

# Learning How Not to Be Good: A Plebeian Perspective

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*“In the world there is no one but the vulgar.”*

The major political reforms proposed in John McCormick’s *Machiavellian Democracy* comprise what might be termed a “plebeian” model of democracy—one inspired by the plebeian democracy of late republican Rome, which at once formally differentiated first-class citizens (Senators and Equestrians) from second-class citizens (plebeians), but, unlike other polities with hierarchical social structures based on differentiated socioeconomic classes, relied on such differentiation to combat, and not just cement, elite power. In Rome, aristocratic citizens had disproportionate voting rights and were solely able to run for high office, but at the same time they were subject to various special economic burdens<sup>2</sup> and also had to face, among other things, the Tribunes of the Plebs (elected by and for the plebeians) who had the power to survey, veto, and bring criminal accusations against Roman elites.<sup>3</sup> McCormick’s main proposals for contemporary democracy—a tribunical body composed of non-elite citizens with the authority to veto laws and bring charges against elite citizens, the use of sortition (in conjunction with election) for the nomination and selection of leaders in order to break economic elites’ hold on electoral power, and an expanded capacity for ordinary citizens to deliberate and make public judgments, especially judgments in political trials of political elites—follow this underlying logic of introducing differentiated citizenship to *contest*, rather than to elevate, those with the most economic and political power within a democracy.

Their primary purpose is to generate increased elite accountability, above and beyond what is secured through the conventional institutions of electoral democracy. Taking seriously the division between the few and many in a way that most leading democratic theorists do not, these proposals embody what McCormick calls a “plebeian republicanism” that can help the “plebeians of modern republics” combat the ever-present threat of manipulation and domination from the most powerful members of society.<sup>4</sup>

I shall assume for the sake of this essay that McCormick’s proposals are good ones: that he is right about the threat economic inequality poses to democracy, that differentiated institutions like a revived tribunate are an appropriate response for confronting this threat, and that democrats ought to cultivate a will-to-regulate the most advantaged members of society. The question I want to ask is in what sense these commitments are Machiavellian—and whether Machiavelli suggests anything about the *ethical disposition* ordinary citizens need to muster in order to implement and maintain the institutions of plebeian democracy.

McCormick classifies his model of plebeian democracy as “Machiavellian” primarily for two reasons. Sociologically, Machiavelli’s famous diagnosis of all politics in terms of a contestation between two classes of people—the few whose insatiable ambition will lead them to try to oppress as many people as they can and the many who want merely not to be oppressed<sup>5</sup>—provides the rationale for maintaining hyper-vigilance vis-à-vis economic and political elites, even within contemporary democratic states lacking formalized aristocratic orders. And institutionally, Machiavelli’s sympathetic analysis of the Roman tribunate, his proposals for magistracies reserved for non-elite citizens in his own Florence, his support of sortition, his advocacy of a citizenry with an expanded power to accuse and adjudicate political crimes, and his repeated observation of the overlap of economic and political power all inspire McCormick’s own proposed constitutional reforms. In emphasizing these two aspects, *Machiavellian Democracy* paves fresh ground not only in trying to resolve the perennial question of whether Machiavelli favored principalities or popular governments, but, in its advocacy of the latter interpretation, also takes aim at recent so-called Cambridge School theorists. They (Skinner, Pocock, and Pettit, among others)—both as interpreters of Machiavelli as a republican and as advocates of republicanism—remain for McCormick insufficiently attentive to socioeconomic inequality as a threat to liberty and unduly satisfied with electoral and deliberative institutions that do not, like the tribunate, place explicit public pressure on political and economic elites. As a contribution to the scholarship on

Machiavelli, *Machiavellian Democracy* will prove an important work that, in emphasizing the strong egalitarian features of Machiavelli's politics, challenges Machiavelli's placement in a republican tradition of Cicero, Bruni, and Guicciardini and also objects to what McCormick takes to be the inherently oligarchic features of the republican tradition itself.

However if Machiavelli's sociological and institutional legacies are clearly apparent in McCormick's work, what appears to be mostly missing from McCormick's account of plebeian democracy is Machiavellianism in its *moral* sense. Machiavelli's significance as a political philosopher stems most basically from his arguments about the fundamental discontinuity between political ethics and ethics as such. Regardless of whether interpreters like Strauss are correct to call Machiavelli a "teacher of evil,"<sup>6</sup> it is clearly one of Machiavelli's central maxims that effective political actors, whether actual princes or leading politicians in republics (whom Machiavelli calls "princes of republics"),<sup>7</sup> must transact in practices that cannot be justified within familiar biblical, classical, or commonsensical ethical paradigms. In chapter 15 of the *Prince*, Machiavelli summarizes the transvaluation of moral values required by politics:

[A] man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and use this and not use it according to necessity.<sup>8</sup>

