

ARTICLE

Machiavelli against Imperialism: a Critique of Roman Expansionism and a Call for a Confederative Solution

Ricardo Silva¹

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5447-4859>

¹Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Department of Sociology and Political Science. Florianópolis/SC, Brazil

Machiavelli's republicanism is grounded on two primary aspirations: the preservation of freedom within republics and the expansion of their territories. However, these goals are not indefinitely compatible, as an imperialist foreign policy ultimately undermines a free way of life. An influential understanding of Machiavelli's 'republican dilemma' suggests that he unequivocally prioritized imperial expansion over preserving freedom when these ends collided. This interpretation points to Machiavelli's endorsement of the Roman model, which sacrificed its own freedom to expand its dominion over other peoples, as evidence of such a preference. This article challenges the notion of Machiavelli's imperialist intent, arguing that this interpretation not only overlooks Machiavelli's critique of Roman imperialism but also ignores a non-imperialist alternative to territorial expansion presented in the 'Discorsi': the formation of leagues or confederations of free states for mutual defense. The league-based model of territorial expansion is the only approach that can effectively update Machiavelli's international thought, aligning best with the contemporary republican ideal of freedom as non-domination.

Keywords: Machiavelli; republic; empire; territorial expansion; leagues of free states

<http://doi.org/10.1590/1981-3821202500020004>

Correspondence: rsilva@cfh.ufsc.br

Funding: National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) - 304528/2019-6.

This publication is registered under a CC-BY License.

In his studies on the history of the republican conception of freedom, Quentin Skinner identified a set of ideas he termed the “neo-roman theory of free states” (SKINNER, 1998, p. 01). Although his research primarily focused on seventeenth-century English thinkers who opposed Hobbes and advocated for parliamentary power against absolute monarchy, the Cambridge historian argued that this theory “had been revived and adapted by the defenders of republican *libertà* in the Italian Renaissance, above all by Machiavelli in his *Discorsi* on Livy's history of Rome” (SKINNER, 1998, p. 10).

Despite valid concerns regarding Skinner's close association between Machiavelli's theory of freedom and the ideas of the ‘neo-Romans’ in England (BARROS, 2022; PALONEN, 1998), the neo-Roman theory of free states does capture at least one central aspect of Machiavelli's republicanism. It asserts that a citizen can only be free within a free state, emphasizing the inseparable link between the freedom experienced within a political community and the non-domination of that community in the external arena, populated by other cities or states. In this framework, external domination of a republic would indicate a failure of its internal order.

For Machiavelli, a republic committed to preserving freedom must implement laws and policies that cultivate the martial virtues of its citizens and encourage territorial expansion, which he viewed as the only reliable safeguard against foreign domination. However, beyond a certain point, the processes associated with territorial expansion begin to undermine the very freedom they were meant to protect. Not only does expansion immediately annihilate freedom in the conquered republics, but the relentless pursuit of new territories over time also erodes the freedom of the imperial republics themselves. This dilemma encapsulates what might be termed the ‘problem of empire’ in Machiavelli's republicanism.

While neo-Roman interpreters have remained relatively silent on this problem, a growing number of scholars depict Machiavelli as a staunch imperialist. This argument posits that when a republic's internal freedom conflicts with its external expansion, Machiavelli would invariably favor expansion. This perspective, they claim, would explain Machiavelli's call for modern states to ‘imitate’ the Roman model. This article challenges this imperialist interpretation of Machiavelli's international thought

and proposes an alternative resolution to the tension between freedom and territorial expansion

My argument unfolds in four sections. The first two sections reconstruct the ‘imperialist’ interpretation of Machiavelli. The first section outlines how contemporary scholars have developed this interpretation of the Florentine theorist. The second section examines how the imperialist thesis appears in Machiavelli’s most significant works, particularly in ‘Discourses on Livy’ (hereafter referred to as ‘Discorsi’).

The final two sections present objections to the imperialist interpretation and propose an alternative perspective. The third section analyzes Machiavelli’s critiques of Rome’s expansionist model. While Rome’s imperial expansion increased its wealth and effectively protected the city from external threats, it also suppressed the freedom of the conquered republics and played a significant role in the erosion of freedom among Roman citizens. The fourth and final section explores a relatively overlooked solution in contemporary interpretations of the problem of empire in Machiavelli’s republicanism, focusing on his suggestion for a confederative model (the ‘leagues’) among free cities as a more moderate approach to territorial expansion that preserves freedom.

If the discussion presented below does not entirely refute the interpretation that Machiavelli unequivocally favored the imperial republican model, it should at least provide sufficient evidence to cast doubt on the imperialist interpretation. By underscoring the ambiguities in Machiavelli’s support for the Roman model of territorial expansion and emphasizing his proposal to replace the imperialist model with the defensive model of leagues, the discussion here presented aims to reaffirm Machiavelli’s preference for freedom over territorial expansion when the pursuit of one necessitates the sacrifice of the other.

Machiavelli the Imperialist

It is undeniable that Machiavelli was a genuine admirer of the Roman Republic. For the beleaguered Italian cities of his time, Rome stood as a model of a proud republic uniquely capable of reconciling freedom with greatness. Machiavelli’s admiration for Rome and the ancient world becomes evident from the very beginning of the ‘Discorsi’, where he laments that in the modern era, “neither prince nor republic may be found that has recourse to the examples of the ancients”, especially “in ordering

republics, maintaining states, governing kingdoms, ordering the military and administrating war, judging subjects, and increasing empire” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 06).

Machiavelli’s clear admiration for Rome has led many contemporary interpreters to view his works as an unconditional endorsement of Roman foreign policy, marked by continuous territorial expansion driven by military power. Confronted with the inevitable dilemma of balancing the desire for internal freedom with external expansion, these scholars contend that Machiavelli would unequivocally prioritize the expansionist imperative. As a result, they portray Machiavelli as a staunch imperialist, deeply engrossed in ‘power politics’. Mark Hulliung (1984), for example, argued that “by no means is imperialism an obscure or occasional topic in Machiavelli’s writings. On the contrary, it is a central theme running throughout all his works, from beginning to end” (HULLIUNG, 1984, p. 06). Confronted with weak evidence supporting the necessity of Roman imperial expansion, Machiavelli, according to Hulliung (1984), “clouded the issues and sought refuge in spurious arguments” to assert that “the Roman way had to be followed”. Furthermore, “by deceiving himself into believing there was no middle way”, he ultimately became “totally bad” (HULLIUNG, 1984, p. 59).

Leo Strauss (1958) also attributed to Machiavelli the belief that “republics are not free to choose between a policy of aggrandizement or one of mere preservation” (STRAUSS, 1958, p. 260). According to this perspective, Machiavelli’s endorsement of an “intelligent policy of imperialism as it was practiced by the Romans” suggests “a considerable degree not only of domestic turbulence but above all of corruption of manners” (STRAUSS, 1958, pp. 260-261). Machiavelli’s alleged acquiescence to corruption is taken as evidence that, in the tragic choice between freedom and greatness, the latter always outweighs the former.

