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 Book Review
 

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Gabriele Pedullà  
**Machiavelli in Tumult.  
 The *Discourses on Livy*  
 and the Origins  
 of Political Conflictualism**

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018,  
 284 pp.

*Machiavelli in Tumult* (2018) is an ambitious work which thoroughly and elaborately investigates Machiavelli's theory of conflict, leading to several innovative findings. Pedullà's book was first published in an Italian voluminous edition (Bulzoni, 2011) with no less than 634 pages (*sic!*). Afterwards, the volume was significantly abbreviated and updated for an English publication, enabling a wider, international audience to engage with Pedullà's praiseworthy research on Machiavelli. The interpreter approaches the Florentine primarily contextually, as a historian of political ideas. Moreover, Pedullà's historical Machiavelli seeks to remain useful and relevant for the contemporary theory by precisely avoiding the methodological mistake of overburdening the Florentine with the present over the past (p. 9). This predominantly, but not exclusively, historical research, leads Pedullà to a fascinating representation of Machiavelli's teaching as an essentially *anti-aristocratic*, *popular* project, very much in line with political-theoretical readings of Claude Lefort, Filippo Del Lucchese and John McCormick, who are in fact his respected interlocutors.

In the very opening lines, which give the tone to the whole book, Pedullà argues that Machiavelli's *Discourses* bring forward "an unprecedented attack on 2000 years of Greek, Roman, and humanistic reflections on the value of civic concord" (p. 1). In the first chapter the author presents the key features of humanist thought that dominated the Italian Communes, starting from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. Until the end of *trecento*, Florence was characterized by the guild type of republicanism which necessarily included competition and negotiation between different social groups and their distinctive interests (p. 68). However, as a result of the influence of classical political thought through the recovery of Aristotle's and Cicero's texts, humanists gradually introduced the paradigm of concord and unanimously promoted the values of civic harmony, unity and the ideology of the common good, in order to delegitimize conflicts which supposedly lead to political instabilities and violence in the city (pp. 15, 65). In this context, Pedullà argues that humanist tracts on republics, like the Ancients' ones, have a primarily pedagogical function (p. 21). Humanists conceive conflicts and selfish passions behind them primarily in the moral terms: tumults are enemies of a free life necessarily leading to ruin (pp. 25-26, 68). Therefore, the main goal of the humanists' works is to persuade the audience to follow the *examples* of virtuous Roman heroes, who are devoted to promotion of the common good over selfish desires and excessive appetites (pp. 22, 97).

In stark opposition to the humanists who look at the Ancients and their good moral customs as models for imitation, Machiavelli returns to the Ancients for an

entirely different purpose and in a completely modern fashion. He seeks to liberate the innovative potential of the Romans, in order to critically intervene in his own here and now (p. 34). According to Pedullà, Machiavelli's *Discourses* established "a completely new philosophical genre" which he terms "political classicism" (p. 31). Following the footsteps of great Italian 20<sup>th</sup> century historian Arnaldo Momigliano, Pedullà argues that in *Discourses* Machiavelli applies "an original method of interpretation" (p. 31) which is entirely different from the dominant forms of the commentary genre (pp. 29, 218). For example, instead of simply selecting some isolated thesis, Machiavelli's "discourse form" of commentary on the whole of Livy's history presents in itself a great change (p. 31). More importantly, unlike his contemporaries, who return to the ancient historians in order to better illustrate the general principles of classical political thinkers such as Aristotle, the Florentine's return to Livy is *original* since it seeks to draw universally valid lessons on politics directly from the practical political experience of Rome (pp. 29, 31). He finds material for his own universal, theoretical conclusions in Livy's *Histories* and significantly complements them further in a vivid dialogue with a whole range of *historians*, including ancient Greek and Roman, as well as the modern ones. *Discourses* mark a groundbreaking shift in the primacy of history over philosophy (p. 33). Machiavelli seeks to liberate Roman history from the claws of classical philosophical thought in order to spark innovation and political imagination of the plebs in Florence. The Florentine uses history as a tool of political theory which has the

function of intervention in the accidents derived from tumults through the production of new modes and institutions (*cf.* pp. 257-258). In Machiavelli's project Pedullà discerns nothing less than "a complete repositioning of political theory with respect to philosophy and history" (*sic!*) (pp. 7, 133).

