error and the reader might justifiably assume that Machiavelli dethrones him from the status of his hero *par excellence*. Lefort (2012, pp. 388-393) has proposed to interpret Manlius' error of not using entire forces, on the political level, as not knowing how to win over the plebs. If harsh laws are not directed towards curbing the oppression of the greats, then they do not necessarily serve 'only the common good' (*cf.* D, III. 22).

Following the proposed, Lefortian line of thought further, the reader will notice that in D, III. 23: 269 Machiavelli explicitly says that Camillus resembled Manlius. In the continuation of the same chapter, we learn that Camillus was not only marveled at, but hated by the army as well. When discussing the reasons for such hatred, Sullivan (1996, p. 152) finds the main cause in the behavior of Camillus himself, who broke the principal rule of not depriving the people of their property (*cf.* P, 17: 67). Machiavelli says that Camillus refused to distribute the money from the sale of Veientian property between his soldiers, and, moreover, that he threatened to use the goods that have already come into the soldiers' possession to fulfill his vow to Apollo (D, III. 23). I agree with Sullivan that the proper measure of severity does not include depriving the people of property (1996, p. 152). However, I suggest taking one further step. Camillus, who was *similar to Manlius* in his severe proceedings, did not, after all, serve only his fatherland. His mistakes bring out Manlius' 'sins' as well.

Machiavelli already discussed the plebs' refusal and open indignation towards Camillus' decision to take away a part of the loot from the conquest of Veii in order to satisfy the gods (D, I. 55: 110). On that occasion, behind Machiavelli's praise of the refusal to deliver one's property, Sullivan finds the expression of 'their greed for acquisition' (2004, p. 47), desire 'to have', 'desire for property' (Sullivan, 1996, p. 84). According to her reading, it is the celebration and appraisal of selfish interests that one finds in the following Machiavelli's lines describing the plebs' refusal to return a part of the loot: 'how much goodness and how much religion were in that people, and how much good was to be hoped from it' (D, I. 55: 110). In contrast to Sullivan's position, and in line with the presented twofold theory of desire, one could interpret such refusal on the part of the plebs as an expression of desire 'to be', as a response to the excessive domination of the greats. The motives which move the plebs are neither selfish interests, nor the dedication to the common good as understood conventionally, but the desire to be free from the oppression of the

greats. According to Machiavelli's own text, the early market, labor-exchange society was developed in his time at least in Tuscany.[42] In such a society, undoubtedly, all individuals seek to acquire (property), but behind such a universal desire one is invited to recognize a more fundamental division in the background: while some desire to acquire as the basis for their economic subjectivity and personal autonomy, others endeavor to acquire property as the basis for exploitation/domination and as a source of (political) power (Žagar, 2019, p. 315, n. 17). While the plebs desire acquisition in order 'to be', the greats desire acquisition in order 'to have' more.[43] It is fair to ask if in the eyes of Machiavelli harsh captains like Manlius and Camillus, who are essentially similar in their proceedings, are suspected of being insensitive to class difference. Under the mask of severe measures against those striving to preeminence, while simultaneously neglecting class *difference*, such stern captains perhaps actually enslave the plebs in a most extreme way. Or even, as Lefort (2012, p. 393) has argued, they may consciously use hardness as a mask for promoting class interests of the greats.

By accepting the principle of difference, and rejecting Manlius as an exemplary figure, we are not entirely surprised that after a long path of discussion over the preferred characteristics of republican captains, Machiavelli, in the chapter following his critique of Manlius, suddenly, in a characteristic discursive twist, adopts Valerius Corvinus as an exemplar 'to *anyone* whatever, how he ought to proceed if he wishes to hold the rank of captain' (D, III. 38: 297 – my emphasis). Despite most grave dangers brought by kind and humane modes of proceeding, Valerius knew the most important thing: to inspire confidence in his army, in the plebs, and to overcome fear and terror of confronting a new enemy (*ibid.*): the greats as such.