Building on Strauss (1958), another interpreter argued that Machiavelli’s ‘rapacious republicanism’ resolves the tension between freedom and greatness by elevating the latter to the ‘highest good’ of the republic. This perspective views Machiavelli’s approach as a form of “Realpolitik (...) which holds that politics is fundamentally a matter of promoting the security and greatness of the state by whatever means necessary, including deceit and unjust violence” (FISCHER, 2006, p. xxxvi). According to this view, even the extensive incorporation of plebeians into

Rome's power structures serves merely as a means to the true end: territorial expansion for the enhancement of the republic. As another Straussian reader of Machiavelli has argued, the Florentine theorist "loves the people in the same way that Rome loved its plebes, as soldiers" (SULLIVAN, 2004, p. 38).

However, attributing an imperialist intent to Machiavelli is not exclusive to Strauss' decidedly textualist approach. Scholars more aligned with contextualist perspectives have reached similar conclusions. For instance, David Armitage (2002), in exploring the 'republican dilemma' between empire and freedom in the history of ideas, observes that Machiavelli, likely influenced by the Roman historian Sallust, believed that "attack was the best form of defense" for protecting a community's freedom from external threats (ARMITAGE, 2002, p. 32). Unlike Sallust, however, Machiavelli recognized the tragic nature of this dilemma, arguing that "it would be impossible for any state to avoid the compulsions of expansion, and hence to escape the loss of its liberty" (ARMITAGE, 2002, p. 31). As another scholar summarized, "for Machiavelli, liberty is of secondary importance; what he really cares about is greatness, expansion, empire" (REGENT, 2011, p. 760).

The most ambitious contextualist interpretation of Machiavelli's alleged imperialism comes from Michael Hörnqvist (2004), who applies a modified version of Skinner's methodology¹. Hörnqvist (2004) interprets Machiavelli's core texts as rhetorical works intended to engage a specific, historically situated audience influenced by the long-standing tradition of Florentine imperialism. Classic Humanist political thinkers such as Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni viewed Florence as the rightful heir to Rome, tasked with the civilizing mission of spreading republican order and the politics of freedom throughout Tuscany, and potentially across all of Italy and the world (BROWN, 2000; HÖRNQVIST, 2004; MOWL, 2018; WOODHOUSE, 2018).

Hörnqvist (2004) situates Machiavelli within this tradition but points to an important innovation he introduced to Florentine imperialism: the belief that Rome's

¹This is how Hörnqvist (2004) articulates his effort to refine Skinner's linguistic contextualism: "I have distinguished between two different levels of reading: on the one hand, an ideological level, focusing on the relationship between the particular text and the ideological vocabularies and the systems of representation available at the time; on the other hand, a rhetorical level that addresses the text's engagement with, and embeddedness in, the local and historically contingent political and practical context of interacting particulars. While Skinner's empirical studies have been concerned mainly, if not entirely, with the former of these two levels, the present study focuses on the latter, and on the relationship between the two levels" (HÖRNQVIST, 2004, p. 37).

legacy was not exclusive to Florence, as the Roman model could be emulated by any republic or monarchy aspiring to succeed in territorial expansion. In fact, Machiavelli harbored “a deep and genuine fear that some other modern state will bring about this Roman revival before the Florentines” (HÖRNQVIST, 2004, p. 272-273). A ‘novelty of his political thought’ lies in the universalization of lessons drawn from his Florentine predecessors, which endowed the imperialist ideology with a more abstract and theoretical discourse while maintaining a close dialogue with the specific conditions of Florence in his time. Thus, it would not be paradoxical to assert that Machiavelli’s work is both “less confined to its local and contemporary context, and more directly aimed at the *here and now* of Florentine politics” (HÖRNQVIST, 2004, p. 272).

Interpretations that attribute an imperialist ‘leitmotif’ to Machiavelli’s republicanism undeniably find support in numerous textual sources. Although this article primarily challenges this interpretation within the ‘Discorsi’, it is essential to recognize that Machiavelli’s preoccupation with territorial expansion and the defense of Florence’s external domains runs throughout his entire diplomatic career, including his earliest chancery writings². In response to the instability of Florence’s foreign conquests, intensified by the chaos following the French invasion of 1494, Machiavelli was compelled to closely examine Florence’s foreign policy toward the communities under its hegemony in Tuscany, such as Pisa, Pistoia, Volterra, and Arezzo³.

Machiavelli begins to outline his vision of imperial expansion in abstract terms in the early chapters of ‘The Prince’ (1998), particularly in Chapters 03, 04, and 05, where he discusses the processes of annexation that define mixed principalities. This discussion culminates in Chapter 05, where he addresses, as the title suggests, “How cities or principalities which lived by their own laws before they were occupied should be administrated” (MACHIARELLI, 1998, p. 20). A newly established prince seeking to expand his domain by annexing another city must be mindful of the challenges in maintaining control over the conquered territory and should aim to secure it by one of three methods: completely destroying the city, residing there personally, or allowing

²In a recent study on the subject, Adam Mowl (2018) notes that “Although Machiavelli’s political works before the *Discorsi* do not present us with successive redactions of a theory of empire, they do provide glimpses of concepts, arguments, and problems of an imperial nature that, taken together, lay some of the groundwork on which the later theory is raised” (MOWL, 2018, p. 111).

³A comprehensive overview of the various dimensions of Florentine rule in the Tuscan region is provided by Connell and Zorzi (2000).

the city to continue under its own laws while imposing a tribute and establishing a local elite dependent on the new prince. The task is easier when the conquered city was already ruled by a principality. In such cases, ensuring the submission of the inhabitants, who are already accustomed to being subjects, typically requires only the ruthless elimination of the former prince and his lineage.

However, the situation becomes more complicated when the conquered province was accustomed to living under its own laws and in freedom, as is the case with a republic. After recounting Rome and Sparta's successes and failures in experimenting with various methods to secure control over annexed territories, Machiavelli concludes that the most effective way to retain control over a republic is to bring about its complete destruction, because "in republics there is greater life, greater hatred, more desire for vengeance" (MACHIARELLI, 1998, p. 21). Since the unity of the citizens poses an insurmountable obstacle to consolidating imperial power, no conquest will be lasting unless the inhabitants are 'broken up or dispersed'. Anyone who seeks to dominate a republic has no other choice, as "whoever becomes patron of a city accustomed to living free and not destroy it, should expect to be destroyed by it". The reason for this is that the memory of freedom is difficult to erase and serves as a constant source of resistance to imperial rule: "in rebellion", conquered republics call upon "the name of liberty and its own ancient orders which are never forgotten either through length of time or because of benefits received" (MACHIARELLI, 1998, p. 21).

However, the elements for a theory of imperial domination outlined in 'The Prince' (1998) provides only a partial perspective on the problem of the empire within Machiavelli's republicanism. While they shed light on the consequences for the civic life and freedom of conquered republics, they offer little insight about the fate of liberty within the imperial republics themselves. This omission may be attributed to Machiavelli's primary focus on principalities – political entities that, unlike republics, can thrive without civic life or liberty. As Pocock (1975) noted, "Machiavelli, beginning work on *Il Príncipe* in 1512, does not in this treatise consider innovation from the aspect of its impact on citizenship" (POCOCK, 1975, p. 156). This incompleteness is addressed only in the 'Discorsi'. By bringing the expansionist policy of the Roman Republic to the forefront, Machiavelli offers a more comprehensive analysis of the tension between freedom and empire in the life of republics.