From the methodological point of view Machiavelli's *Discourses* owe a great deal to the Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60-7 BCE) who, according to Pedullà, occupies a privileged place in the Florentine's thought. Correspondingly, Pedullà dedicates the entire sixth chapter of his book to the analysis of Dionysus' *Roman Antiquities*. Unlike Livy's *Histories*, in *Roman Antiquities* Dionysus brings forward a systematic comparison of Roman and Greek institutions and delineates a history of gradual evolution of Rome's constitution and its functioning until the first Punic war, in order to outline universal principles of politics as his final goal (p. 217). Aside from the methodological compatibility of *Discourses* with *Antiquities*, Dionysus exerted decisive influence on the content of *Discourses* itself. Pedullà claims that Machiavelli's most original ideas are primarily the result of his encounter with Dionysus (p. 185), and he finds the Greek historian's traces throughout *Discourses* (pp. 204-205, 213). Machiavelli draws particularly on Dionysus' interpretation of Rome in order to confront the humanists and demystify the value of harmony. The most important elements of Dionysius' influence can be discerned in several important aspects: 1) the positive evaluation of bloodless conflicts with a special emphasis on the role of tribunes of the plebs as the guard of freedom; 2) the

theory of mixed regime and delineation of gradual evolution of Rome's constitution through class conflicts (which gains the advantage over Polybius' influence); 3) the positive assessment and "the most sustained" analyses of the institution of dictatorship; and, 4) the high estimation of Roman citizenship policy which despite the "inconvenience" of tumults led to military strength. Each of these elements is innovatively reworked by Machiavelli in a more radical direction.

In the eyes of Pedullà *Discourses* are "an immensely ambitious project" (p. 223) which offers "an unprecedented appreciation of tumults" together with the due "acknowledgement of their inevitability" (p. 220). Machiavelli's theory of conflict is based on a shocking and controversial thesis introduced in D, I. 4: "the disunion of the plebs and the Roman Senate made that republic free and powerful". In the second chapter Pedullà analyses the modes by which the tumults can result in the strength of republics and, at the same time, he provides a basic outline of Machiavelli's theory of conflict. Unlike the humanists, the Florentine thinks that common good *is* derived *from conflicts* which are a *natural* and inevitable given of the political life in any city (p. 69). In D, I. 4 he argues that in every city there are two different humors, the greats who want to oppress and command the people, and the people, or the plebs, who do not want to be commanded and oppressed by the greats. Therefore, two social groups, the plebs and the greats, incarnate different *humors*. Machiavelli uses the medical language of humors in order to describe the workings of the political body and to justify internal conflict which can never be supervised,

since each humor has its role and place in the political body (p. 48). In analogy with the human body which consists of different humors (fluids) which have to be regularly vented in order to prevent significant imbalance(s) and/or to cure illness, health maintenance of the political body requires that (primarily) the humors of the people as a class are regularly vented through different *modes* (D, I. 4) (pp. 49-51).

