Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Interdisciplinary Humanities and Communication Studies
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

# *Plebeian Machiavellianism: The Idea of "Learning How not to be Good" for Ordinary Citizens*

**Jeremy Shengxuan Peng**

*Kent School, Kent, USA*
*jeremy.peng080619@gmail.com*

***Abstract.*** Most accepted political thought holds that good and morally upright actions such as justice and virtue are desirable in politics, since they guide both politics and daily life; Niccolò Machiavelli, however, put forward a completely opposite view of political conduct: "learn how not to be good." This point was demonstrated in full in the book The Prince, and his idea of "learn how not to be good" has usually been regarded as advice for rulers, leaders or political elites only. Based on Jeffrey Edward Green's idea of plebeian Machiavellianism, this paper argues that ordinary citizens will often meet ethical situations in which they must act "not morally" and "not politely." By examining Machiavelli's writings along with modern democratic theory, the article shows that the final control over powerful elites rests on the anger, suspicion and watchfulness of citizens. Such emotions and attitudes often contradict common moral values like civility and equality. Thus, "learning how not to be good" is a political skill which may help ordinary citizens in identifying power and resisting unfair control. The main purpose of the article is not to encourage cynicism; it is to show that moral discomfort is normal and that it is essential for a responsible citizen under an unequal and flawed democracy.

***Keywords:*** plebeian Machiavellianism, political ethics, democratic theory, bad conscience, civic vigilance

## 1. Introduction

The relation between morality and politics has been debated among political thinkers for a long time. Many classical and liberal thinkers hold that political conduct should obey the moral rules of daily life. Also, a large number of modern democratic theories emphasize "civility, honesty, and good faith." This is similar to Cicero's belief that what is honorable is also what is useful. However, Niccolò Machiavelli is the exception who goes in the opposite direction. In *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy* he points out that political decisions are often taken under pressure, uncertainty and conflict, and in such situations people cannot keep moral consistency [1, 2]. When Machiavelli says that politicians must "learn how not to be good," he does not only mean that acting badly a few times for a greater good is acceptable. His point is that the foundations and rules of politics themselves are in conflict with traditional morality and virtue.

On the other hand, in Machiavelli's political world this argument is usually made for the upper-class men who hold power, that is, princes, magistrates and founders. In most cases ordinary people

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

are described as innocent participants who have no part in ethical compromise. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli praises ordinary people for their *bontà* and religious faith. He holds that ordinary people are less corrupted morally than the elites [1]. In *The Prince* the people also appear mainly as subjects who only wish not to be oppressed; the prince is the one who needs to learn how to use cruelty, deception and force [2]. Also, modern political theory has elite-centered readings in which the leaders bear the "dirty hands," and citizens need not carry the guilt of immoral action.

This paper does not accept the view that difficult moral choices belong only to political leaders. According to Jeffrey Edward Green's idea of Machiavellian ethics, ordinary citizens also run into problems which cannot be solved only by acting morally good [3]. Democratic systems are imperfect, with inequality, a lack of transparency and strategic decision-making, and for this reason citizens should learn to identify power, to bear moral discomfort and to protect themselves by acting "not to be good."

This paper holds that ordinary citizens in flawed democracies must decide at what moment and in what way they should not be "good." However, the argument does not support cynicism or cruelty. In plebeian Machiavellianism, people push back against those in power and also keep asking what is morally right. Here, acting rightly means that citizens keep in mind their own dignity and that of others and defend personal liberty from powerful actors; also, they refuse to be used as a tool of domination, even if pressure from the system pushes them to go along.

## 2. Literature review

One of the central debates in political philosophy is whether political actions should obey moral rules. Classical and medieval thinkers held that there was no conflict between politics and moral virtue. For example, in *On Duties* Cicero states that what is morally useful (*utile*) will in the end agree with what is morally honorable (*honestum*). This argument has later influenced Christian and Renaissance humanist political thought [4].