Empire and domination: the Roman model

While the imperialist interpretation of Machiavelli rests on a selective reading of his views on the foreign policy of the Roman Republic, it is true that the ‘Discorsi’ contain significant passages that support this interpretation. This is especially evident in the more abstract discussions of the relationship between empire and freedom found in the early chapters. However, before presenting the textual evidence for what I term the ‘imperialist interpretation’ of Machiavelli – and giving due consideration to the thesis I intend to critique – it is important to address a potential methodological concern. Specifically, does this approach risk falling into the ‘anachronistic’ trap of applying the concept of ‘imperialism’ to phenomena that existed long before the term itself emerged in the late 19th century? There are two complementary responses to this objection: one methodological and the other substantive.

The first response involves clarifying that the approach taken here is rooted in contemporary political theory, not the history of political thought. Undoubtedly, one of the key methodological contributions of linguistic contextualism, particularly as developed by the Cambridge School, is its critique of interpretive strategies that impose present-day ideas and values onto a past where such concepts were not available to the authors in question (SILVA, 2010). Quentin Skinner (1969) identified the ‘anachronism’ inherent in this approach, arguing that it tends to create ‘mythologies’ rather than offering genuine historical analysis. A historian truly committed to understanding the texts of past authors should begin with the premise that “there simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions” (SKINNER, 1969, p. 50). However, these precautions are primarily pertinent to the historian’s work, which aims to understand what a particular statement meant to its original author within the context of its time. An equally legitimate approach, however, involves considering the relevance that a historical text might hold for contemporary political theory. While Skinner’s contextualist methodology remains valuable for historians, it may not fully serve political theorists who seek to emphasize the contemporary significance of historical texts. This point is reflected in Skinner’s own intellectual journey. As Skinner’s focus shifted from the history of ideas to political theory – especially through his increasing engagement in the ‘republican revival’ as an alternative to the prevailing dominance of liberalism – his approach to historical texts evolved. His methodology gradually moved

beyond earlier constraints, placing greater emphasis on how these texts are utilized in contemporary theoretical debates (SILVA, 2017).

The second response, more substantive, acknowledges that similar phenomena can occur across different historical periods, even if they are described using different terms. Our understanding of these persistent phenomena depends on the level of abstraction we apply (BEVIR, 1994). Although the term ‘imperialism’ was not available in Machiavelli's linguistic context, the practices it describes were well-known long before the Renaissance. Instances of cities or peoples conquering and dominating others for the benefit of their rulers, often at the expense of the freedom of the conquered, existed well before the rise of nation-states. With the concern about ‘anachronism’ addressed, we can now examine the passages in the ‘Discorsi’ that seem to support an imperialist interpretation.

As numerous interpreters have noted, Machiavelli's most innovative thesis on the political and institutional life of republics is found in Chapter 04 of Book I, where he emphasizes – contrary to classical republican tradition – the potentially beneficial effects of the antagonism between the ‘humors’ of the people and the greats (PEDULLÁ, 2018). In Chapter IX of ‘The Prince’ (1998), Machiavelli had already observed that this antagonism, manifest in the fact that “the people desire not to be commanded nor oppressed by the great, and the great desire to command and oppress the people,” is inherent to “every city”. The form of government, whether “principality, liberty, or license,” is an “effect” of this division within the sociopolitical body (MACHIARELLI, 1998, p. 39). However, in the ‘Discorsi’, he advances beyond this significant observation. After underscoring the inevitability of conflict and its potentially positive effects on the freedom of the Roman republic, among which “all the laws that are made in favor of freedom” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 16), Machiavelli poses the question: “Where the guard of freedom may be settled more securely, in the people or in the great?” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 17). The answer is not provided immediately or directly. Anyway, the author's ultimate conclusion on this matter forms the essential basis for the imperialist interpretation.

In the passage from Chapters 04 to 06 of Book I, Machiavelli deliberately hesitates, drawing his audience into a rhetorical game designed to sway their beliefs

towards his own⁴. He presents arguments for both sides of the debate – the people and the greats. After all, history offers examples of admirable republics that chose either model, entrusting the preservation of liberty to either the people or the greats.

It is well known that Machiavelli's primary audience consisted of young Florentine aristocrats educated in civic humanism and the classical republican tradition. More than their Roman predecessors such as Cicero, Livy, and Sallust, these young humanists harbored deep suspicion toward the idea of granting the turbulent Florentine populace any role in governance, let alone the 'guard of freedom'. The Soderini Republic, with its vision of broad-based governance centered on the hegemony of the Great Council, left no fond memories for figures such as Zanobi Buondelmonti and Cosimo Rucellai, to whom Machiavelli dedicated the 'Discorsi' (1996). For these individuals, Venice – not Rome – was the ideal model of a republic. Machiavelli's goal was to challenge and change this belief.

The author's cautious approach is understandable, given the need to respect the sensitivities of his audience. In chapter 05, Machiavelli (1996) presents a balanced view of the arguments from both sides. Proponents of the Roman model, where the people serve as the guardians of freedom, contend that "when those who are popular are posted as the guard of freedom, it is reasonable that they have more care for it, and since they are not able to seize it, they do not permit others to seize it". Conversely, advocates of the aristocratic republic argue that entrusting the guard of freedom to the great produces "two good works: one is that they satisfy their ambition more (...); the other is that they take away a quality of authority from the restless spirits of the plebs". At one point, Machiavelli even suggests that, when considering only the duration of freedom, "one takes the side of the nobles because the freedom of Sparta and Venice had longer life than that of Rome" (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 18).

However, the duration of a free way of life is just one of Machiavelli's criteria for measuring the success of a republic. In addition to the length of its freedom, the scope and quality of that freedom, as well as the republic's capacity to achieve

⁴As Ostrensky (2019) observes in the analysis of politically controversial topics, "Machiavelli assumes (...) the role of a skilled orator, aiming to persuade an audience to abandon their initial views in favor of the ones he advocates. This orator shows a preference for the rhetorical device of the dilemma, allowing him to explore political and moral issues from multiple angles, encouraging readers to reject conventional answers while also prompting them to take a stand" (OSTRENSKY, 2019, p. 58).

greatness, are also crucial factors. Thus, Machiavelli concludes Chapter 05 by asserting that a thorough examination of the issue leads to the following conclusion: “you are reasoning either about a republic that wishes to make an empire, such as Rome, or about one for whom it is enough to maintain itself” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 18). The author goes as far as possible in adhering to the rhetorical principle of considering the opposing perspective (‘audi alteram partem’). He acknowledges the arguments of proponents of aristocratic republics, suggesting that the decision about preserving freedom is a choice between two equally valid alternatives. However, in the following chapter, the terms of this choice begin to shift, and Machiavelli’s support for the people as the true guardians of freedom becomes more evident. It is during this shift that the republic’s imperialist model of territorial expansion gains prominence, providing the strongest textual evidence, for those who view Machiavelli as a committed imperialist.

