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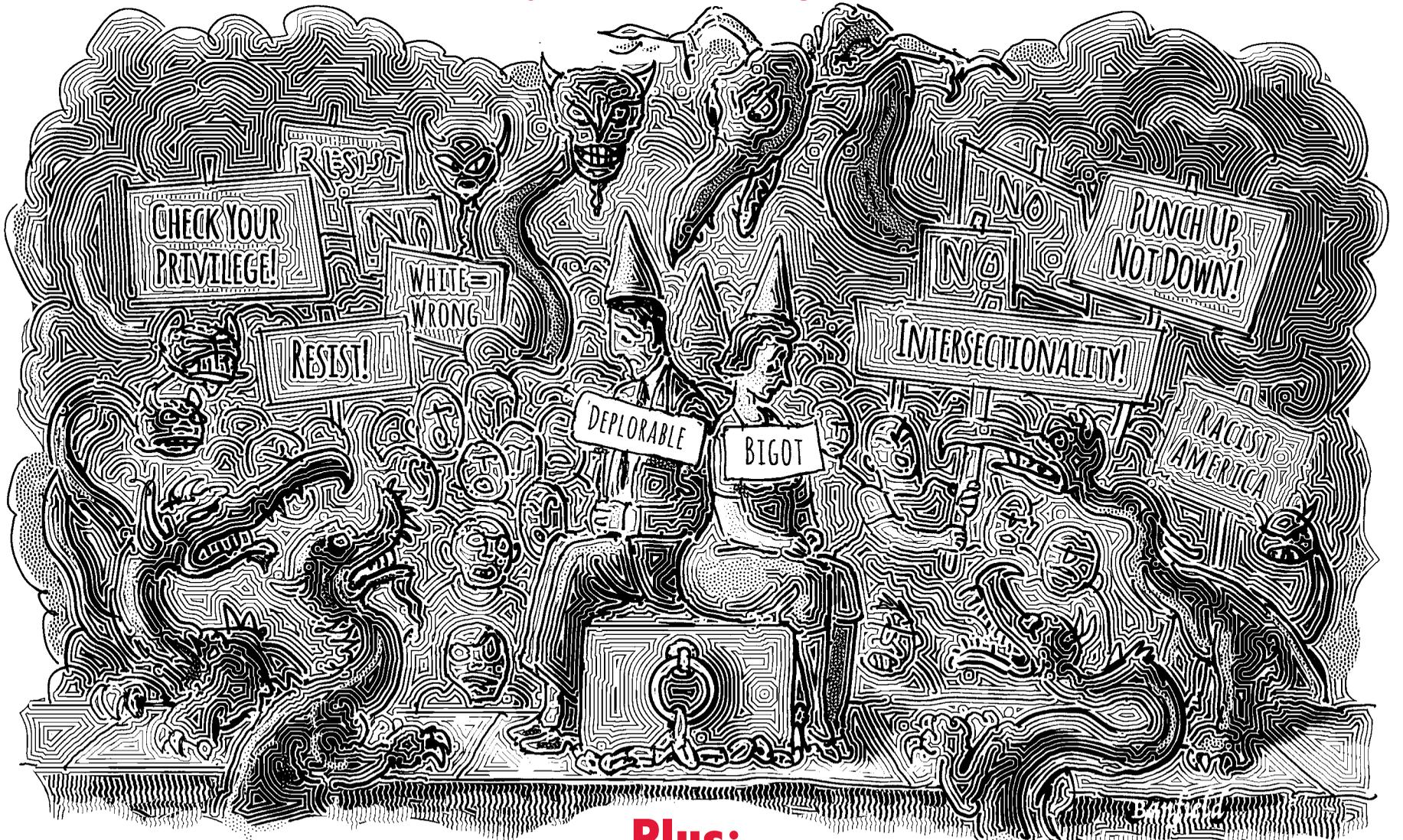
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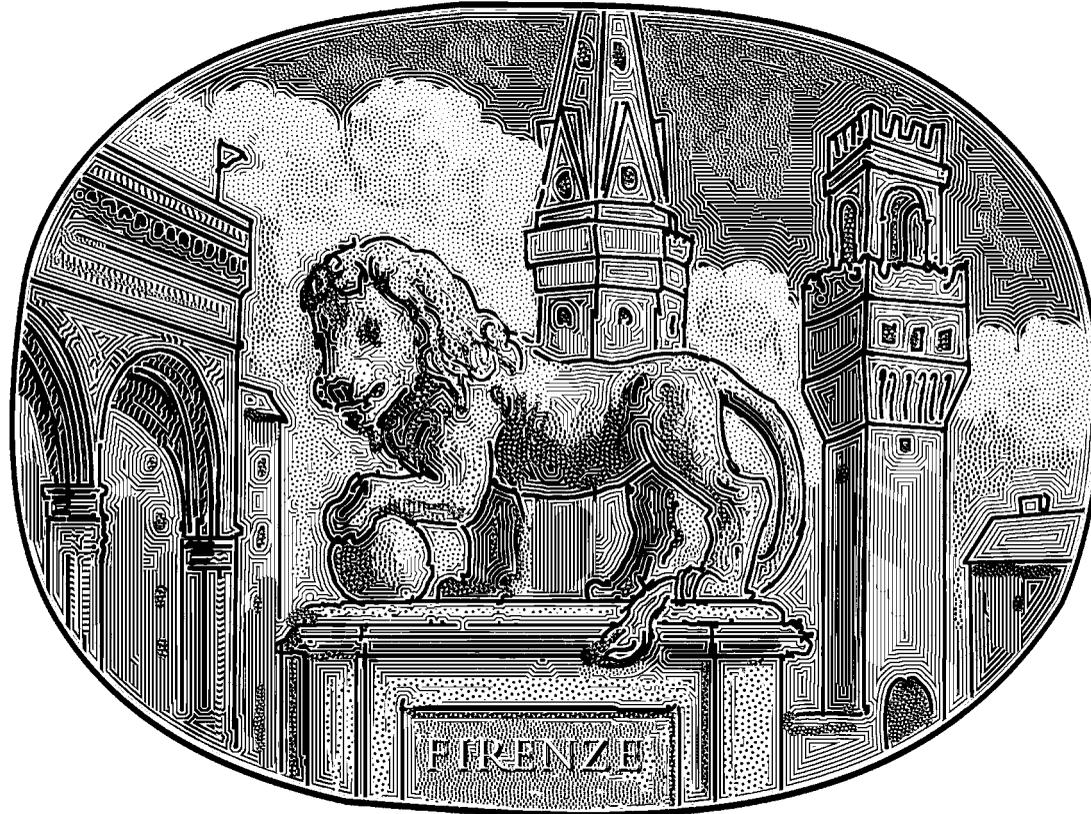
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## MACHIAVELLI THE MODERATE