2.5. The 'Religious Dimensionality' in Machiavellian Democratic Society

The fundamental, modern political problem, from the perspective of Lefort's interpretation, is the difference between the greats' desire to dominate and command and the plebs' desire not be dominated and commanded. From Sullivan's perspective, Machiavelli's solution is a strictly secular, political imitation of Christianity in the form of a fearful, irreligious republic that appropriates harsh elements of Christian teaching for its own temporal purposes. However, this solution ultimately masks the

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[42] *Cf.* D, I. 55: 112, where Machiavelli claims that there is 'so much equality' in Tuscany, since there are 'no or very few gentlemen'. Gentlemen can be understood as old landed aristocracy. Equality is characteristic for Tuscany because work/labor is the main source of distinction (Lefort, 2012, p. 275).

[43] Holman (2018, pp. 131-185) similarly argues that the greats' desire for oppression and the plebs' desire to resist oppression are two distinct forms of a single human desire for (ambitious) self-expression.

fundamental problem of the division of desires. For Sullivan, Machiavelli's acquisitive republic grounded on fear and harsh punishments seeks to prevent the tyrannical ambitions of the particularly ambitious few and secure longevity. I posit that such a 'new Rome' is insensitive to 'class' difference, and therefore amplifies escalation and intensification of the domination of the greats as a 'class' to such an unthinkable degree that a republic cannot possibly maintain itself. Indeed, as Sullivan herself has emphasized, spectacular punishments and renewal of fear conceived by Machiavelli as 'great' and 'generous' acts (D, III. 27) required to constantly reinvigorate the state and to preclude tyranny, can in fact be a far cry from regaining human liberty and dignity. 'New Rome' can easily result in tyranny and, therefore, Machiavelli's model of the correction of the defects of the Ancients in the form of a bloody republic itself needs some corrections (Sullivan, 2006). In other words, Machiavelli's approach to human existence from the perspective of desire for acquisition and consequent reduction of society to the promotion of selfish expansionist and material interests and struggle for power leads to an impasse. But it is fair to ask if this deadlock is where Machiavelli's teaching necessarily leads us to?

Lefort's perspective on Machiavelli puts to test the Florentine's use of religion in the terms proposed by Sullivan's interpretation. The French interpreter finds a modern, democratically transformed '*theologico*-political matrix' (Lefort, 1998, p. 16 – my emphasis) in Machiavelli's texts. Lefort highlights what I term, following Bilakovics (2012, pp. 143, 172), a 'religious dimensionality'[44] of Machiavellian so-

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[44] The 'religious dimensionality' of modern society is best captured in Lefort's influential understanding of power as a purely symbolic, 'empty place'. This idea originates from his encounter with Machiavelli. The essential elements of the 'empty place of power' can be reconstructed by closely following Lefort's unique reading of the Florentine. However, the best entrance points and the most elaborated account of the conceptualization of power as an 'empty place' and the related type of (democratic) society, is to be found in Lefort (1988), most succinctly especially in the chapter "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?" (*ibid.*, pp. 213-256). For the following interpretation I rely primarily on Bilakovics (2012, pp. 125-174) and Lalović (2000). See also Žagar (2019, pp. 158-165). By the 'empty place of power' Lefort designates a novel, distinctively modern way of conceiving the primal division between the particular (the mundane) and the universal (the transcendent) (Lefort, 1998, pp. 216, 223), which replaces and subverts the previous Christian (premodern) 'theological-political matrix' (*ibid.*, p. 16). Modern power is characterized by the revolutionary 'dissolution of markers of certainty' (*ibid.*, p. 19) that corresponds to the disembodiment and the subversion of the Christ-like head-figure of the king who in his 'double-bodied' person incorporated the place of power and ensured mediation between the mundane and the transcendent. While the king's power came from the divine, at the same time, in his own mortal, commanding body, as an unconditional head (father) figure of society, he secured the sense of substantial unity for the society and ensured hierarchically and rigidly defined (natural) social form and identity (*ibid.*, p. 253). The revolutionary disincorporation of the place of power (which one can, on the theoretical plane, decipher in the *Prince-Discourses* project) made visible the originary and irresolvable division of society into two political classes as the

ciety which allows for imagining something other than the relations of pure domination and force and, thereby, keeps a society from sinking entirely to the level of merely empirical, flat time and space.