However, a reader eager to grasp Machiavelli’s ultimate reasons for endorsing the imperial model of a republic must wait until the final four lengthy paragraphs of Chapter 06 in Book I. In the earlier paragraphs, the comparison between the two republican models is further elaborated, providing more details on Sparta and Venice on one side, and Rome on the other. Sparta’s success in preserving its republican freedom for over eight centuries is ultimately credited to the genius of its founder, Lycurgus, who established a city built on frugality and material equality among its citizens. With no wealth disparity to fuel ambition among the plebeians, they were content to entrust the protection of liberty to the nobility. There was “more equality of belongings in Sparta and less equality of rank” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 21). Furthermore, the city maintained a small population and resisted the influx of foreigners, preserving a homogeneity of customs that fostered internal unity and served as a powerful antidote against corruption.

Venice, in contrast, developed its aristocratic structure more through the contingencies of its growth than through the foresight of a legislative genius. In its early days, the city adopted a democratic form of governance, granting all residents the right to participate in government. Unlike Sparta, Venice did not restrict foreigners from settling within its borders. However, it barred them from holding public office, creating a distinction between the original inhabitants and their descendants, known as ‘gentlemen’, and the newer residents, referred to as the ‘populace’. The enduring unity

and stability of the Serenissima Republic stemmed from two key factors: a careful balance “between whoever governed them and those who were governed”; and the republic’s decision to never involve the populace “to work in things in which they could seize authority” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 20-21).

Based on his analysis of Sparta and Venice, Machiavelli identifies two crucial conditions for the success of aristocratic republics in maintaining internal peace and ensuring the longevity of freedom: “either not employ the plebs in war, as did the Venetians, or not open the way to foreigners, as did the Spartans”. Rome, however, did both, “which gave the plebs strength and increase and infinite opportunities for tumult” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 21) Machiavelli suggests that Rome could have made a different choice to avoid such unrest, but this would have been at the expense of its imperial expansion. If

the Roman state had come to be quieter, this inconvenience would have followed: that it would also have been weaker because it cut off the way by which it could come to the greatness it achieved, so that if Rome wished to remove the causes of tumults, it removed too the causes of expansion (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 21).

In the passage above, Machiavelli concludes his evaluation of the different arguments for adopting one model of safeguarding freedom over another, leaning in favor of the Roman model. This conclusion, however, is neither abrupt nor unconditional. Perhaps anticipating potential criticisms of endorsing the expansionist Roman model, Machiavelli issues a cautionary note, acknowledging that in “all human things he who examines well sees this: that one inconvenience can never be suppressed without another’s cropping up” and that “nothing entirely clean and entirely without suspicion is ever found” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 21-22). Only after this acknowledgment does Machiavelli present his conclusive argument to justify his preference. The entire earlier rhetorical exercise, which implied that choosing between the people or the greats as the guardian of freedom was merely a matter of preference, falls apart. Emulating Rome’s model transitions from being a matter of choice to a ‘necessity’. But why?

If it were truly possible for a republic to sustain itself indefinitely without expansion, then the aristocratic models of Sparta and Venice could indeed be seen as examples of “the true political way of life and the true quiet of a city” (MACHIARELLI,

1996, p. 23). The key would be to learn from the mistakes of these cities, which failed to recognize that “expansion is poison for such republics” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 22). One possible solution could be implementing legislative reforms, such as “a constitution and laws to prohibit it from expanding” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 23). The problem – and here lies the critical point – is that even such measures would be ineffective because maintaining a static equilibrium in human activities is ultimately impossible.

Since all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall; and to many things that reason does not bring you, necessity brings you. So when a republic that has been ordered so as to be capable of maintaining itself does not expand, and necessity leads it to expand, this would come to take away its foundations and make it come to ruin sooner. So, on the other hand, if heaven were so kind that it did not have to make war, from that would arise the idleness to make it either effeminate or divided; these two things together, or each by itself, would be the cause of its ruin (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 23).

Aristocratic republics face a no-win situation: they either collapse from their inability to defend against external threats or crumble due to a loss of virtue and moral corruption in the absence of such threats. Therefore, embracing the Roman model emerges not only as the solution aligned with “necessity” but also as the choice for the “more honorable part” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 23). Rome's strategy of integrating plebeians into the military and extending citizenship to foreigners bolstered its military strength and created a robust and numerous popular class, which was then tasked with protecting freedom. Imperialist interpretations suggest that Machiavelli, much like the Roman elites, viewed popular participation as a necessary, albeit undesirable, means for the republic to achieve the greatness associated with imperial domination.

However, an alternative interpretation that reverses the terms of the relationship also seems plausible. As John McCormick (2015) notes,

Machiavelli's ostensible endorsement of empire actually plays an important part in a rhetorical strategy whereby the Florentine persuades aristocratically biased republicans, like those to whom he dedicates the book, to accept a constitutional model more inclusive and empowering of common citizens than they would have otherwise accepted (McCORMICK, 2015, p. 134).

This interpretive lens undoubtedly challenges the imperialist reading of Machiavelli. It not only provides a pragmatic alternative explanation for his endorsement of the Roman expansionist model, but also clarifies Machiavelli's ambivalence on the safeguard of freedom. However, I argue that the main barriers to interpreting Machiavelli as an unequivocal imperialist are not hidden in rhetorical subtleties that conceal the author's true intentions; rather, they are clearly evident in the text of the 'Discorsi', as will be explored further.

The contradictions of Imperialism

One strategy behind the imperialist interpretation of Machiavelli is to position the author within the tradition of justifying imperial expansion, found in classical Roman republicanism and adapted by Florentine civic humanists. Theorists from the last century of the Roman Republic, such as Cicero and Livy, employed a dual-purpose lexicon to describe Rome's relationship with conquered peoples: describing the various forms of subjugation to the Roman Metropolis while concealing the fact that the conquered peoples were stripped of their freedom. Terms such as 'allies', 'friends', and 'clients' were used to describe the forms of subjugation of conquered peoples, avoiding the term 'slaves'. Cicero, for example, claimed that Rome established a "protectorate over the entire world rather than an *imperium*" because it defended "their allies and provinces with fairness and good faith." (CICERO apud BURTON, 2019, p. 28) Similarly, Livy, as noted by Lavan (2013), "attributes particular importance to benefaction as a source of Roman authority. The Romans are repeatedly represented as benefactors whose favours give them a claim to the loyalty and obedience of her beneficiaries" (LAVAN, 2013, p. 161).

Civic humanists who preceded Machiavelli drew on classical Roman republican sources to justify Florence's expansionist policies in Tuscany. Theorists such as Salutati and Bruni contended that Florence was the only modern heir to Rome's civilizing mission, purportedly destined to bring freedom to peoples conquered in just wars. In response to Antonio Loschi's diatribe against the city in 1401, in which the Milanese chancellor exposed the subjugation Florentines imposed on their subjects, Coluccio Salutati refuted the claim that "the subjects of the Florentines are suffocated by tyranny and deprived of their former dignity", since they "were either born free with us or were adopted into sweet liberty from the difficulties of a wretched servitude"

(SALUTATI apud WOODHOUSE, 2018, p. 559). As Hörnqvist (2004) notes, for Salutati, “Florence’s Roman heritage and love of liberty gave the city a natural right to dominion and lordship over Tuscany and the rest of the peninsula” (HÖRNQVIST, 2004, p. 53).