In chapter D, I. 5 Machiavelli claims that the greats do not want to simply keep what they already possess. On the contrary, they want to acquire more because of the fear of losing their possessions which most often leads to oppression over the plebeians. The aims of the plebs are generally more honorable, if their humor emanates from a defensive posture against the excessive appetites of the greats. The people as a class are (generally) less dangerous and more trustworthy than the greats and as such are able to better protect the *common good* precisely by defending the city (and primarily themselves) from the excessive ambition of the greats (pp. 137, 175). Therefore, conflicts are not necessarily ruinous and damaging (p. 51): if the ambitions of the plebs are channeled in appropriate, non-violent *modes*, then the discords can help to maintain the social order (p. 53). Machiavelli argues in favor of "a conflictual order" (p. 255). This is the order that introduces, recognizes, *institutionalizes* and embodies conflicts into the formal structures of the city in order to ensure the possibility to regularly and *ordinarily* vent the ambition of the people as a class. In this sense, Machiavelli admires the creation of tribunes of the plebs in Rome. This popular magistrate occupies the central role in the Roman republican

political system, and it is itself the result of the (first) major *conflict* between the plebeians and the patricians in Rome following the expulsion of the kings (494 BCE). The Florentine opposes tradition and rehabilitates conflicts early in *Discourses* by arguing that tumults are productive of new institutions (p. 47), because they had a positive role in “the fulfillment of Roman constitution” (D, I. 2).

Tribunes of the plebs enable both formal, institutional modes of venting the humors of the plebs and the more informal ones. Regarding the formal (legislative and judicial) ordinary modes, Machiavelli recognizes the right to veto laws, but he especially praises the tribunes’ accusatory power (right to appeal), including the power to accuse the senators and the consuls, which results in public trials. Machiavelli presents the trials as the most favorable legal mode for the purgation of the city (D, I. 7), since it ensures accountability of those who rule (p. 60) and eliminates the dangers of calumnies and *sects* (D, I. 8). However, equally important is the *ordinary* role of tribunes manifested in the informal/extra-institutional modes of organizing the plebs such as *detractio militiae*, *secessio* and other *non-violent* forms of dissent and unarmed confrontations with the patricians (like riots and demonstrations). Since Machiavelli’s preference for tumults over concord is grounded on the *twofold understanding of ordinary modes* of venting the humors of the people as a class, Pedullà argues that Machiavelli’s theory of conflict prevents the complete juridicization of politics and precludes the reduction of Machiavelli’s theory of conflict to “government of the law” characteristic for the Cambridge School (pp. 63-64, 254-

255). Pedullà’s Machiavelli is far from a typical (neo)republican thinker (p. 124). Bloodless forms of conflict derived from the ordinary modes of venting the humors of the plebs, which were characteristic for Rome in the period until the murder of Tiberius Gracchus (133 BCE), are evaluated positively in Machiavelli’s eyes. Such non-violent modes ensure that the laws are made in favor of freedom (*cf.* D, I. 4).

Furthermore, Machiavelli’s theory of tumult allows for the employment of *extraordinary/violent modes* of conflict resolution depending on the type of conflicts and the degree of corruption. Pedullà claims that conflicts over *property* are presented in Machiavelli as far more dangerous than the other types of conflicts in the city, since they change the aim of the people as a class as well (pp. 75, 80). The Agrarian law revived by the Gracchi tribunes and directed towards redistribution of patricians’ property excessively accumulated in the foreign conquests, resulted in bloodshed and civil war and eventually brought the collapse of the republic (D, I. 37). However, the plebs, who initially seem to be simply seduced by the same desire for property that characterizes the greats, are eventually excused by Machiavelli, as their proceedings are presented as a sort of desperate response to the problem of excessive inequality (D, I. 37 end). According to Pedullà, in the case of the conflicts over property and material redistribution, the ordinary modes applied by the Gracchi brothers are insufficient. In this case Machiavelli’s solution is presented in the form of a violent reformer, best exemplified in the figure of Cleomenes (p. 78). In the attempt to restore order and economic equality, unlike his predecessor Agis (who is similar to the Gracchi

brothers), Cleomenes did not hesitate to resort to (even extreme) violence (D, I, 9, D, I, 18). In order to reform economic disparities of a corrupted city and to reestablish popular power, Machiavelli approves of the employment of extraordinary, violent modes against the greats (p. 83). This figure of radical reformer provides the link between *The Prince* and *Discourses* which together form a single, unified *anti-aristocratic* political project (pp. 83, 142).