Machiavelli was not the first to suggest that a successful political leader would need to have a political ethics distinct from traditional accounts of virtue, as *Quattrocento* humanists, among others, also had taught that princes would be uniquely focused on providing security, managing military affairs, maintaining an active rather than contemplative existence, and practicing kingly virtues like *magnificentia* and *majestas*.<sup>9</sup> Where Machiavelli does break from the mirror-of-princes tradition—and from most prior political theory—is with his insistence that responsible political action would require the violation, and not the indirect realization, of traditional moral norms. Whereas medieval writers and earlier humanists had taught that the prince's political ethics were fully consistent with the four classical, "cardinal" virtues (fortitude, temperance, justice, and wisdom) and the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity,<sup>10</sup> and assumed that any apparent transgression could be fully justified as what was necessary to realize the common good,<sup>11</sup> Machiavelli's singular importance as a moral philosopher resides in his stress that the prince's political ethics, far from supplementing

or completing traditional ethics, depends upon the acceptance that politics and morality cannot be fully reconciled. Even if this tragic outlook can be inferred in a few earlier authors,<sup>12</sup> Machiavelli's originality lay in his idea that the discontinuity between politics and morality needed to be actively *learned*: that it deserved to be an explicit and prolonged feature of a treatise on politics, that there was a technology to politically expedient wrongdoing,<sup>13</sup> and that the capacity to violate moral norms for the sake of politics (in the proper way) was not something modern political leaders would find easy or natural but rather something about which they would need to be persuaded and educated.

The question I want to pose is what application this Machiavellian outlook—this insistence on the necessity of effective political action involving at least the partial transgression of conventional moral codes—might have for plebeians in a plebeian democracy. Ought not a Machiavellian democracy require that its citizens be Machiavellian? Ought not plebeian proposals, which explicitly aim to buttress the rights and liberties of the “ignobles,”<sup>14</sup> require something ignoble from those they are meant to serve? If there is a place for Machiavellian darkness in political theory, ought not the applications of such a teaching be democratized, to include not just the purview of princes and political elites but the ethical horizon of ordinary citizens?

Surprisingly, these are questions on which both Machiavelli and McCormick remain mostly silent and un-Machiavellian. In the case of Machiavelli, his core teachings on how not to be good—involving the capacity to generate fear, to lie and deceive, to break promises, to put on a fake display of piety, to remain focused on the military underpinnings of legal orders, and to administer “well-used cruelty”—all have as their explicit target the ethical horizon of *elite* political leaders, princes in both a literal and metaphorical sense, rather than the ethical situation of ordinary citizens. And when Machiavelli does address the ethics of ordinary citizens, he often appeals to the very traditional norms he otherwise aims to transcend—emphasizing, for example, the need for common citizens to be characterized by non-corruption,<sup>15</sup> goodness (*bontà*),<sup>16</sup> and decency (*onestà*).<sup>17</sup> At various points in the *Discourses on Livy*, for example, Machiavelli clearly states the importance of citizens possessing religious piety and moral goodness if they are to perform the self-sacrifice

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and law-abidingness required for a healthy political community. He argues that in Rome, “religion served to command armies, to animate the plebs, to keep men good [*buoni*], to bring shame to the wicked.”<sup>18</sup> He praises the plebs of the early Republic, whose trustworthiness made it possible for the Senate to propose that plebeian soldiers contribute one-tenth of their war booty on their honor without additional mechanisms for verifying their honesty—an example which “shows how much goodness and how much religion were in the people, and how much good was to be hoped from it.”<sup>19</sup> Machiavelli repeats the same phrase in his analysis of German tribes whose “goodness and religion” make it so that ordinary citizens contribute whatever taxes are required of them without additional oversight or threat of force.<sup>20</sup> While there are certain hints in Machiavelli suggesting something counter to his general moral traditionalism regarding the People—for example, the People’s need to “vent its animus,”<sup>21</sup> its possession of “greater life, greater hatred, [and] more desire for revenge” than the few when its liberty has been violated,<sup>22</sup> Machiavelli’s suggestion that the plebeian desire not to be dominated stems not from any noble pacifism but from weakness,<sup>23</sup> and Machiavelli’s precept that any authentic republican theorist must presuppose *all* individuals to be bad<sup>24</sup>—we are still left with the striking fact that Machiavelli, the great teacher of a political ethics discontinuous with ethics as such, confines this teaching, at least explicitly, to the few.

For the most part, McCormick repeats this same imbalance, not really pursuing the moral Machiavellianism that might be required for ordinary citizens in a plebeian democracy. Both in his interpretation of Machiavelli’s account of popular government and in his own statements about contemporary politics, McCormick does not suggest that a committed plebeian will need to learn to overcome—like a committed prince—his or her good conscience and engage in politically necessary but morally dubious acts. McCormick continually applauds the People on traditional moral terms, speaking of “the trustworthy motives of the people,”<sup>25</sup> their tendency to use aggression and violence not at all or only in retribution to evil from the nobles,<sup>26</sup> their superior capacity to embody norms of goodness and decency,<sup>27</sup> their fundamental disinclination toward domination,<sup>28</sup> and their proneness to good judgment.<sup>29</sup> McCormick sees Machiavelli as someone, like himself, who wants to “reeducate [conservative republicans] . . . on the honest or decent rather than insolent or licentious nature of the people.”<sup>30</sup> To be sure, McCormick does acknowledge that the People are not perfect, they make mistakes in their decisions and are susceptible to being tricked,<sup>31</sup> but these imperfections are not seen as a *condition* of the