In the same context of humanist responses to Loschi’s critique, Leonardo Bruni, a leading disciple of Salutati, developed his rationale for Florence’s dominance in Tuscany. Bruni (2018) not only emphasized Florence’s Roman heritage and argued for a “certain kind of hereditary right *dominium* of the globe,” but he also adeptly used the language of patronage to justify Florence’s rule. Having earned its “glory and greatness” not through “crimes and fraud”, but through “wise policies” and “by maintaining *fides*, integrity, moderation, and above all by undertaking the cause of weaker parties”, Florence had “undertaken dangers for the safety and liberty of others and guarded many with its *patrocinium*” (BRUNI apud MOWL, 2018, p. 60)⁵.

But how should we understand the numerous scholarly efforts to place Machiavelli within the tradition of Roman and Florentine imperialism? It is important to note that imperialist rhetoric, across different eras, rarely justifies the domination of one city or state over others by emphasizing the benefits accrued by the rulers. Instead, the power of imperialist ideology lies in its ability to obscure these advantages, either by omitting them entirely from the discourse or by downplaying them in favor of the supposed benefits, whether real or imagined, for the subjugated peoples. The Romans, much like their self-proclaimed Florentine successors, justified the subjugation of neighboring peoples by claiming it was essential not only to protect the liberty of Rome and Florence but also to bring order and freedom to the conquered peoples. Given the concentration of ancient virtue in Rome and modern virtue in Florence, the act of dominating less virtuous cities was framed not as a mere pragmatic choice driven by self-interest or a mere desire for power, but as a moral imperative — a duty that must be fulfilled.

Given this typical trait of imperialist ideology, we find considerable challenges when attempting to position Machiavelli within the aforementioned tradition. Two main reasons underscore this difficulty, each relating to the external and internal effects of imperialist foreign policy. Externally, Machiavelli does not support the notion that a republic’s imperial expansion brings freedom to the conquered cities. Instead, he

⁵According to Hörnqvist (2004), “there can be no doubt that the fundamental text of the period when it comes to situating the modern Florentine republic within the tradition of Roman liberty and imperialism is Leonardo Bruni’s *Laudatio Florentinae Urbis* of 1403–04” (HÖRNQVIST, 2004, p. 55).

argues that being under a republican empire often results in a deeper form of servitude than under a principality. As Machiavelli explicitly states, “of all hard servitudes, that is hardest that submits you to a republic. First, because it is more lasting and there can be less hope to escape from it; second, because the end of the republic is to enervate and to weaken all other bodies so as to increase its own body” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 133).

The words above reveal that, far from liberating conquered cities, republican imperialism undermines them to the point where they lose any chance of self-governance for extended periods. This stands in stark contrast to the core principles of imperialist ideology. The use of the term ‘servitude’ to describe the status of these dominated cities leaves no doubts as to the author’s perspective. These general ideas are also reflected in the imperial ambitions of Machiavelli’s own city, as demonstrated in an excerpt from Book II of ‘Florentine Histories’. In recounting events from the ‘Quattrocento’ that put an end to the ‘tyranny’ of the Duke of Athens in Florence, Machiavelli observes that Florence’s rebellion against the duke inspired other cities – Arezzo, Castiglione, Pistoia, Volterra, Colle, and San Gimignano – to rise up against Florence itself. Thus, “in recovering its freedom”, Florence “taught its subjects how to recover theirs” (MACHIAVELLI, 1988, p. 99). In response to these uprisings, the Florentines sent representatives to Arezzo “to renounce the empire they have over that city”, reasoning that “since they could no longer have them as subjects, they might profit from them as friends of their city” (MACHIAVELLI, 1988, p. 100)⁶.

⁶I am grateful to Sérgio Cardoso for underscoring the relevance of this passage to the theme of this article. It is important to note that while the hypothesis of Machiavelli’s critique of Roman imperialism, as I have reconstructed from the ‘Discorsi’, could also be applied to Florence, there is a significant difference regarding the latter. Unlike Rome, which integrated its people into its political and institutional framework through expansion, Florentine expansionism, which relied on mercenary armies rather than armed citizens, did not involve the incorporation of the people into the city’s governance. While a comprehensive analysis of this theme in the ‘Florentine Histories’ would exceed the scope of this article, one illustrative example is Machiavelli’s treatment of wars fought under Florence’s claim to be the sole legitimate heir to Rome. Although Machiavelli clearly acknowledges the importance and justness of defensive wars, such as those through which Florence repelled external sieges, he is also critical of wars waged solely to satisfy the ambitions of factional leaders, to the detriment of the common good, either to unify the divided city under their command, or to create a climate of instability and chaos through which they could dethrone their adversaries and rise to power. In the ‘Florentine Histories’, Machiavelli seems to provide a criterion for evaluating the justness of wars: they are unjust when driven by “the ambition of men” (MACHIAVELLI, 1988, p. 163) and just when fought out of “necessity” (MACHIAVELLI, 1988, p. 194). But when is war necessary? Apparently, for Machiavelli, when it involves defending one’s own freedom, not when it seeks to usurp the freedom of others. By analyzing the variety of opinions within the city about the opportunity to wage war against Lucca, the author seems to censure those who, in the past, rejected a war against Milan “to defend their own city’s freedom” but now advocate for a war against Lucca “to seize the freedom of others” (MACHIAVELLI, 1988, p. 164).

However, Machiavelli identifies the quintessential example of the liberticide nature of imperial republics in Rome's foreign policy. Chapter 03 of the second book of the 'Discorsi' begins with Livy's assertion that "Rome grew from the ruin of Alba", referring to one of the cities conquered by Rome during its early imperial expansion, still under the monarchy. The Chapter is titled "Rome Became a Great City Through Ruining the Surrounding Cities and Easily Admitting Foreigners to Its Honors" (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 133) In the preceding chapter, Machiavelli had already noted that, while it is rare to find peoples devoted to a free way of life among moderns, "in ancient times there were many very free peoples in all provinces" (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 129). Rome, therefore, encountered "republics very armed and very obstinate in defense of their freedom" (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 132). Consequently, the triumph of Rome was made possible only due to 'a rare and extreme virtue'. Although Machiavelli attributes the modern lack of commitment to freedom to cultural factors – above all 'false interpretations' of Christianity that favor idleness over virtue – he acknowledges that this religious corruption was only made possible because the "Roman Empire, with its arms and its greatness, eliminated all republics and all civil ways of life". This annihilation was so complete that, even centuries after the Empire's collapse, "the cities still have not been able to put themselves back together or reorder themselves for civil life except in very few places of that empire" (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 132).

Thus, Machiavelli not only rejects the claim that cities conquered by Rome or Florence gained protection and freedom, but also exposes the factual errors behind this assertion. While this critique is crucial in challenging the notion of an intrinsic, resolute imperialism in Machiavelli's republicanism, the most compelling objections to the imperialist interpretation concern the effects of unchecked expansionist policies on preserving freedom within Rome itself. I believe it is possible to claim that 'Machiavelli views Roman imperialism as a major structural cause of the republic's corruption and eventual downfall'. He emphasizes three harmful effects of imperialist foreign policy on the preservation of freedom: the erosion of civic virtue, the increase in material inequality, and the rise of private dependence of citizen-soldiers on their military leaders.