The third chapter discusses Machiavelli's positive evaluation of *fear* as a political instrument (cf. D, III, 1). Despite the fact that fear can be paralyzing and destructive (D, I, 45), at the same time, when appropriately used, in analogy with tumults, it represents an indispensable and most useful instrument for the preservation of a free way of life. The tribunes effectively exploited the greats' fear of public trials and harsh (including capital) punishments to curb their domination. Additionally, they continuously threatened the mighty with various forms of bloodless upheavals. Both types of threats are presented as effective *internal* remedies, useful and indispensable correctives from inside, which hold back the appetites of the greats (pp. 97, 99, 107-108, 116). Such (political) interventions, which make possible a free life under the assumption of inevitability of conflicts, are primarily results of the efforts of those who are oppressed in society. However, despite the fact that undoubtedly the most dangerous threat for liberty comes from the side of the greats, a careful reader of Machiavelli needs to avoid being carried away by an over-idealized image of the people as a class in *Discourses* (pp. 139-142). According to Pedullà's analysis the plebs are themselves often corrupted

by the vices of the greats as suggested in chapters D, I, 37 (beginning), D, I, 40, and especially D, I, 46. In this context, the reader is invited to realize that fear is an effective instrument at the disposition of the greats as well. For instance, religion, that is the fear of god(s), checks the desires of the people. Another important instance of curbing the desires of the plebs is the institution of dictatorship, rehabilitated by Machiavelli. In D, I, 33 a dictator is presented as an "emergency magistracy", as a sort of *temporary* prince of a republic (p. 112). The dictator was by law not subject to public accusations, and until 367 BCE he could have been elected only from the ranks of patricians (p. 201), but he was used as an instrument to curb the nobility as well (D, I, 5). On the general level, Pedullà argues that Machiavelli's theory of tumults generates fear or even terror from within as an important tool of political power, and as such ascribes to Machiavelli a never fully developed theory of *metus civilis* (pp. 110, 115). He conceives Machiavellian politics as "the art of remedies" which results in necessary corrections of the insolent behavior of the citizens, especially the mighty ones (p. 164). Among a set of useful political tools such as laws, religion, oaths and necessity (p. 96), Machiavelli finds fear the most effective. In a critical response to humanist naive belief in the education which is supposed to enact citizens' dedication to the common good, Machiavelli introduces "a special pedagogy" of threats which he finds politically far more utile (p. 37).

The fourth chapter investigates the reasons for Machiavelli's preference of the mixed regime over all other types of government (D, I, 2). Traditional support-

ers of the mixed regime (the Ancients and the humanists) favor such a government because the balance of powers between monarchical, aristocratic and popular elements promotes domestic harmony and leads to concord and pacification of society (p. 120). However, Machiavelli introduces the difference between two types of mixed regimes (aristocratic and popular), exemplified respectively in the figure of Sparta and Venice on one side, and Rome on the other. The Florentine introduces the dynamic binary of the greats and the plebs into the mixed regime by claiming that in Rome the guard of liberty was placed in the hands of the plebs (D, I, 5). In other words, he deliberately tilts the (Roman) mixed regime towards its popular pole which secures the space for tumults (p. 123). Tribunes of the plebs hold the guard of liberty through their right to accuse and to veto laws, and through other non-violent extra-institutional modes of venting their humor (p. 182). Machiavelli's popular mixed regime highlights dynamic social and political processes without the possibility of any final equilibrium (p. 124). Sparta and Venice, which are supposedly characterized by a perfect balance, are in fact tilted towards the greats.