*Machiavelli's Politics*, by Catherine H. Zuckert.  
The University of Chicago Press, 512 pages, \$45



**N**ICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI IS A PROBLEMATIC figure. A champion of bold strokes, he deplored the “middle way” and counselled princes to commit themselves “without any hesitation” rather than remain neutral. He wrote with the audacity he commended to his readers. Eliminate your rival’s bloodline—“Kill the sons of Brutus.” Good ends excuse morally dubious means—even cruelty, which can be “well used.” For most readers maxims like these have determined Machiavelli’s reputation, making his name into an adjective of censure.

For more attentive readers Machiavelli’s ends have served to excuse or explain his immorality. He claimed to write in order to strengthen his native Florence, to liberate Italy, or, most ambitiously, for the “common benefit of everyone.” If historians of political thought are right to count members of modern states among Machiavelli’s beneficiaries, inquiry into his books is an important enterprise. It is also risky. For reasons he himself explained, investigations into founding mo-

ments can disclose crimes and conspiracies as well as heroic acts and edifying exemplars.

**T**HE DOMINANT SCHOLARLY APPROACHES to Machiavelli have divided over the extent of his innovation and the scope of his ambition. On one reading, he is a leading figure in a tradition of political thought originating in Aristotle and Cicero and running down to present day “neo-Romans” or republicans. The thinkers of this tradition prefer republics to principalities because they consider active citizenship noble in itself and a powerful hedge against domination or tyranny. Machiavelli’s significance lies mainly in his discovery of new means to old and enduring ends.

An alternative approach understands Machiavelli to have inaugurated an entirely new tradition by changing both the ends and means of politics. No longer concerned with excellence of soul and disputes over justice, political life becomes a struggle among passionate, self-interested individuals. The bold immorality of his practical advice hints at his bolder and

broader attack on Christianity for “weakening the world,” and ancient political philosophy for teaching men to orient themselves by “imagined republics.” Although his campaign against tradition has to do with politics in the first instance, it is in the final analysis all-encompassing, embracing epistemology and philosophy.