functionality of plebeian democracy. A large part of what insures the good conscience of the plebs within McCormick's analysis is the premise that elite usurpation remains an ever-present threat in any democracy: that "republics, democracies, and popular governments have eternally suffered attempts by wealthy citizens to manipulate politics to their own benefit."<sup>32</sup> McCormick cites with approval no fewer than five times in the book, including the opening epigraph, Machiavelli's line that "the desires of free peoples are rarely pernicious to freedom because they arise either from being oppressed or from suspicion that they may be oppressed"<sup>33</sup>—an insistence, or over-insistence, that should give the reader pause. This means that even those instances where McCormick approaches extending a darkened, Machiavellian moral transvaluation to the ethics of the plebs—for example, his provocative intimations regarding what he and (on his reading) Machiavelli consider to be the wisdom of having the plebs arm itself in its own legions and intermittently execute recalcitrant nobles found guilty in popular trials<sup>34</sup> (proposals which McCormick does not after all propose for contemporary democracies)—still fall short of Machiavellianism in the moral sense, since, in addition to emphasizing the paucity of such events in Rome's plebeian democracy, McCormick presents them in terms of the fully justified, completely necessary, *noble* desires to secure freedom from real threats, avoid domination, and live in peace and security.<sup>35</sup> My sense is that McCormick would not disagree with my suggestion that plebeian democracy requires a Machiavellian moral outlook, but such an outlook remains undeveloped in his book.<sup>36</sup>

Both Machiavelli and McCormick, then, continually return to the moral goodness of the plebs and the good conscience with which ordinary citizens can pursue their aims within a plebeian democracy. What this analysis leaves unexplored is the need for plebeians to undergo their own moral transvaluation, their own learning how not to be good—something parallel to, yet still different from, the moral transvaluation of the Machiavellian prince. What I mean to suggest, in other words, is that the project of "ignobles" to avoid domination from political elites must of necessity contain something *ignoble* about it—and that this ignobility, far from disqualifying plebeian politics, would instead, in good Machiavellian fashion, simply be the populist-democratic correlate of a political wisdom which understands that political ethics are discontinuous with ethics as such and therefore require certain transgressions of conventional moral norms. In making this claim I do not mean to say the plebs are no different from the nobles and that both are animated by a common will to self-aggrandizement

(an interpretation McCormick strongly criticizes and locates in such figures as Livy and Montesquieu as well as Skinner's exegesis of Machiavelli), for I think ordinary citizens do occupy a substantially different political world from elite citizens and are not generally motivated by a desire for domination. Any extension of the Machiavellian teaching of learning how not to be good, therefore, should involve specific precepts for plebeians that are not the same as those for Machiavellian princes and political elites. What I do mean to suggest is that such an extension ought to be part of plebeian democracy, both because Machiavellian darkness should not belong to the few alone (if there is going to be political modernism, both the few and the many ought to have some claim to it) and because, as a practical matter, it seems to me that the implementation and maintenance of the institutions of plebeian democracy—class-based representation, trials and

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other disruptions of elite power, the identification of the most advantaged as a class in need of special regulatory attention—require overcoming the plebeian's good conscience and engaging in at least five commitments which, though necessary, are still morally fraught and would require from ordinary citizens that they adulterate the purity of certain reigning political and social-scientific ideals.

First, the commitment to plebeian democracy, with its fundamental and formal division between the few and the many, sullies the idealism that would conceive of democratic life simply in terms of an undifferentiated notion of free and equal citizenship.<sup>37</sup> A plebeian democrat does not of

course reject the ideal of free and equal citizenship, nor efforts to achieve a more genuine meritocracy. But if the general trend in the political culture is either to assert that existing institutions already realize these commitments or to propose reforms that will enable polities to approximate them more closely, the plebeian insists that the dream of free and equal citizenship will always remain to some extent unfulfilled: economic inequality will always infect educational, economic, and political opportunity to some degree,<sup>38</sup> and also, as McCormick insists, merely formal or juridical equality is insufficient to prevent the strongest members of a democracy, even if meritocratically selected, from threatening abuse against ordinary citizens. Accordingly, the plebeian advocates differentiation between the few and the many—and, in particular, singling out the most advantaged members

of society and subjecting them to extra burdens and potential regulation. This differentiation signals that plebeian democracy can provide only a *disenchanted and compromised* version of the commitment to free and equal citizenship. Even if the plebeian differentiation of the few from the many is qualitatively different from early modern republicanism that relied on property classes for oligarchic rather than democratic ends (i.e., even if plebeian differentiation is meant only to counteract the oligarchic elements that persist within contemporary mass democracies), it is nonetheless the case that plebeian democracy carries with it the unwelcome insistence that liberal democracy cannot be what its most idealistic exponents promised it would: namely, a polity grounded in a uniform set of laws, applied to all citizens indiscriminately, reflecting a common human equality, which effectively overcomes, within a circumscribed political space, the social inequalities that hitherto have always infected political life.<sup>39</sup>

When democracy is juxtaposed to monarchy, feudal aristocracy, or authoritarianism, it can be presented in straightforward, perfectionist, fully-idealized fashion as political and legal equality. But when the threat to democracy comes from within democracy itself—from powerful elites who win power in a democracy and threaten abuse of less powerful citizens, or from the impossibility of fully realizing core principles like fair equality of opportunity—then democracy progressively proceeds, paradoxically, by taking a step back from its own ideals and insisting on the reintroduction of the few and the many. This reintroduction may be the wise and appropriate path, but it also suggests the limitations of the sacrosanct liberal-democratic ideal of free and equal citizenship, or at least the need for this ideal to be supplemented by institutions that moderate and even violate it to some degree. Such logic, even if valid as I think it is, is not only counterintuitive, but to some meaningful degree *demoralizing*. The plebeian who defends it will be accused of engaging in class warfare. And he or she will be made to feel guilty by more idealistic philosophers of democracy who refuse, on moral grounds, to relinquish the pure ideal of a democracy shaped by an undifferentiated notion of free and equal citizenship. Particularly with regard to this latter challenge, the plebeian democrat must learn to suffer this bad conscience as a condition of effective advocacy for plebeian reforms.