The Florentine's novel distinction between popular and aristocratic mixed regime is linked to a couple of mutually interlinked premises. Firstly, Machiavelli rejects the Aristotelian tripartite scheme of society (greats – *mediani* – plebs) which posits the middle class, those not too rich and not too poor, in the center of the political system as guarantors of stability and rampart against internal struggles (p. 127). For Aristotle, who is primarily interested in securing harmony and concord of socie-

ty, both extremes – the plebs and the greats – are equally dangerous (p. 129). The idea of “middleness” in Aristotle's *Politics* was reworked by the civic humanists and transformed from a predominantly economic into “an exclusively moral category”: those who pursue virtue are the guarantors of stability of the order (p. 130). In contrast to humanists obsessed with stability and balance, Machiavelli is primarily interested in the dynamic of political struggle. As a result of his preference for history over philosophy, he rejects the middle way solutions, and follows the binary model/logic in representation of society, which leads him to confront the necessity to choose between the plebs and the greats (pp. 133, 135). Secondly, his binary model defines humors in a way that excludes the possibility of the final rest of the society. Most often the plebs have smaller appetites and defensive posture towards the greats, although their position can even be entirely reversed, depending on the context (p. 141).

In the fifth chapter Pedullà establishes a direct link between internal and foreign politics in Machiavelli. Siding with the plebs in the internal arena at the same time promises more success in the confrontation with the contingency characteristic for the external arena of the city. Inclusion of the plebs in the government in the form of tribunes of the plebs necessarily implies acceptance of the side effects of such a choice – tumult in the city. However, although there are no definite solutions to the harmful side of conflicts which can indeed lead to licentiousness and disintegration of society, one needs to confront the risk they pose with the help of diverse political remedies/correctives (p. 166). It is

possible to well-manage and/or to a certain degree *neutralize* or *moderate* conflicts for them to enhance the strength of the republic. Participation of the people as a class in the government of the city ensures the plebs' military conscription, secures one's own arms (military self-dependence), which in turn makes possible both defense and foreign acquisition(s). Moreover, the same line of reasoning stands behind Machiavelli's preference for Roman inclusive conception of citizenship, which welcomes foreigners, over Sparta's restrictive citizenship policy.

The Florentine's defense of Roman citizenship policy, which grants citizenship to those conquered in wars, should be understood on the premise of *utility*, rather than morality (p. 152). A large population, which is the result of both the open citizenship policy for foreigners and the expansion of the plebs' power in the city, is the source of military strength which is a prerogative for the survival of the state (p. 175). This combination of numerous citizens, military strength and ("inconvenient") tumults is inextricably and directly related to each other (p. 206). Moreover, the alternative between the internal concord of aristocratic mixed regimes of Sparta and Venice which are ordered to maintain themselves in narrow limits, and the internal discords of Roman popular mixed regime orientated towards foreign expansion, in fact represents a false, non-existing choice (p. 164). The Roman imperial model is presented as the only possible model, because, in the end, the necessity always leads to the need of expansion (D, I, 6), which in turn requires a strong and numerous army (D, II, 3, D, II, 19). Just like the humors within the city,

the states are always in competition with each other, moved by fear and desire (p. 167). As a result one must accept the internal conflicts as an inevitable inconvenience of political life, a risk that one must necessarily take, since the other alternative necessarily brings ruin due to the dangers threatening from the arena external to the city. The existence of *external threats* is of great importance for the plebs' status and their rights in the city as well, since fear of the foreign enemy makes the threats of *detractio militiae* and *secessio* (more) effective, and in turn protects the interest of the people as a whole (p. 255). Rome's decline is to a significant degree linked to the destruction of Carthage in 146 BCE (*cf.* D, I, 18, D, III, 16).