The lines separating these approaches have been tolerably clear for some time. The first, a narrative of revision, stems from Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock’s work of the 1970s; the second, a narrative of rupture, from Leo Strauss’s *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958). The political stakes of this debate have emerged more recently, as proponents of the first approach have articulated a republicanism concerned with discovering and counteracting novel forms of “domination” in service of an egalitarian conception of citizenship. The second approach to Machiavelli, by contrast, is bound up with an attempt to renew Socratic philosophy, a way of life conceived as distinct from that of the citizen and available only to a few.



CATHERINE ZUCKERT'S *MACHIAVELLI'S Politics* brings these approaches into close and productive contact. Although her title evokes Aristotle's great work, Zuckert, who teaches political science at the University of Notre Dame, argues that Machiavelli is best understood as the enemy rather than heir of Aristotle. Machiavelli does not consider humans to be naturally political, for instance, nor does he consider nature or the common good suitable guides for political action. Her Machiavelli, like Strauss's, initiates a rupture rather than a revision.

Nevertheless, Zuckert departs from Strauss in several respects, some seemingly superficial, others more profound. Strauss famously exposed Machiavelli's use of numerology to convey an esoteric teaching; Zuckert does no counting apart from the political math of few and many, majority and minority. Strauss's book staged a prolonged encounter between himself and Machiavelli, to which only select contemporaries were admitted; Zuckert intersperses her own interpretations with those of fellow scholars, Strauss among them, and she tallies her debts and disagreements in respectful and pointed footnotes. Zuckert is concerned to place her interpretation of Machiavelli in its scholarly context.

Although Zuckert proceeds through careful readings of Machiavelli's works, she also describes the historical context surrounding their composition (a hallmark of Skinner's method). The texts themselves suggest the viability of this approach. As Zuckert notes, not only the abundant contemporary examples in Machiavelli's works but also his own representation in the *persona* of a political actor—as for instance in the letter to Lorenzo de Medici that opens the *Prince*—justify attention to immediate political context. To get at Machiavelli's political thought requires understanding his "politics," in the sense of that word we use when asking about someone's partisan sympathies and opinions. Historical research into Machiavelli's service in the Florentine republic informs Zuckert's interpretation of *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy* in the first half of her book. The second half contains chapters on Machiavelli's later works—the comedies, *The Art of War*, *Life of Castruccio Castracani*, and, finally, the *Florentine Histories*. Chronology, not theme, organizes Zuckert's synoptic study of these texts.

Zuckert also considers Machiavelli's historical situation relevant to evaluating his authorial ambitions. She claims that "Machiavelli could not possibly have understood himself to be the founder of modernity" since "that insight is available only in hindsight." He knew that

even his most ambitious projects, like the unification of Italy, could be achieved only posthumously and thanks to the advice he imparted through books, which for all their power were not invulnerable (as the lost volumes of Livy attest). Zuckert's interpretation of Machiavelli's comedy, *Clizia*, suggests that the character Nicomaco's foolish longings for eternal youth represent self-parody on the part of Niccolò.

ZUCKERT'S MOST PROFOUND DEPARTURE from Strauss, however, concerns Machiavelli's understanding of Christianity. Zuckert acknowledges Machiavelli's opposition to the "present religion" and the more subtle impieties hinted at, for instance in *The Prince's* treatment of parricide and the plot of the *Clizia*. But she denies that the eradication of Christianity is the goal of Machiavelli's enterprise or the prerequisite for its success. He admired the strength of Spain, France, and the Swiss, all of them Christian states. These cases, in Zuckert's view, substantiate Machiavelli's claim in the *Discourses* that cowardly interpretations of Christianity, not the religion

itself, were to blame for the world's weakness. Both in ancient and modern contexts "training"—especially but not exclusively military training—matters more than religion. Machiavelli's "primary concern," Zuckert argues, "was not a critique of Christianity so much as an improved understanding and practice of politics."

Machiavelli didn't attempt to understand politics by arbitrating among the goals that citizens claimed to pursue. Instead he tried to study and satisfy their strongest passions, particularly the desire to rule and the desire not to be ruled. Although opposed, these passions were compatible under certain conditions. Machiavelli sought to realize those conditions, Zuckert writes, by persuading ambitious politicians that "the best way of achieving their own ambitions was to secure the lives, families, and properties of their subjects or fellow citizens."