The decline in civic virtue is a direct consequence of Rome's ultimate imperialist goal: to subjugate all the peoples and cities of the known world. Machiavelli

suggests that this objective was largely achieved once Rome had “subdued Africa and Asia and had reduced almost all Greece to obedience’ (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 50). At this point, the Romans “became secure in their freedom”, since “it did not appear to them that they had any more enemies who ought to give them fear” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 50). However, the newfound security resulting from the success of the imperialist policy led to a series of harmful consequences for civic virtue, including a deterioration in the standards for selecting and electing magistrates and a decline in public debate. The ancient ordinances of Rome, having remained unchanged, lost their effectiveness to yield positive effects due to the city’s corruption. Thus, for example, when appointing a consul, the Roman people no longer considered the candidate's ‘virtù’ but focused solely on their popularity, prioritizing “those who knew better how to entertain men rather than those who knew better how to conquer enemies” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 51). Subsequently, the Romans further declined and began appointing to office “to those who had more power”. This created a situation that was contrary to the principles of a free way of life, as “only the powerful propose laws, not for the common freedom but for their own power” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 50). The fear of the powerful silenced the more virtuous citizens, resulting in the abandonment of the practice where “a tribune, or any other citizen whatever, could propose a law to the people, on which every citizen was able to speak, either in favor or against, before it was decided” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 50). Now, not even laws were proposed freely, nor was there open debate on the laws proposed by the powerful, as “for fear of them nobody can speak against them” As a result, “the people came to be either deceived or forced to decide its own ruin” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 51).

In addition to setting in motion the aforementioned mechanisms, Rome’s imperialist policy also negatively impacted the civic virtue of Roman citizens through interactions with the conquered peoples and their corrupt customs. Machiavelli observes that “acquisitions sometimes do no middling harm to every well-ordered republic”. A republic must be cautious when conquering “a city or a province full of delights”, as it “can take their customs through the intercourse it has with them” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, pp. 174). Once conquered, these corrupt cities “avenge themselves against their conqueror without fighting and without blood, for by permeating it with their bad customs” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, pp. 175).

Rome's imperialist expansion also triggered processes that aggravated the material inequality in the city, further accelerating the republic's slide into corruption (SILVA, 2020). In discussing the conflict over the Agrarian Laws, reintroduced in Rome by the Gracchi brothers, Machiavelli implicitly acknowledges that the Roman Republic's territorial expansion served as a powerful mechanism for land concentration, benefitting the patricians while disadvantaging the plebeians. This context is crucial for understanding the significance of the Gracchi's redistributive reforms, the determined resistance from major landowners to such reforms, and Machiavelli's observation that this episode fundamentally transformed the nature of the conflict between the plebeians and the patricians. What had originally been a conflict between the plebeians and the Senate – one that, in uncorrupted times, “made that republic free and powerful” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 16) – evolved into factional struggles spearheaded by ambitious leaders. Whereas the people previously fought for public honors and recognition, they now fought for material wealth (SILVA, 2013). This shift “inflamed so much hatred between the plebs and the Senate that they came to arms and to bloodshed, beyond every civil mode and custom” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 80).

Lastly, the imperial expansion of the Roman Republic gave rise to a new form of dependency among its citizens, one that was detrimental to their freedom, deriving from the prolonged military commands, crucial instruments for expanding the Republic's territorial conquests. Machiavelli explicitly identifies that “two things were the cause of the dissolution of that republic: one was the contentions that arose from the Agrarian law; the other, the prolongation of commands” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 268). In fact, Machiavelli considers the prolonged tenure of any magistrate in power to be harmful, as this practice prioritizes extraordinary measures over the ordinary ones that should govern a well-ordered republic⁷. However, the extension of military commands proved to be the most damaging, particularly when applied to the consuls, the supreme military leaders of the Roman Republic. As the author explains, “the farther the Romans went abroad with arms, the

⁷For Machiavelli, although “extraordinary modes” may produce immediate positive results, “nonetheless the example does ill”. The reason for this is that once established “a habit of breaking the orders for the sake of good”, then “under that coloring, they are broken for ill” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 75). In fact, there is nothing more pernicious “in a republic than to make a law and not observe it” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 93).

more such extension appeared necessary to them and the more they used it” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 270) which ultimately consolidated a practice that led to two effects that intensified factionalism in Rome:

one, that a lesser number of men were practiced in commands, and because of this they came to restrict reputation to a few; the other, that when a citizen remained commander of an army for a very long time, he would win it over to himself and make it partisan to him, for the army would in time forget the Senate and recognize that head (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 270).

It was through the spread of this factional spirit that Marius, leader of the popular faction, and Sulla, leader of the noble faction, “could find soldiers who would follow them against the public good” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 270). Similarly, it was for this reason that “Caesar could seize the fatherland” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 270) and thus effectively end the centuries-long experience of the Roman Republic. Based on this analysis, Machiavelli concludes that “if the Romans had never prolonged magistracies and commands, if they would not have come so soon to so much power (...), they would have come later still to servitude” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 270).

Empire without domination: the alternative of leagues

Up to this point, our discussion has aimed to both reconstruct the issue of empire within Machiavelli’s republicanism and challenge the interpretation of scholars who attribute a distinctly imperialist intent to Machiavelli. As we have seen, the problem of empire emerges within Machiavelli’s ambivalent narrative regarding the territorial expansion of the Roman Republic. In the short term, imperial expansion enabled the greatness and freedom of Rome at the cost of dominating the conquered republics. Roman freedom was built upon the ruins of other peoples’ freedoms. In the long term, however, imperialist policies initiated internal processes of dependency and corruption that ultimately led to the destruction of Rome’s own freedom. In the international equation of freedom, what began as a zero-sum game evolved into a negative-sum game.

The imperialist interpretation paints a distorted picture of Machiavelli’s intentions by overlooking his critiques of the detrimental effects of unchecked territorial expansion, as practiced by ancient Rome and aspired to by Florence in the early modern period. In fact, beyond revealing the mechanisms that erode freedom in

imperial republics, Machiavelli also offers elements for a non-imperialist solution to the problem of territorial expansion. In my view, this understanding does not require reading between the lines; it simply demands a close examination of what is explicitly stated in the text.

One could begin by noting that Machiavelli's admiration for Rome does not necessarily imply that the Roman model should simply be replicated in Florence, as the purpose of 'imitation' is not to attempt the unlikely repetition of the past. When, in Chapter 06 of 'The Prince' (1998), Machiavelli mentions the names of Romulus, Theseus, Cyrus, and Moses as exemplary figures among the greatest princes of the ancient world, he compares his approach to that of 'prudent archers' who, knowing "the place they plan to hit appears too distant (...), set their aim much higher than the place intended" (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 22). The same logic applies to republics. The 'place intended' by Machiavelli for Florence at the dawn of modernity was certainly far short of what Rome had achieved in the ancient world.