Second, the differentiation between the few and the many marks not only a demoralized account of democracy, but a demoralized account of ordinary citizenship. Self-identifying plebeians will have to endure certain sociopsychological costs as a consequence of plebeian democracy. To be sure, the logic of introducing legalized differentiation between ordinary and



elite citizens is that such differentiation will benefit, rather than harm, the social and material conditions of everyday citizens in contemporary mass democracy. For one thing, such differentiation locates and singles out elite citizens as special threats to political liberty and special targets of egalitarian-minded regulation. For another, such differentiation generates indignation among ordinary citizens who, now as second-class citizens, will be motivated to implement and maintain institutions devoted to vigilant patrol and regulation of economic and political elites. As McCormick explains, “the people . . . must be provoked into . . . indignation, and are done so, with beneficial political results, by formal political inequality that, counterintuitively, inspires more substantive political equality in practice.”<sup>40</sup> But even if this logic, whereby differentiation serves democratic rather than oligarchic ends, is sound, it is not without strain for ordinary citizens who must

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bear the burden of understanding themselves as plebeians. While McCormick himself confronts this problem of “sociopsychological limits”<sup>41</sup> imposed on plebeians, his ultimate move is to say that such concerns are exaggerated if not altogether groundless. He argues that inferior class-based designations do not “fundamentally and indefinitely debilitate the social and political agency of those placed within such categories” (indeed, McCormick’s proposals depend on the opposite being true: that the indignation generated by such categories will politicize ordinary citizens into vigilance vis-à-vis elite citizens). And, further, McCormick points out that the class-based designations he supports are in no way permanent: they do not prevent social mobility of individuals between the groups.<sup>42</sup>

These are good points, but in my view they should not be taken to mean that the problem of plebeian democracy’s sociopsychological burdens is therefore illusory. The very psychological state McCormick says plebeian institutions are meant to embody and cultivate—*indignation*—indicates a more onerous inner life for the ordinary citizen than that advertised by leading paradigms of democratic citizenship, whether the rancor-free rational psychology of deliberative ethics or the rancorous yet egalitarian psychology of so-called agonistic models.<sup>43</sup> The burden of understanding oneself as a second-class citizen, of feeling always on the verge of being oppressed by economic and political elites, and, I would add, of acknowledging the

inescapability of at least a modicum of overlap of economic inequality with inequalities in education and political voice—all of this suggests a darker and more compromised civic self-understanding than citizens in contemporary mass democracies are normally socialized to experience. It is easier to imagine oneself as an equal co-legislator in a democratic political community than to confront and accept the plebeian reality of second-class, non-elite citizenship most, but not all, citizens are fated to endure.

Against the sunny and triumphant atmosphere of conventional discourses of liberal-democratic citizenship, therefore, plebeianism requires a certain pessimism. In effect, the plebeian democrat claims that the abstract ideal that all citizens possess an equal and inviolable *dignity* before the law must be materialized into a productive *in-dignation* at the fact that no democratic society will sufficiently realize the ideal—that, in the words of a recent student of human dignity, “No society fully realizes the dignity of the individual, though some societies come closer than others”<sup>44</sup>—with the result that a revitalized, democratized differentiation between the few and the many is thereby justified. This indignation is an important feature of plebeian ethics. It might be seen as the plebeian or democratic contribution to the long-standing tenet of political modernism that any authentic political theory must presuppose the human being to be fallen, if not evil—a dictum which finds famous articulations in Machiavelli himself, as well as Hume and Carl Schmitt among others.<sup>45</sup> To this dark heuristic the plebeian democrat insists on the addendum: every authentic *democratic* theory must presuppose the ordinary citizen to be in some sense indignant, unsatisfied, frustrated, in a word, *unhappy*, at least within the circumscribed spaces of government and formal politics. Plebeian democracy’s acceptance, and indeed productive generation, of this unhappiness is an important feature of what learning how not to be good would mean within a plebeian conception of politics.

A third aspect of the plebeian’s bad conscience has to do with the *methodological vulgarity* of appealing to the elite-mass division. Outside of its moral appeal, one of the virtues of the ideal of undifferentiated free and equal citizenship is its felicitous methodology: it requires no untidy, contestable sociological divisions between nobles and ignobles, the few and the many, the rich and the middling. A plebeian democracy, however, depends on making such distinctions. With the specific case of the United States in mind, McCormick’s proposals for class-based representation in the tribunate define the elite in the following terms: “Political and economic elites are excluded from eligibility: that is, anyone who has held a major municipal, state, or federal office, elected or appointed, for two consecutive terms

at any time in their life; and anyone whose net household worth exceeds \$345,000 (i.e., members of the wealthiest ten percent of family households as established by the most recent U.S. census data).<sup>46</sup> Critics will object that this definition is arbitrary and will ask why the cut-off should be the top ten percent and not, for example, the wealthiest one percent or some other number. Even if the plebeian can make empirical arguments in defense of a particular delineation, I do not think such claims will ever be fully persuasive to a skeptical challenger. To the extent this is true, this methodological vulgarity, this arbitrariness, represents another way in which the plebeian democrat must learn how not to be good.