Zuckert's phrasing links Machiavelli to later liberal thought. (He had advised his princes to avoid hatred by abstaining from the property and women of his subjects.) In the *Discourses* he praises the prosperity of "free



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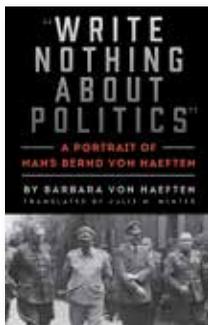
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towns and provinces," where everyone "seeks to acquire those goods he believes he can enjoy once acquired," and advises princes to ensure that "one person does not fear to adorn his possessions for fear that they be taken away from him." Even in his comedies, Zuckert shows, Machiavelli endorses a certain sort of bourgeois respectability. Satisfying the illicit passions that drive the *Mandragola's* plot, for instance, requires "maintaining the appearance of a conventional marriage sanctified by the Church." Machiavelli thus offers an immoralist's defense of morality, or at least the appearance thereof. These anticipations of liberalism suggest a studied and utilitarian moderation.

But Zuckert finds in Machiavelli's works not only a foundation for, but a corrective to, liberalism. He is more attentive than liberal theorists to satisfying—not merely suppressing or redirecting—the desire to rule and to win glory in doing so. The superiority of republics to principalities, Zuckert maintains, lies not merely in the protection of property but "in the hope citizens of a free regime have that they or their children may attain high office." Machiavelli is also more attentive than liberals to the danger of corruption. By this term, says Zuckert, Machiavelli understands the people's "failure to do what is necessary to preserve liberty," a condition that increases in proportion to their security and prosperity unless checked by good laws and periodic returns to founding moments.

Machiavelli's republicanism was more robust and abiding than that of our own republicans. He addresses not only the people's desire for "non-domination," but the desire of the few to dominate. If there is a kind of egalitarianism inherent in his description of the fundamental political passions—as Zuckert says, for Machiavelli "the 'great' are not different from the many by nature"—it is a noble egalitarianism. All equally desire to rule and seek glory when they can, just as they resist and seek liberty when they must. A view of republics or citizenship focused only on non-domination is necessarily partial. This partiality limits the applicability of Machiavelli's insights.

Zuckert's Machiavelli, like the Machiavelli of the republicans, intervenes in present day political debates. (Zuckert suggests he would alleviate economic inequality with subtle changes in taxation rather than outright redistribution, for instance.) But Machiavelli's enduring relevance arises not from the depth of his insight, nor the ingenuity of his interpreters, nor even from the still-shocking brutality of his maxims. It stems from his restraint. Even the works that contained "ev-

erything he knew," Zuckert notes, left a "short road" for his readers to march on their own two feet. And he alerted his readers that politics would present them with new challenges, for which he could do no more than train them via "mock battles." Because Machiavelli offered no system and knew no ordered whole, the actions, judgments, and praise or blame of his students would be their own. However "republican" his politics, he addressed his works to those who wanted to understand and to win glory—that is, to princes or would-be princes.

MACHIAVELLI TRIED TO RECRUIT for his political project the sorts of young people whom Socrates had tried to win for philosophy. Zuckert notes that Socrates and Machiavelli share more than one might think. Both are concerned primarily with the human things rather than cosmology; both follow reason even when it leads away from conventional pieties; both eschew treatises for dialectical forms of writing. Machiavelli nevertheless represents a "major challenge" to ancient political philosophy, Zuckert concludes: "writers need to show how their works improve the lives of ordinary people." It is not sufficient to withdraw from the assembly with a select few, Machiavelli suggests, not only because one is bound to come under suspicion from those who remain in the assembly (as Socrates did), but because one cannot find fulfillment in private life. Machiavelli's deepest departure from Socrates concerns the place of politics in the hierarchy of human aspirations.

At the foundation of modern politics Zuckert discovers an author concerned more with politics than theology, partial to republics over principalities, and engaged with his immediate context as much as the timeless antimonies of political life. Her Machiavelli is neither Strauss's apostate nor Skinner's sort of republican. Readers persuaded by these authors will question whether Catherine Zuckert has adequately accounted for the novel political challenges presented by Christian revelation, or whether she has ascribed to an author of the 16th century insights that his times would not have allowed. Nevertheless, her approach allows Machiavelli to remain as he presented himself—neither a philosopher nor a pamphleteer, but an eminently *political* thinker, concerned both to understand political life and to defend it against its critics.

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