



# Machiavelli's Account of Unity: Subverting the 'Body Politic'

Oliver Chan



YAN P. LIN CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF FREEDOM AND GLOBAL ORDERS IN THE ANCIENT AND MODERN WORLDS

## Introduction

You might have heard of the term “the body politic” before. The use of the body as a metaphor for a well-functioning political association is canonical of Renaissance political thought.

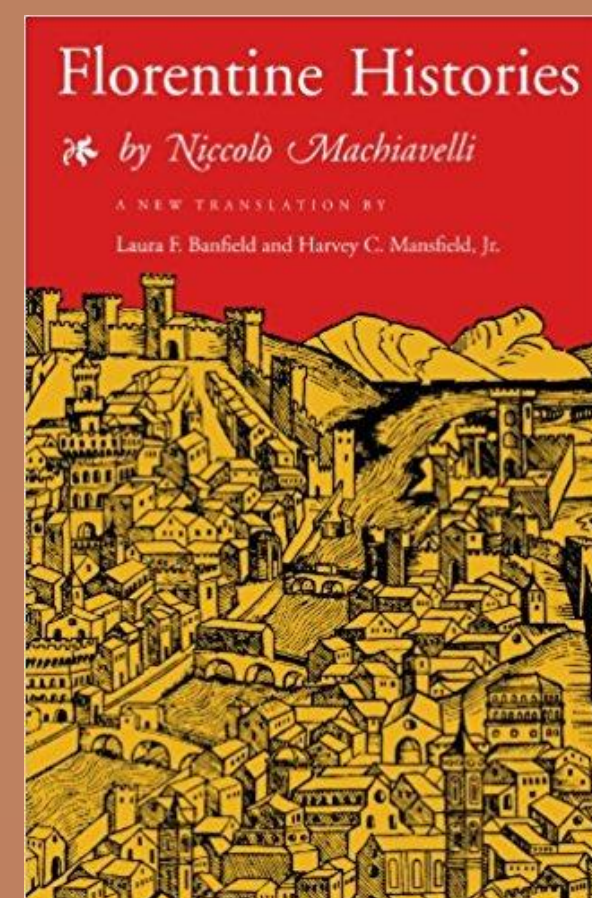
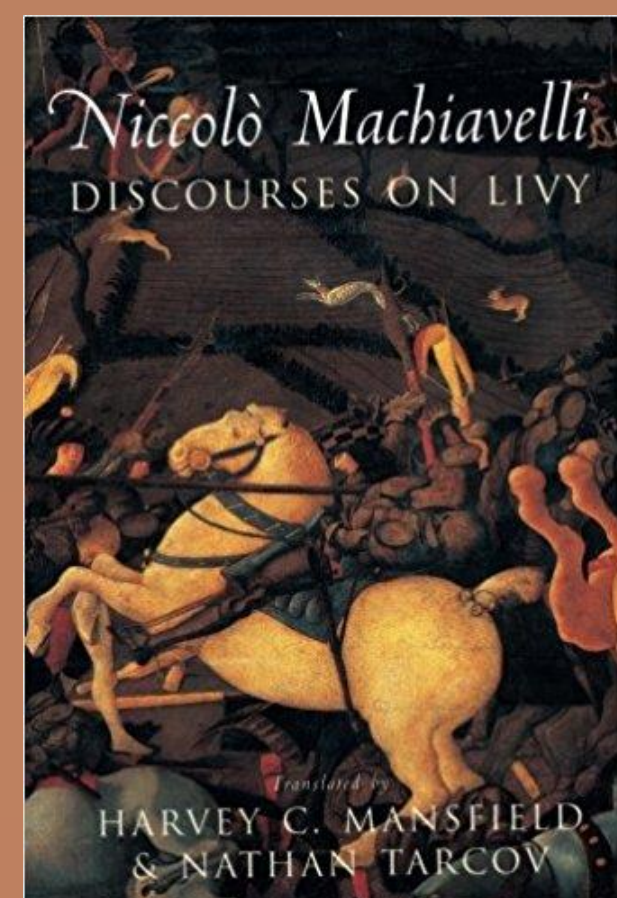


(The 'Body Politic' of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*)

Part of the strategy in use of body as a political metaphor is to emphasize (1) the importance of the principle of unity to the nominal whole and (2) the need for order and correspondence amongst the citizen-parts that comprise the 'body politic'. In other words, there is a sort of functional *harmony* to unity. Moreover, (3) by speaking of a 'body' as a sort of thing with substance, it evokes a sense of realness and certainty to the cultural construct of the community or political association being described.

## Methods

This project was conducted through textual analysis with some interpretation of the original Latin and Italian. The originals were often read alongside their translated versions.



## Discussion

During the Italian Renaissance, the prevailing imagery of how the body was viewed by people was shaped by humanists. For example, in Book I of *On the Dignity and Excellence of Man*, Giannozzo Manetti asks “What harmony of limbs, what shapeliness of features, what figure, what face could be or even be thought of as more beautiful than the human?” When the image of the body is evoked in the idea of ‘the body politic’ by political humanists, one imagines a political association that is stately, proportioned and elegant like the human form that Manetti describes.

In Machiavelli's work, there is a distinct subversion of the sort of 'elegant' image of the body offered by political humanists. The imagery of bodies that Machiavelli evokes in his work are better described as *'grotesque'*. Machiavelli's bodies are maimed, devoured, disease-ridden, and desecrated. By desecrated, I mean that the bodies that he describes are: hanged, defenestrated and, famously, bisected in the middle of a town square (*The Prince*, Ch. 8 – Cesare Borgia and the case of his viceroy in the Romagna).