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But if the charge of arbitrariness cannot be refuted, it ought not in itself dissuade the plebeian from his or her commitments. After all, theories of social justice have long made use of a notion of the “least advantaged”—a class which either possesses the minimal amount of resources or welfare a well-ordered society ought to guarantee its citizens (as in certain utilitarian schemes of social justice that rely on a notion of a basic minimum), or, following Rawls, the class which ought to have its prospects maximized for any ongoing system of inequalities to be just. But as Rawls among others has admitted, when it comes to any definition of the least favored, “it seems impossible to avoid a certain arbitrariness.”<sup>47</sup> What the plebeian can argue, therefore, is that insofar as contemporary democracies already make use of a vivid and explicit (but arbitrary) category of the least favored as a class entitled to special regulatory attention, they should also be able to operate with a category of the most favored

(as a class to be excluded from membership in plebeian institutions and also targeted by the judicial and regulatory actions such institutions take). Such logic does not, however, counteract the underlying charge: that plebeian proposals will always be somewhat arbitrary in how they differentiate citizens. And so the problem of the plebeian bad conscience can only be moderated but not avoided in this regard.

The fourth form of bad conscience involves the issue of the motivations underlying plebeian proposals for class-based representation, expanded trials against elite citizens, and the use of elements of sortition to disrupt the elite hold on electoral mechanisms. Such motivations are not

entirely reactive to the actual or threatened wrongdoing of concrete elite perpetrators, as McCormick mostly suggests, but stem too from the desire to see powerful individuals (who may not always be individually guilty of actual offenses) burdened publically on the public stage. Consider the Greek example of ostracism, which might be considered a prototype of plebeian institutions in general, and something both Machiavelli and McCormick briefly address (although admittedly do not endorse). Procedurally, what is so special about ostracism is that the decision about whether anyone should be ostracized in a given year precedes (by weeks or a couple months) the question of who the ostracized individual, should there be one, will be.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the motivation to seek retribution against *any* elite precedes concrete, remedial action against a particular transgressor. Although he does not say so, a similar logic informs McCormick's proposals for popular trials. McCormick empowers the tribunate to accuse only three elite citizens per year (one each from the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government). But if the *raison d'être* of such investigations and trials is only the blameless desire to seek protection against threats from elites, as McCormick continually suggests, then one would expect there to be no limit on the number of trials, allowing the factual circumstances of existing threats to dictate whether to proceed with trials and how many there should be. In suggesting that something other than protection from actual or threatened wrongdoing motivates these trials, I do not mean to criticize the proposal for them, but only to suggest that their justification—and the justification for plebeianism in general—rests on additional foundations besides those of criminal justice (the bringing of offenders to justice): namely, the motivation to have the most advantaged members of society endure special economic and political burdens as *redress* for systematic social injustices for which no one individual is necessarily to blame.

Machiavelli himself implies something like this additional foundation for plebeianism, when in his own discussion of political trials, he offers not one but two justifications for making it easy for citizens to bring forward charges for political crimes: not only will accusations and trials make it so citizens, especially elite citizens, will be afraid to “attempt things against the state,” but such institutions will enable the people to “vent . . . those humors that grow up in cities.”<sup>49</sup> That the People have a need to vent its “ill humors” is an important Machiavellian theme, and something to which Machiavelli continually returns.<sup>50</sup> Although he does not fully elaborate the source of these ill humors,<sup>51</sup> Machiavelli's clear implication is that they are part of what it means to be a plebeian: they stem from the frustration that arises from being a second-class citizen in a polity where first-class citizens not

only threaten abuse, but win most of the honors, wealth, and power. The ill humors, therefore, are not limited to responses to specific acts of transgression but have a more general and continual grounding.<sup>52</sup> Read in terms of contemporary mass democracy, the Machiavellian idea of “ill humors” would mean: insofar as liberal democracies remain chronically unable to realize their own principles—specifically, insofar as equality of opportunity is not fully realizable, insofar as political life remains infected by economic inequality, and insofar as key devices of popular empowerment (e.g., representation) remain hard to verify—there are motivations for singling out and burdening the most advantaged in a way which, even if justified, is

not justified in the sense of responding to a concrete perpetrator. In other words, what a plebeian wants, in addition to protecting the polity from ongoing instances and future threats of elite domination, are political and economic<sup>53</sup> acts of redress that symbolize and also remedy the shadow of unfairness that inheres in even the most progressive advanced liberal democratic societies of today. But if this is true, then the “nobles” forced to endure these burdens will not always be guilty of actual crimes, but will be compelled, in a kind of legalized noblesse oblige, to offer public acts of redress for a society’s shortcomings vis-à-vis its own principles.<sup>54</sup>

Now McCormick does not explicitly recognize the idea of redress as a secondary grounds for plebeian institutions, but he gestures toward it: not only, as I have said, in his limitation of the number of permitted tribunical cases, but also when he acknowledges that Machiavelli understood that public accusations would “provide a regulatory benefit beyond deterrence and punishment of individual

magistrates and *ottimati*,”<sup>55</sup> and, further, when he admits that to some extent the plebeian motivation to impose public burdens on elites will be inspired from abuses from the past.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, McCormick’s worry about the insufficient indignation of the plebs vis-à-vis elites (and the need to actively generate it)<sup>57</sup> ought to be interpreted, not as an odd plebeian insensitivity to their own abuse at the hands of transgressing elites, but as a sign that it is not only actual or threatened abuse from specific individuals that motivates plebeians, but a redressive, retrospective, and partially symbolic desire to see the most powerful members of a polity forced to engage in public acts of

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redress—a desire which, even if justifiable on the macrolevel, no doubt will appear unfair to many of the elite individuals being publically burdened, thus contributing to the plebeian bad conscience.