Moreover, in the preface to the second book of the 'Discorsi', before delving into a systematic analysis of the foreign policy of the Roman Republic, Machiavelli outlines several reasons to question the excellence of past examples. He admits that "the truth of ancient things is not altogether understood" (MACHIARELLI, 1996, pp. 123), since our knowledge of those times comes only from what 'the writers' have recorded or what the elderly remember. The former are unreliable because "most writers" focus exclusively on "the fortune of the victors" (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 123), while the latter cannot be fully trusted because, as men age, they lose "force" even as they gain "judgment and prudence" (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 125). Due to this change in perspective, what once appeared 'endurable and good' in youth now seems 'unendurable and bad'. However, "whereas for this they should accuse their judgment, they accuse the times" (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 125). Just before addressing the youth, at the end of the preface, Machiavelli acknowledges his uncertainty about whether he too might "be numbered among those who deceive themselves" by praising "too much the times of the ancient Romans and blame ours" (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 125).

Once Machiavelli relativizes the belief in the absolute superiority of the Roman model, he argues that Rome's approach to territorial expansion was neither the only possible method nor the best for every city in every situation. He outlines three models of territorial expansion: the Athenian/Spartan, the Roman, and the Tuscan. The first

relies on the subjugation of subjects, the second on the formation of alliances, and the third on the union of associates. Machiavelli swiftly dismisses the Greek model, labeling it the worst of all and ‘entirely useless’. This model was the cause of the downfall of Athens and Sparta, as these cities “acquired dominion they could not keep” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 137). The primary weakness of this expansion method was its reliance solely on violence to impose rule over conquered cities, without any effort to establish alliances.

The Roman method of expansion, by contrast, stabilized newly acquired territories through a more nuanced political strategy, balancing the use of force with efforts to gain the consent of the conquered peoples. This policy combined “force” and “love”, as described in an early chancery report on the Florentine control of Pisa (MACHIARELLI apud CESA, 2014, p. 35). The alternation between these methods depended on the customs of the conquered cities and the level of resistance they offered to Roman rule. Rome could either allow the inhabitants to continue living under their old laws and customs, facilitating their integration as Roman citizens, or it could destroy the cities entirely and force their inhabitants to resettle in Rome. In either case, the result was the expansion of Rome's army of citizen-soldiers and, consequently, its territorial empire. The Romans understood that anyone who plans “for a city to make a great empire should contrive with all industry to make it full of inhabitants” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 131). When Rome did not destroy the conquered cities, it made them allies, while always retaining for themselves “the seat of empire and the title of command” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 136). At this point, the author makes it clear that the “love” of Rome towards its allies was not intended to promote their freedom, but conversely “came to subjugate themselves by their own labors and blood without perceiving it” (MACHIARELLI, 196, p. 136).

Both the Greek and Roman methods of territorial expansion are liberticide, as they both rely on the immediate suppression of others’ liberties and eventually lead to the loss of their own. Both approaches are aggressive and based on domination. In contrast, the Tuscan method, characterized by the formation of defensive leagues of free republics where “none was before another in either authority or rank” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 135), offers a way to reconcile territorial expansion with the preservation of freedom. It is noteworthy that among many examples of ancient leagues, Machiavelli specifically references the ancient Etruscan league and the

practices of the “ancient Tuscans” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 138) as examples of a non-liberticidal approach to territorial expansion. I believe this choice is deliberate as Machiavelli seeks to offer Florence the most compelling model, invoking the legacy of ancestors known for their greatness and commitment to freedom.

Despite the significance of the league model for a more contextual understanding of Machiavelli’s international thought, few scholars have explored – and even then, only briefly and sporadically – the possibility that Machiavelli was proposing a Tuscan confederation to his fellow Florentines rather than adopting the Roman model (BARON, 1956; BENNER, 2009; VIROLI, 1998; WINTER, 2018; ZUCKERT, 2017). Machiavelli acknowledges the difficulties in studying the ways of the ancient Tuscans, noting that “there is no particular history of their affairs” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 135). Nevertheless, the surviving records are sufficient to demonstrate that the league achieved “the highest glory of empire and of arms and special praise for customs and religion” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 138). In addition to colonizing lands near the Adriatic Sea, “their arms were obeyed from the Tiber as far as the foot of the mountains that encircle the thick part of Italy” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 135).

The primary difference between the league model and the Roman model was the moderate nature of the former’s need for expansion. For the Tuscans, territorial conquest was fundamentally defensive and limited, in contrast to Rome’s aggressive and boundless expansion. As Machiavelli notes in the case of the Tuscans, “for having arrived at a rank that seems to enable them to defend themselves from everyone, they do not seek larger dominion” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, pp. 137). Contrary to the argument laid out in the early chapters of the first book of the ‘Discourses’ – which claims that continuous expansion is a ‘necessity’ for states – Machiavelli observes that the leagues of free cities could only restrain their conquests because “necessity does not constrain them to have more power”. Furthermore, the leagues “do not see any usefulness in acquisitions” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 137) that go beyond the number of cities required for self-defense. Drawing from the historical example of the Tuscans, Machiavelli suggests that the number of necessary communities for effective self-defense is around “twelve or fourteen communities” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 137).

Machiavelli identifies two distinct advantages of the league model that are absent from other expansionist models. Unlike Rome, Athens, and Sparta, leagues are not readily prone to engage in warfare. Initiating a war requires a unified,

supreme authority capable of imposing its will on the entire political body. In contrast, the league model operates as “a republic that is disunited and placed in various seats”, which makes it more difficult “to consult and decide” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 137). Despite their reluctance to engage in wars, the republics within leagues uphold a strong sense of martial virtue. This is exemplified by Machiavelli’s reference to Switzerland as the sole contemporary example of territorial expansion via the league model. As noted in ‘Il Principe’, “the Swiss are very well armed and very free” (MACHIAVELLI, 1998, p. 50).

The other advantage, even more significant, is that “you easily keep as much as you take” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 137). One of Machiavelli’s recurring theses on territorial expansion is that retaining conquered territory is far more crucial than the conquest itself, as “whoever acquires empire without forces will be fittingly ruined” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 174). Machiavelli employs a botanical metaphor to illustrate this principle: since “all our actions imitate nature, it is neither possible nor natural for a thin trunk to support a thick branch” (MACHIAVELLI, 2007, p. 134). While Machiavelli relies on this metaphor to explain the downfall of Athens and Sparta, it can also be seen as a lesson for Florence of his time. The Greek model of expansion is fundamentally flawed, and the Florentines would be wise to avoid it.

Machiavelli also recognized that Florence, a small and deeply flawed republic, lacked the resources to emulate Rome’s example. Florence did not possess the customs, religion, and, most crucially, the armies that Rome had. Essentially, Florence lacked the Roman ‘virtù’. In Chapter 19 of the second book of the ‘Discorsi’, Machiavelli advises his fellow citizens to abandon the illusion of Florentine imperialism by emulating the Roman model, since “acquisitions by republics that are not well ordered and that do not proceed according to Roman virtue are for their ruin, not their exaltation” (MACHIAVELLI, 1996, p. 172).