(The Defenestrations of Prague by Karel Svoboda)

One striking passage that subverts the traditional usage of the body as an image is found in II.37 of Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*. Therein, he describes how the people rebelled against Walter de Brienne, “the Duke of Athens.” Initially, he had been appointed by the people to rule Florence for the purpose of resolving their financial problems. However, as time went on, the people found that Walter had “changed their customs too much” (to be like more like the French) and had ruled too tyrannically for a people ‘accustomed to freedom’. Thus, the people rebelled: in an act of fury, out of a desire for revenge, they literally “ate” an advisor of Walter and his teenage son. This scared Walter into fleeing Florence.

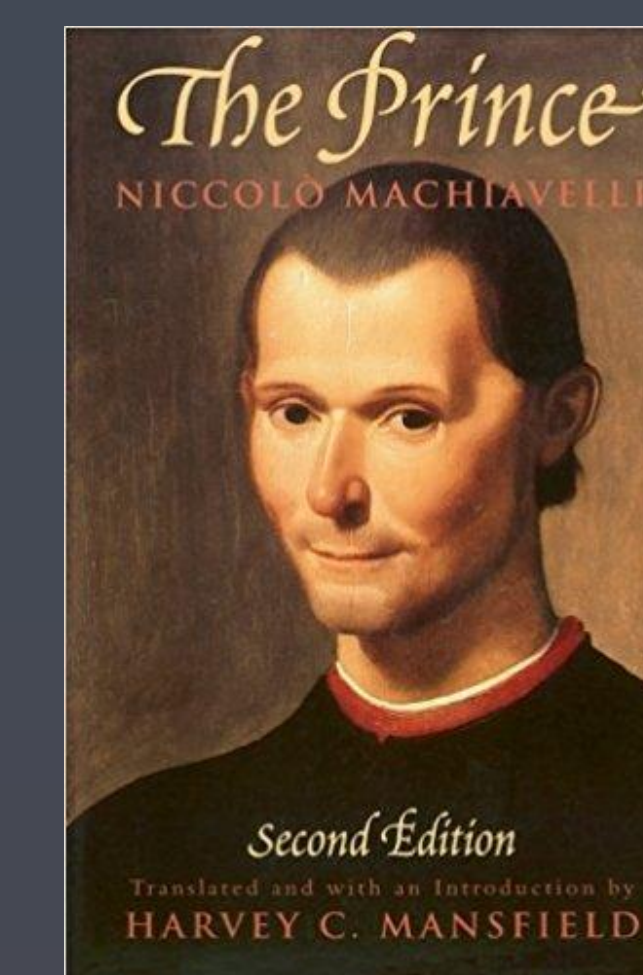


(Painting of Cesare Borgia by Giuseppe Gatteri)

The ‘body politic’ of Machiavelli seems to operate much differently than the ideals of political humanists. It cannot be tamed by laws and institutions. Laws and institutions merely serve as ordinary means of dealing with threats. The extraordinary means of dealing with threats as described before are passionate and ravenous *but* they function to expel the dangerous, metastasizing element(s) of the community. So much like bodies, the “body politic” of Machiavelli – as the people – seems to have an ‘automatic’ purgative mechanism.

## Conclusions

I argue that Machiavelli is effectively offering a critique of the use of the 'body' as a sort of image for a unified political association. Machiavelli's form of unity is *untamed* and will go to whatever lengths to defend the principle of their unity as a people Machiavelli roots this purgative “trigger” at the level of humours, or impulses; and Aristotle had similarly rooted purgation in the appetitive, irrational part of the soul. Moreover, drawing influence from Marsilius of Padua, Machiavelli critiques political humanists by offering a less bounded and more precarious view of the unity of a people. Indeed, unity is threatened by sectarian divisions; the ambitions of distinct citizens of the community; foreign conquest; and a multiplicity of other ‘externalities’. Machiavelli certainly uses the body as a much different image and metaphor than his political humanist contemporaries.



## Selected References

- Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Discourses on Livy*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield & Nathan Tarcov. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Print.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Florentine Histories*. Translated by Laura F. Banfield & Harvey C. Mansfield. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. Print.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. Print.
- Marsilius of Padua. *The Defender of the Peace*. Translated by Anabel S. Brett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Print.
- Aristotle, and J. L. Ackrill. *A New Aristotle Reader*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. Print.
- Brown, Alison. *Language and Images of Renaissance Italy*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. Print.
- Anthony Parel. *The Political Calculus: Essays on Machiavelli's Philosophy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972. Print.

## Acknowledgements

The funding for this Arts Research Internship project was generously provided by both the Maldoff family and the Yan P. Lin Centre for the Study of Freedom and Global Orders in the Ancient and Modern Worlds' Research Group for Constitutional Studies.

I would also like to extend many thanks to my supervisor Professor Yves Winter for all of his insight and kindness during my internship.

TRIFOLD AREA – THIS GUIDE WILL BE REMOVED BEFORE PRINTING – TRIFOLD AREA – THIS GUIDE WILL BE REMOVED BEFORE PRINTING – TRIFOLD AREA

TRIFOLD AREA – THIS GUIDE WILL BE REMOVED BEFORE PRINTING – TRIFOLD AREA – THIS GUIDE WILL BE REMOVED BEFORE PRINTING – TRIFOLD AREA