Finally, the plebeian bad conscience also inheres in the degree to which the advocate of plebeian democracy can be accused of a certain *ingratitude*: a hyperbolic dissatisfaction with today's leading liberal democratic states, not for being inferior to other existing or historical regimes, but for failure to meet rigorous expectations of what democracy should be. After all, McCormick never denies that existing liberal democracies are better than all prior regimes.<sup>58</sup> A Burkean philosopher or social scientist committed to restricting normative judgments in politics to comparative evaluations between regimes, rather than absolute judgments of a single regime in light of an impossible ideal, might accuse central features of plebeianism—the plebeian interest in *cultivating* indignation (rather than only responding to existing levels) and in having institutions penalize elites for reasons other than only their own transgressions—as emblematic of a faulty, dangerous philosophy of holding societies accountable to perfectionist criteria.<sup>59</sup>

While there may be counterarguments to make here, the plebeian would do better to accept some elements of the charge of ingratitude as a condition of political progressivism. What Susan B. Anthony said in the context of nineteenth century feminism—“Our job is not to make young women grateful, it's to make them ungrateful”—is in fact applicable to any political theory that takes seriously the capacity of the future to surpass the past in what is politically possible. The plebeian, whose second-class status might be seen as a universalized and de-gendered version of the pre-liberation status of women in politics,<sup>60</sup> must endure the bad conscience of offending competing urges for embracing the status quo. Such ingratitude has its own Machiavellian legacy, as Machiavelli taught that *all* people—the few and the many alike—suffer from ingratitude.<sup>61</sup> McCormick focuses only on the relative difference between nobles and ignobles, emphasizing Machiavelli's claim that the few are *more* ungrateful than the many,<sup>62</sup> and does not pursue the Machiavellian truth that plebeians suffer from their own ingratitude and that, as I am suggesting, such ingratitude in some form must be accepted as a condition of the commitment to plebeian democracy.

These five aspects of the plebeian bad conscience suggest that a democratized Machiavellianism would involve not just the institutions of plebeian democracy, but a sullied, disenchanting, complicated ethical outlook required to realize and maintain these institutions. While I support McCormick in his proposals and applaud his impressive excavation of Machiavelli, I do think he misses out on the full sense of the *ignobility*

required both to implement and maintain a plebeian democracy. Traditional democratic theory has accepted ignobility in the very limited sense that it explicitly opposes legalized titles of nobility. McCormick's innovative Machiavellian proposals for plebeian democracy accept ignobility in the additional sense of bringing back the distinction between nobles and ignobles. What I am suggesting, also drawing on Machiavelli, is the need for a third kind of ignobility: the need for plebeians to learn how not to be good in order to succeed in their institutional objectives.

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#### NOTES

1. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* [hereafter P], trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), XVIII, 71.

2. Economically, the richest and most powerful Roman citizens funded from their own pockets numerous public feasts, games, the construction of buildings, and sometimes the costs of the magistracies they held. Fergus Millar, *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (Univ. of Michigan, 1998), 73–94; Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses* (Penguin, 1992), 201–345; A.W. Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic* (Oxford, 1999), 94–121.

3. On the tribunes' power to accuse, see Millar, 14; A.H.M. Jones, *The Criminal Courts of the Roman Republic and Principate* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), Ch. 1, "Iudicia Populi."

4. John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 147, 150.

5. P, IX; also see Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* [hereafter D], trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), I.4, I.5; Machiavelli, *The History of Florence* [hereafter HF], in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, vol. 3 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), II.12, 1093–94; III.1, 1140–1141. Occasionally, Machiavelli makes a threefold distinction between nobles, people (*populo*), and plebs, thus distinguishing the middleclass from the lower class. See, e.g., HF, II.42, 1138–39.

6. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958).

7. D, II.2, 131.

8. P, XV, 61.

9. Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 118–28; Felix Gilbert, "The Humanist Concept of the Prince and the Prince of Machiavelli," *The Journal of Modern History*, 11:4 (Dec., 1939): 439–83. For example, Francesco Patrizi argued in his treatise from the 1470s, *The Kingdom and the Education of the King*, that the prince would have his own virtue: "the virtues of the ruler are one thing, the virtues of the people are another." In particular,

Patrizi claimed that ordinary citizens might possess qualities—like a “modest outlook,” gratitude for benefits they receive from their monarchs, and “obedience and goodwill”—which would be inappropriate in princes (quoted in Skinner, 125).

