

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Black, Robert. Machiavelli: From Radical to Reactionary

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Volume 46, Number 1, Winter 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1107795ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i1.41747>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Khoury, J. (2023). Review of [Black, Robert. Machiavelli: From Radical to Reactionary]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 46(1), 246–248. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i1.41747>

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**Black, Robert.**

***Machiavelli: From Radical to Reactionary.***

Renaissance Lives. London: Reaktion Books, 2022. Pp. 256 + 22 col. ill., 16 b/w. ISBN 978-1-78914-615-8 (hardcover) £17.95.

Robert Black's subtitle to his biography of Machiavelli, *From Radical to Reactionary*, is expressed most forcefully in the second chapter: "In substance *The Prince* itself differs from anything Machiavelli had hitherto written. He has now articulated a coherent and extraordinarily powerful thesis of monumental originality [...] *The Prince* is absolutely unique, overturning the entire heritage of Western political thought" (76). Black's assessment of the place of *The Prince* in the Western tradition is accurate, but his assessment of Machiavelli as a "reactionary" is problematic. In his view, the *Florentine Histories* is characterized as "idealistic" (186), with Machiavelli becoming "the voice of the *status quo* and of compromise" (190). In sum, Black presents a much-elasticized Machiavelli who was a poet, a dramatist, a political operative, a historian, and a political philosopher in equal measure.

Black's polemical thesis regards the secretary's political philosophy. He posits Machiavelli variously as a theorist who supported monarchical rule, yet "paradoxically an ardent republican" (9); an atheist who "became a political radical, the author of an outrageous handbook on tyranny composed for the benefit of aspiring Renaissance despots"; he "then changed colour, championing a revival of ancient Roman republicanism," and then "at the end of his life [...] emerged as a conservative, upholding aristocratic government and the traditional politics, values and mores of the social and political Establishment" (9–10). The story of the man who emerges from the biography is engaging, albeit not without provoking the occasional metaphorical raised eyebrow.

The book opens with an account of Niccolò Machiavelli's family background, noting that his paternal illegitimacy had far-reaching consequences on both the father and the son, essentially deeming them second-class citizens. Ultimately, Black concludes that these circumstances made Machiavelli "keen to serve whatever Florentine regime was in power" (23).

The first chapter then outlines Machiavelli's humanist education, his forays into poetry, and his entry into the civil service. He shows his aspiring humanism through his early verse and translation of Terence and displays his political shrewdness in his famous letter to Becchi about Savonarola (9 March

1498) and, again, when he is elected second chancellor in June 1498. Machiavelli honed his diplomatic skills during this time, going on more than twenty important missions, remaining in his post until the Medici returned to power in 1512. It is here that Black, in an observation regarding Machiavelli's diplomatic letters, comes close to contradicting himself about the secretary's analogues between his diplomatic writings and his theoretical treatises. He writes that "Machiavelli's diplomatic correspondence and reports anticipate some of the political ideas developed in his later famous writings," but then insists that "[f]ew of his chancery letters [...] offered opportunities for personal reflection; only exceptionally do these writings anticipate the author of *The Prince* and the *Discourses*" (40–42).

The strength of this first chapter lies in its analysis of Machiavelli's poetry which, sadly, is still little studied. Black shows that some of the secretary's most shrewd observations, for example, his argument that ultimately we lack freewill, that we are determined by our individual immutable natures, had already made its appearance in Machiavelli's poetry, especially his "Tercets on Fortune" ("Capitolo di fortuna"), written during his chancery years. Black rightly concludes that "Machiavelli's early poetry is the real occasion of his first steps as a deep political thinker" (46).

In chapter 2, which focuses on *The Prince*, Black contends that Machiavelli is concerned only with glory. The world of *The Prince* is "drowning in sin [...] The stench [...] is overpowering. It is a world of misery and slavery [...] the domain of tyranny" (77). Black acknowledges that "the words 'tyrant' and 'tyranny' are not found in the text," but insists that Machiavelli's "new prince is a synonym for tyrant" (77), correctly pointing out the use of the word in *Discourses* (1.25–26). He further declares that "Machiavelli [...] reduces the common good to a secondary status, subordinate to the prince's benefit [...] in *The Prince* it is the prince who counts, not his subjects" (79–81).

Chapter 3 concentrates on the *Discourses*. Black acknowledges the book's "intrinsic links to *The Prince*," but argues that the latter "is meant for a new prince about to set up a regime in the Romagna or elsewhere in Italy apart from Tuscany [...] In the *Discourses*, his perspective is wider, embracing all of Italy" (117). In this reading, Machiavelli "emerges as a political, sociological, geographical and historical relativist [...] not as a monochromatic champion of any particular political regime" (119). The remainder of the chapter gives us a fascinating narrative of Machiavelli as a dramatist. The chapter serves to

vindicate the secretary's own observation in a letter to his friend Lodovico Alamanni (17 December 1517) about his reading of *Orlando Furioso*, where he bemoans that he has not been acknowledged as a poet.

Chapter 4 shines the light on Machiavelli's final years, arguing that he re-emerged as a conservative, especially in *The Art of War*, the *Life of Castruccio Castracani*, and the *Florentine Histories*. Black asserts that Machiavelli's morality in these works is "conventional" but retains an anti-Christian stance (152–53). While he highlights several important features of the extant historiography here, his argument that Machiavelli re-emerges as an "idealist" (186), and that now, especially with the *Florentine Histories*, he was writing "for the occasion *par excellence* [as] Florence's official historian and [...] the pope's counsellor," strikes me as too quick a judgment, especially because Black also insists that Machiavelli's abilities as an ironic and satirical writer are exceptional. Why could Machiavelli not write in an equally subversive fashion at this stage of his career, as he had done earlier? I would argue that both *Castruccio Castracani* and the *Florentine Histories* are as radical as *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. In fact, Black opens his final chapter, "Machiavelli's Legacy," with the sentence, "Machiavelli's contemporaries neither acknowledged nor realized his conservatism in old age," adding that "Guicciardini regarded him as an unrepentant extremist" (213).

Without doubt, the book is a lively, engaging read. It is gorgeously interlaced with twenty-two colour plates, and it does offer several important considerations regarding the secretary, even if I am sceptical about the thesis that Machiavelli ever became a conservative. It offers good historiographical references and reminds us of the importance of looking at authors wholistically.

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