Machiavelli's political philosophy contradicted the attempt to bring politics and morality into harmony. In *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy* he shows that political action normally takes place in an environment full of uncertainty, conflict and fear. Therefore, moral consistency cannot be kept by politicians [1]. By "learning how not to be good" he is not rebelling against morality; what he rejects is the belief that moral kindness and goodness will lead people to success by themselves [2]. That is, to be morally good is not the same as to succeed.

Earlier thinkers such as Thucydides, Tacitus and Kautilya had already seen the tension between moral standards and political necessity, and Machiavelli carried the idea further; in his account this tension is always there, it is not an exception and it cannot be resolved [5-7]. In Machiavelli's view, therefore, political actors should use their own ethical judgment and not depend only on moral standards.

Early modern humanist political theory also accepts that the ethical demands on rulers are different from those on ordinary people, but a ruler's behavior should still agree with classical and Christian virtue. Skinner [8] and Gilbert [9], for example, have demonstrated that the Renaissance *mirror-for-princes* literature allowed rulers to use coercion, deception and strategic calculation, so long as their actions were aimed at virtuous ends. This literature defined the moral virtue of a ruler in such a way that acts which looked transgressive no longer counted as transgressions.

Machiavelli makes a break with this humanist theory. He does not try to justify some political actions by the common good; he states strongly that some political actions will inevitably violate moral standards. Skinner [8] has emphasized that Machiavelli changed the content of virtue and at the same time separated political action from moral standards and made it independent of them.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

Machiavelli's definition of *virtù* follows from this, with adaptability, decisiveness and political effectiveness placed above morality [2]. What matters most is that, for Machiavelli, this way of thinking should be taught, adopted and applied in political ethics.

Machiavelli's claims about political ethics are broad, but most modern political theories still apply Machiavellian moral realism only to social elites. In Weber's distinction between the "ethic of conviction" and the "ethic of responsibility," moral compromise is attributed to political leaders as a responsibility they are obliged to bear; in Walzer's idea of "dirty hands," violations of moral standards are tragic burdens which political leaders must carry for the common good and public benefit [10, 11].

Machiavelli is called a "teacher of evil" by Leo Strauss. Such an interpretation strengthens the view that his ideas are dangerous, exceptional and suitable only for those who hold power [12]. In Strauss's account Machiavelli was willing to advocate immoral conduct openly, and this makes him a radical thinker who deliberately undermined classical and Christian moral foundations. On this reading Machiavellian ethics becomes a kind of esoteric knowledge, and it is dangerous just because it is honest about the corrupt reality of political life. Strauss presents Machiavelli as exceptional and transgressive; thus, it becomes easier to assume that this kind of political realism belongs only to rulers and political elites and is not an approach that ordinary citizens could use. Under these theoretical systems a "separation of moral duty" appears, in which the elites are responsible for getting their hands morally dirty so that ordinary citizens can stay morally innocent.

One important fact is ignored by the idea of "moral duty separation": ordinary citizens live in political systems which require them to do things that violate moral values, and they face ethical demands as well. Such an elite-centered view assumes, absurdly, that democratic citizenship raises no moral difficulty. Machiavelli's own work makes this elite-centered interpretation still more complicated. On one side he praises ordinary citizens for their *bontà* (goodness), their religious faith and their character of being less corrupted than the elites [1]. On the other side he holds that political theory should start from the badness of human nature, and he fully agrees that ordinary citizens have such characteristics as resentment, a desire for revenge and violence [1].

According to his theory of political humors, this tension lies at the center of Machiavelli's thought. Class conflict, in this theory, is not a problem which can be resolved or eliminated [1, 13]. Policies such as the Roman tribunate and public accusations have their meaning here; they can deter the abuse of power and at the same time turn public resentment into political development [14-19].

Machiavelli does accept that the aggression of ordinary citizens may be politically necessary, but what such acts of aggression mean ethically for those citizens is not fully discussed by him. Thus, it is still not clear whether ordinary people must also learn how not to be good.