10. So the same Patrizi who argues for a distinctly princely virtue (see note 9 above) still claims that all princely virtues will come to nothing unless they are joined with classical and Christian virtues (Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 126, 131). Likewise other Italian humanists who argued for a distinctly princely ethics—whether Oliviero Carafa’s insistence that “Kings . . . pursue their own advantage and are wont to put their interests before the ties of relationship and friendship” (quoted in Gilbert, “The Humanist Concept of the Prince,” 469); or Bartolomeo Sacchi’s argument in his 1471 *The Prince* that diplomacy is not enough and that a ruler must be able to supplement it with coercion (Skinner, *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 130)—did not claim that the realization of these commitments would require an active unlearning of traditional moral norms.

11. Cicero’s arguments in the third book of *De Officiis* about the necessary harmony of what is beneficial (*utile*) to a political community and what is honorable (*honestum*) sets the stage for later humanist efforts to find in the idea of the common good a way to reconcile ostensibly transgressive acts with the demands of morality. See Cicero, *De Officiis*, Bk 3, secs. 36, 64. But this utilitarianism, which would dissolve the conflict between politics and morality, is not the perspective of Machiavelli, for whom there is simply an insoluble tension between the claims of the city and the moral claims of the soul.

12. See, e.g., Tacitus, *Annals*, 4.14; Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.63, 3.40; Kautilya, *The Arthashastra* (London: Penguin, 1992).

13. Consider Machiavelli’s example of “cruelty well-used” (P, VIII), according to which violence should be committed all at once, rather than incrementally over time, to obtain maximum political effect with the least amount of egregiousness. In its differentiation of better and worse forms of moral wrongdoing, the idea of “cruelty well-used” might be seen as a microcosm of Machiavelli’s overall contribution to political ethics.

14. For Machiavelli’s use of the terminology “ignobles [*ignobili*]” to refer to the plebeians, see, e.g., D, I, 5; II.30. For McCormick’s parallel use of the term “ignoble,” see *Machiavellian Democracy*, 34, 46, 71, 191.

15. D, I.16, 18.

16. D, I.17, I.55.

17. P, IX.

18. D, I.11, 34–35.

19. D, I.55, 110. The phrase “how much goodness and how much religion” is repeated a second time in the chapter (111).

20. D, I.55, 110. Machiavelli concludes: “And, truly, where there is not this goodness [*bontà*], nothing good can be hoped for, as it cannot be hoped for in the provinces that in these times are seen to be corrupt, as in Italy above all others” (*ibid.*, 110).

21. D, I.7, 24.

22. P, V, 21.

23. D, I.5, 18: “Without doubt, if one considers the end of the nobles and of the ignobles, one will see great desire to dominate in the former, and in the latter only desire not to be dominated; and, in consequence, a greater will to live free, being less able to hope to usurp it than are the great.”

24. D, I.3. For another hint of a Machiavellianism deployed on the plebeian level, see the famous speech of the anonymous Ciompo Machiavelli constructs in his



*History of Florence*, who is said to have urged fellow lower-class Florentines to persist in violence against the nobles, in part because “if we expect to be pardoned for our old transgressions, [we] must commit new ones” (HF, 3.13, 1159).

25. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 48.

26. *Ibid.*, 24, 44–45.

27. *Ibid.*, 24–25, 80.

28. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

29. *Ibid.*, 70–76.

30. *Ibid.*, 43.

31. *Ibid.*, 81–82.

32. *Ibid.*, 15.

33. *Ibid.*, 1, 6, 24, 44, 48; quoting Machiavelli, D, I.4.

34. *Ibid.*, 70–72, 90, 129–33, 137. Also see, McCormick, “Machiavelli and the Gracchi: Prudence, Violence, and Redistribution” *Global Crime* 10:4 (2009): 298–305.

35. McCormick, thus, can claim: “Machiavelli invites us to understand popular ferocity as the righteous indignation of a normally passive people who have been violated, abused, and threatened. The people’s aggressive behavior is revealed to be a legitimate and indeed necessary response to the prideful and greedy nature of elites” (*Machiavellian Democracy*, 89). Likewise, McCormick can say of the People: “[T]hey exhibit an oppressive appetite only in response to oppression inflicted upon them; and they do so honestly, overtly, without any trace of subterfuge or guile” (*ibid.*, 24).

36. Although I do not think McCormick pursues a Machiavellian moral outlook for the People, he nevertheless hints at such a perspective when he acknowledges “how difficult it is to distinguish between [popular] aggressiveness that is appropriately defensive from that which is dangerously offensive” (*Machiavellian Democracy*, 87); when he argues, “neither do the people always behave so passively, nor are their desires always so invariably benign, as a superficial reading on *The Prince* and the *Discourses* might suggest” (*ibid.*, 86–87); and when, citing Machiavelli, he seems to advocate the people “erring on the side of harshness” in its accusations and judgments in political trials (*ibid.*, 83).

37. While liberal democratic regimes up until the 1960s effectively accepted differentiations based on race, ethnicity, class, and gender, it is distinctive of the contemporary democratic experience that such differentiations are unjust. In America, for example, Rogers Smith describes the now conventional, idealistic objection to differentiation: “The dominant implication [of civil rights legislation and jurisprudence over the last half-century] is that differentiated citizenship is undesirable in modern America’s constitutional republic. Uniform, formally identical treatment of citizens is generally regarded as the law’s proper default position, with departures from such treatment requiring special justification.” Smith, “Differentiated Citizenship and the Tasks of Reconstructing the Commercial Republic,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41:2 (Summer 2010): 214–22, 217. To be sure, as Smith points out, numerous differentiations remain, for example those based on age, sexual-orientation, immigration status, and ontology (e.g., whether one is a human or corporation). Moreover, progressive reformers, especially within the realm of racial politics, have become increasingly suspicious of color-blind politics that effectively perpetuate bias. But the ideal of undifferentiated citizenship at present garners widespread allegiance.