In the last chapter of the book Pedullà argues that Machiavelli's theory of tumults "marks the beginning of political modernity" (p. 252) and offers an overview of a long history of modern political conflictualism in Western political thought inspired by Machiavelli's *Discourses* (p. 2). He presents the Florentine as the inaugurator of "a third paradigm" on conflict, which significantly differs from other major alternatives: classical, Aristotelian natural sociability and Hobbesian social contract ("artificial consensualism") (pp. 227, 259). Moreover, Pedullà discerns different interpretations of D, I, 4 (baroque, anti-tyrannical, parliamentary and radical reading), which together constitute "an alternative political tradition" (p. 227). This tradition consists of a whole range of authors, starting from the early Italian reception of Machiavelli in the works of Francesco Sansovino, Antonio Ciccarelli and Tommaso Campanella, all the way to Malby in the period of the French Revolution. However, authors who

highlight the productivity of internecine struggles for political order, predominantly remain silent on their original source – Machiavelli’s thesis of D, I. 4 – because of the early inclusion of *Discourses* (and Machiavelli’s other works) in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* in 1559. After almost 300 years of enormous importance of *Discourses*’ conflictualism, its influence was significantly diminished after the French Revolution, paradoxically, in the very moment when the importance of conflict for political order was finally acknowledged (p. 242). Machiavelli’s theory of conflict was gradually completely overshadowed by the two dominant modern paradigms of conflictualism: Hegelian-Marxist and liberal-republican. In the eyes of Pedullà, both are in fact close to Hobbesian “immunization” of conflict (p. 252). Machiavelli’s theory of conflict was fully revived again only in the context of anti-totalitarianism due to Claude Lefort’s masterpiece *Le Travail de l’œuvre Machiavel* (1972).

Pedullà certainly gives Lefort due recognition and the reader can recognize traces of both, a hidden and an explicit dialogue with Lefort at different points in the text. For instance, in *Machiavelli in Tumult* one can witness a beautiful dialogue between Pedullà and his former teacher, the historian of Athens, Nicole Loraux, whose original analysis of the denial of the political in Greek polis is significantly influenced by Lefort. Pedullà links negation of conflict in Greek politics to analogue humanist annihilation and repression of conflict in Florence. However, several points in relation to Pedullà’s explicit use of Lefort’s reading of Machiavelli deserve critical consideration. I leave aside here the confrontation of Pedullà’s insistence on “anthropological

roots of human conflict” (p. 197) with Lefort’s thesis on political nature of the city, which I believe sharply sets apart the two stunning interpretative endeavors. Instead I limit myself here to two minor points. Firstly, according to Pedullà, Lefort downplays the expansionistic nature of Machiavelli’s project by presenting it as part of a clever, rhetorical design which is primarily intended to convince his audience of the difficulties of conservation (p. 173). I believe that Lefort’s argument against bellicose republicanism as a goal in itself should be primarily understood in the context of fundamental difference and irreducibility of desires which drive the two class figures: while the greats desire “to have”, the plebs desire “to be”. Secondly, Lefort develops his thesis on the theory of conflict/desire(s) in Machiavelli primarily in dialogue with Leo Strauss’ *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958). Although it seems justified to expect a detailed examination of Strauss’ groundbreaking understanding of class conflict in Machiavelli and the inter-related (distinctively modern) praise of tumults in the city, such a promising encounter with Strauss, as a sort of foreign enemy of Pedullà’s *anti-aristocratic* and primarily *historical* reading, never fully occurs.

Pedullà’s reading of Machiavelli brings forth several extremely original, precious insights into Machiavelli’s theory of conflict and as such deserves highest appreciation and most careful examination. *Machiavelli in Tumult* is a must-read book, especially for those readers interested in *democratic* aspects of Machiavelli’s thought from the perspective of prevailing humanist and classical thinking of his time. Pedullà sharply and convincingly delineates the cutting-edge of the Florentine’s



enormous innovation in Western political thought and offers a comprehensive Machiavellian theory of conflict, which inspires the political imagination of those who are subjugated and ill-treated in society. In Ma-

chiavellian fashion, Pedullà's book in fact seeks to encourage the oppressed to creatively confront the new accidents derived from humors here and now, in the form of new modes and institutions.

*Davorin Žagar*  
*Faculty of Liberal Arts,*  
*Adolfo Ibáñez University, Santiago, Chile*