Unlike the greats obsessed by acquisition and domination, the plebeians defined by their desire to be free from the greats' oppression are capable of the symbolic dimension of politics. Indeed, 'not without cause may the voice of the people be linked to that of God' (D, I. 58: 117). One can find traces of the 'religious dimensionality' of Machiavelli's Rome in the quasi-religious belief of the plebs in the possibility of different, less oppressive social relations. This particular plebeian sensibility towards the symbolic dimension of politics developed as a survival strategy. This strategy deals with the unbearable domination of the greats which in the first place makes possible the modern political project, either princely or republican.[45]

generative, originary political principle that society rests on. Machiavellian society permeated by division is discernable under the conditions of absence of metaphysical absolutes (God or Nature). In such a society the *dimension* of the transcendent remains operative in the form of an 'empty place of power'. The 'empty place of power' means that nobody can possess and occupy the power in the most radical sense: there is no (stable) community (no body), no predetermined "we" to begin with or to arrive at (*ibid.*, pp. 225-226). Such emptiness of the place of power ensures the permanent work of social division; it is constitutive for democracy as a form of society which is characterized by radical uncertainty, contingency, openness, perennial mutation, vitality, restlessness and contestability. Conceptualization of power as an 'empty place' highlights the fundamental, modern, *symbolic character* of power. Organized around an essentially empty place, modern, democratic society constantly 'maintains the gap between real and the symbolic' (*ibid.*). On the premises of the irreducible social division, it is possible to organize a meaningful existence via an 'empty place of power' which enables and enacts the projection of always different representations of society to itself. Thereby, the social field is manifested as a malleable (non-homogenous) space without fixed boundaries and rigid identity. For Lefort, democracy is the preferred type of society, *political* society *par excellence*.

[45] See Žagar (2019, pp. 184-195, 325-334). According to Lefort's analysis of Machiavelli, strong society permeated by irreducible division is possible precisely because the class desires are fundamentally different. Plebeians desire not to be commanded by the greats and as such they are ready to give themselves up to political authority (as a third side in the conflict) if they are made to believe that in such a way domination of the greats can be annulled. In this context, the symbolic dimension of politics becomes decisive. Through the image that political authority enables, enacts, and allows for in the eyes of its subjects (primarily plebeians), the society is rescued from the immanence. The logic of the here and now is challenged when the plebeians are encouraged to imagine the possibility of alternative social relations which in turn creates effects on the level of reality. The society is directed towards the transcendent via a place of power that stands 'above' society. The symbolic character of power has a constitutive (productive) function for the society by enabling its permanent transformations and indeterminate self-representations. However, as I have emphasized throughout the paper, this does not, by any means, imply that politics can be reduced to pure manipulation/deception, since political success is always measured in terms of effective restriction of the greats' domination. *Cf.* above n. 36.

Only by siding with the plebs and by addressing their imaginative capabilities of a less oppressive reality does it becomes possible to thwart the domination of the greats and expand the liberty and dignity of the people as a whole.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a detailed account of Sullivan's rewarding interpretation of Machiavelli and confronted it with Lefortian (democratic) discourse that challenges Sullivan's reading. I have suggested to approach Sullivan's conceptualization of 'new Rome' as an original (and even strategic) step in the direction of further radicalization of Strauss' aristocratic reading of Machiavelli. In order to critically confront Sullivan's interpretation, Claude Lefort (1972) is particularly useful since his innovative thesis on the fundamental bifurcation of (human) desire strikes at the heart of elitist readings of Machiavelli inspired by Strauss. Lefort's crucial discovery of the 'difference principle' in Machiavelli has the capacity to gradually infiltrate and impregnate the entirety of the Florentine's discourse. As such it provides a privileged entrance point to engage in a critical dialogue with Sullivan's appealing, but essentially conservative representation of Machiavelli. Ultimately, democratic reconfiguration of the Florentine's overall political teaching makes it possible to recognize the significance of 'religious dimensionality' of Machiavelli's 'new Rome'.

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Mailing Address:

Davorin Žagar, Postdoctoral research fellow at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Adolfo Ibáñez University, Av. Diagonal Las Torres 2640, Peñalolén, Santiago, Chile. *E-mail*: zagar.davo@gmail.com