38. Rawls, hardly a plebeian democrat and himself a defender of fair equality of opportunity, nonetheless makes the important acknowledgement: “[T]he principle of fair

opportunity can be only imperfectly carried out, at least as long as the institution of the family exists. The extent to which natural capacities develop and reach fruition is affected by all kinds of social conditions and class attitudes. Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in the ordinary sense is itself dependent upon happy family and social circumstances. *It is impossible in practice to secure equal chances of achievement and culture for those similarly endowed.*” Rawls, *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 74 (emphasis added). Also see James Fishkin, *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

39. On the idea that contemporary democracy carries with it the disappointment of “broken promises” and “unforeseen obstacles”—including the disappointment of not fully erecting a political community of free and equal citizens—see Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy: A Defense of the Rules of the Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

40. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 14.

41. *Ibid.*, 13.

42. *Ibid.*

43. On the latter, see, e.g., Chantal Mouffe, “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” *Social Research* 66:3 (1999): 745–58; Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

44. George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), ix.

45. As Machiavelli puts it, “[I]t is necessary to whoever disposes a republic and orders laws in it to presuppose that all men are bad, and that they always have to use the malignity of their spirit whenever they have a free opportunity for it” (D, I,3, 15). Hume similarly says, “It is . . . a just *political* maxim, that *every man must be considered a knave*: though, at the same time, it appears somewhat strange, that a maxim should be true in *politics* which is false in *fact*” (Hume, “Of the Independency of Parliament,” in *Political Essays* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 24. Schmitt states the thesis even more boldly: “[A]ll genuine political theories presuppose man to be evil, i.e., by no means an unproblematic but a dangerous and dynamic being” (Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 61.

46. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 183.

47. Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 98.

48. Sara Forsdyke, *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy: The Politics of Expulsion in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 147–48.

49. D, I,7, 23–24.

50. D, I,4; I,7; I,37. Also see P, VII, where Machiavelli describes how the gruesome execution of a leading magistrate, Remirro de Orco, was a way to “pure the spirits” of citizens in the Romagna and leave them “satisfied and stupefied” (30).

51. But see the treatment on humors in Machiavelli’s thought: Anthony J. Parel, *The Machiavellian Cosmos* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 101–12.

52. As Mansfield and Tarcov explain in their “Introduction” to the *Discourses*, the ill humor is something the “people . . . harbors *toward the whole government* or toward the class of nobles,” even if its venting is directed “against one individual, whose punishment satisfies the people and excused everyone else” (xxix, emphasis added).

53. Given McCormick’s explicit arguments in behalf of a popular republicanism that takes aim not only at political but economic elites, it is a surprising feature of his *Machiavellian Democracy* that the remedies it seeks are mostly limited to political

solutions, like trials and greater participation for ordinary citizens, and do not include specific economic regulations against the superrich. For McCormick's earlier critique of the contemporary blindness to economic elitism, see John P. McCormick, "Contain the Wealthy and Patrol the Magistrates: Restoring Elite Accountability to Popular Government," *American Political Science Review* 100:2 (2006): 147–63, 147–48.

54. Insofar as trials are motivated by redress and not remediation of individual wrongdoing, it is important to restrict the penalties to economic and other non-corporeal regulatory burdens—burdens which might be considered honors too, much like the Roman aristocrats who paid enormous sums out of their own pockets for the commonweal did so for their own honor and standing.

55. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 116. McCormick argues that this extra-judicial function of public trials relates to their ability to "provide an outlet for the ordinary venting of social 'humors' that are generated by class antagonism" (116). This is correct, I think, but it leaves unexplored *why* there will be class conflict beyond that caused by the transgressions of elites and how efforts to quell this conflict might involve regulating individuals for reasons other than their guilt.

56. *Ibid.*, 14: "[C]ollective memory among the people of formal inequalities from the past seems to inspire within them a sensitivity to informal inequalities that persist in the present."

57. *Ibid.*, 14.

58. As much as McCormick celebrates the plebeianism of the Roman and certain Florentine constitutions, his work is hardly a nostalgic celebration of the past, as he is quite aware of how these regimes not only employed semi-naturalized class-based distinctions for oligarchic ends, engaged in discriminations grounded on gender and race. Moreover, McCormick also departs from Machiavelli in *not proposing any citizen can accuse any other* nor employing a lottery for magistracies besides his own tribunate, as such proposals are "too unwieldy" and not suited to the "size and complexity of contemporary commercial societies" (172).

59. For a recent critique along these lines, see, e.g., Kenneth Minogue, *The Servile Mind: How Democracy Erodes the Moral Life* (New York: Encounter Books, 2010), 271–91, 317–25.

60. On the analogy between the figure of the second-class citizen (the citizen who is being-ruled rather than ruling) and the woman (who obeys the persuasive speech of her husband), see Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277b22–24.

61. D, I.28. Also see, D, I.58: "[A]ll men particularly, and especially princes, can be accused of that defect [i.e., ingratitude and inconstancy] of which the writers accuse the multitude" (116).

62. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, 76.