If the Greek mode of expansion should be dismissed as inherently flawed, and the Roman model could not be replicated due to the lack of force and ‘virtù’ among modern Italians, what options remained for Florence? I believe it is reasonable to suggest that Machiavelli, in outlining these three models of expansion, aimed to recommend the league model to the Florentines – not as an ideal solution, but as a pragmatic, second-best alternative. This recommendation perfectly aligns with Machiavelli’s political realism, as he acknowledges that the league model “is the best

mode after that of the Romans” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 137). When the conditions for achieving the best outcome are lacking, adopting the second-best option remains a viable solution. Notably, Machiavelli’s historical and theoretical analyses throughout the chapter that compares the three models of expansion take an abrupt turn in the final paragraph. Addressing the situation in Florence, he laments that, due to ignorance of past lessons, “we are prey to whoever has wished to overrun this province” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 138). He then delivers what seems to be the chapter’s central message: “if the imitation of the Romans seems difficult, that of the ancient Tuscans should not seem so, especially to the present Tuscans (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 138).

In this chapter, the passage functions similarly to the final chapter of ‘The Prince’ (1998) by serving as a call to action, underscoring the pragmatic and context-specific nature of Machiavelli’s suggestion of the league model. However, its significance goes beyond that. From the perspective of the history of ideas, it opens the door to viewing Machiavelli’s international thought as a precursor to the rich and diverse federalist tradition in modern republicanism, which gained momentum with Enlightenment thinkers of the late 18th century, such as Kant, Diderot, and Madison, who were critical of the colonialism and imperialism practiced by the European powers of their time (MUTHU, 2003). From the perspective of contemporary political theory, the league model provides a framework for envisioning an international normative order that aligns with the neo-republican ideal of freedom as non-domination, grounded in the reconciliation of equality and freedom – two core principles of democratic republicanism. Machiavelli touches on these principles when he describes how the communities united in leagues “lived thus with that equality” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 135) and, more crucially, how their confederative structure “makes them not be desirous of dominating” (MACHIARELLI, 1996, p. 137).

Translated by Paulo Scarpa
Submitted on December 1, 2023
Accepted on January 20, 2024

References

ARMITAGE, David (2002), Empire and liberty: a republican dilemma. In: *Republicanism: a shared European tradition*. Edited by SKINNER, Quentin and VAN GELDEREN, Martin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 29-46.

- BARON, Hans (1956), 'The Prince' and the puzzle of the date of 'Discorsi'. *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*. Vol. 18, pp. 405-428.
- BARROS, Alberto Ribeiro Gonçalves de (2022), Republicanismo inglês e a concepção neorromana de liberdade: a problemática interpretação de Quentin Skinner. *Discurso*. Vol. 52, N^o 02, pp. 122-140.
- BENNER, Erica (2009), *Machiavelli's ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 544 pp..
- BEVIR, Mark (1994), Are there perennial problems in political theory? *Political Studies*. Vol. 42, N^o 04, pp. 662-675.
- BROWN, Alison (2000), The language of empire. In: *Florentine Tuscany: structures and practices of power*. Edited by CONNELL, William and ZORZI, Andrea. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 357 pp..
- BURTON, Paul J. (2019), *Roman imperialism*. Leiden/Boston: Brill. 114 pp..
- CESA, Marco (ed) (2014), *Machiavelli on international relations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 238 pp..
- CONNELL, William and ZORZI, Andrea (eds) (2000), *Florentine Tuscany: structures and practices of power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 357 pp..
- FISCHER, Markus (2006), Prologue: Machiavelli rapacious republicanism. In: *Machiavelli's liberal republican legacy*. Edited by RAHE, Paul Anthony. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. XXXI-LXII.
- HÖRNQVIST, Mikael (2004), *Machiavelli and empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 324 pp..
- HULLIUNG, Mark (1984), *Citizen Machiavelli*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 320 pp..
- LAVAN, Miles (2013), *Slaves to Rome: paradigms of empire in Roman culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 304 pp..
- MACHIARELLI, Niccolò (1998), *The Prince*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. 184 pp..
- MACHIARELLI, Niccolò (1996), *Discourses on Livy*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. 424 pp..
- MACHIARELLI, Niccolò (1988), *Florentine histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 416 pp..
- McCORMICK, John (2015), The (in)compatibility of liberty and empire in Machiavelli's political thought. In: *Domination and global political justice: conceptual, historical,*

- and institutional perspectives. Edited by BUCKINX, Barbara; TREJO-MATHYS, Jonathan, and WALIGORE, Timothy. London: Routledge. pp. 133-156.
- MOWL, Adam Woodhouse (2018), *Liberty and Empire in Florentine Renaissance Republicanism: from Salutati to Machiavelli*. *Doctoral thesis*. Program of Philosophy in History. University of California.
- MUTHU, Sankar (2003), *Enlightenment against empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 368 pp..
- OSTRENSKY, Eunice (2019), Maquiavel: a ambição e o dilema das leis agrárias. *Lua Nova*. Nº 107, pp. 55-90.
- PALONEN, Kari (1998), Liberty is too precious a concept to be left to the liberals. *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*. Vol. 02, Nº 01, pp. 243-260.
- PEDULLÁ, Gabrielle (2018), *Machiavelli in tumult: the discourses on Livy and the origins of political conflictualism*. Cambridge University Press. 284 pp..
- POCOCK, John (1975), *The Machiavellian moment: Florentine political thought and Atlantic republican tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 664 pp..
- REGENT, Nikolas (2011) Machiavelli: empire, virtù, and the final downfall. *History of Political Thought*. Vol. 32, Nº 05, pp. 751-772.
- SILVA, Ricardo (2020), Desigualdade e corrupção no republicanismo de Maquiavel. *Dados*. Vol. 63, Nº 03, pp. 01-37.
- SILVA, Ricardo (2017), Da história do pensamento político à teoria política histórica: variações da hermenêutica do conflito de Quentin Skinner. *Lua Nova*. Nº 102, pp. 137-171.
- SILVA, Ricardo (2013), Da honra ao patrimônio: conflito social e instituições políticas nos 'Discorsi' de Maquiavel. *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política*. Nº 12, pp. 43-66.
- SILVA, Ricardo (2010), O contextualismo linguístico na história do pensamento político: Quentin Skinner e o debate metodológico contemporâneo. *Dados*. Vol. 53, Nº 02, pp. 299-335.
- SKINNER, Quentin (1998), *Liberty before liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 152 pp..
- SKINNER, Quentin (1969), Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas. *History and Theory*. Vol. 08, Nº 01, pp. 03-53.
- STRAUSS, Leo (1958), *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. 348 pp..

- SULLIVAN, Vickie B. (2004), *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the formation of a liberal republicanism in England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 296 pp..
- VIROLI, Maurizio (1998), *Machiavelli*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 247 pp..
- WINTER, Yves (2018), *Machiavelli and the orders of violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 238 pp..
- WOODHOUSE, Adam (2018), Subjection without servitude: the imperial protectorate in Renaissance political thought. *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Vol. 79, N° 04, pp. 547-569.
- ZUCKERT, Catherine H. (2017), *Machiavelli's politics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. 512 pp..