John P. McCormick's work *Machiavellian Democracy* is an attempt to link Machiavelli's plebeian ideas back to modern democratic theory. McCormick [20] points out that modern democracies are controlled by deep elite domination. Also, formal equality and procedural legitimacy conceal this kind of manipulation. In his view electoral mechanisms by themselves cannot make elites responsible.

Taking Roman and Florentine examples, McCormick put forward institutional reforms such as tribunician bodies made up of non-elites, wider use of popular trials, the assignment of different powers, responsibilities and limitations in the political system by social class, and the weakening of elite power [20]. Such reforms rely on the resentment and vigilance of ordinary citizens and on their wish to limit the power of elites. However, McCormick describes the nature of ordinary citizens as kind and their actions as coming mainly from the desire not to be dominated, so they act "not to be

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

good" only when elites abuse their power [20]. As a result, McCormick's reading of Machiavellianism stays mainly at the institutional level and does not reach the ethical level.

In his work Learning How Not to Be Good: A Plebeian Perspective, Jeffrey Edward Green [3] states clearly that both Machiavelli and McCormick underestimate the moral demands placed on ordinary citizens under plebeian democracy. If democratic institutions use the indignation, suspicion, blame and resentment of ordinary citizens in order to impose constraints on elites, then those citizens can no longer be morally innocent participants. Green therefore puts forward the concept of "plebeian bad conscience," and it means that citizens need to endure moral discomfort and to accept moral compromise when they support practices that are politically necessary but morally troubling [3]. For example, they should accept that not all individuals will be treated equally by political institutions, to tolerate rough, imperfect and unfair political decisions, and to be ready to impose burdens and penalties without feeling individual guilt.

In fact, Green makes a separation between elite Machiavellianism and plebeian Machiavellianism. Elites may break moral norms in order to keep their power, and plebeians break them in order to resist domination [3]. Thus, the act of "not being good" is a sign of ethical seriousness and not only of moral failure. In addition, Green's concept fits other criticisms of liberal democratic idealism. Rawls [21] states that fair equality of opportunity is never fully achieved, due to family and social background [22]. Similarly, Bobbio [23] holds that modern democracies find it difficult to fulfill their own moral promises, and this creates disappointment.

According to Smith [24], differentiated citizenship does exist in political practice, but people still resist the idea that political institutions will treat them unequally. There is a tension between structural inequality and egalitarian ideals, and the moral dissonance it produces is treated by plebeian Machiavellianism as a source of political vigilance, not as a civic failure.

Agonistic theories also hold that democracy does not require calmness, consensus and politeness. That is, conflict, resentment and anger are ordinary and necessary in it. Mouffe [25, 26] holds that conflict in democracy is inevitable, and that the suppression of conflict may strengthen hegemonic power. This agrees with Green's concept, since indignation and resentment are democratic resources and not threats to democracy.

Institutional reform and civic attitudes are analyzed by Green, but how plebeian Machiavellianism works in daily political life is not fully explained. Scholars of resistance have shown that it is normal for ordinary citizens to act in morally unclear ways when they face domination [27, 28]. What these citizens do corresponds to Green's idea of moral compromise at the institutional level. The above literature therefore shows that learning "not to be good" is not an exceptional demand put forward by radical democratic reform; it is a common situation which ordinary citizens must face in imperfect political systems.

The review makes clear that politics and morality are never in full accord, that democratic institutions depend on conflict and on the vigilance of ordinary citizens, and that these citizens must therefore bear moral discomfort in a plebeian democracy. However, few studies explain how Machiavellian ethical realism works in the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

Based on the work of Machiavelli, McCormick and particularly Green, this paper will extend plebeian Machiavellianism from the political institutional system to everyday political life. In this paper "learning how not to be good" is regarded as an ethical capacity which people need in order to deal with power, to resist domination and to act responsibly under opaque and unequal conditions. The literature section has shown the ethical tension inside the political system, but how this tension works in real civic settings still has to be examined. It is also necessary to investigate further how Machiavelli's insights function in the daily life of citizens. The following section will show that

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

ordinary citizens cannot solve their problems simply by being good when they face inequality, limited resources and institutional limits. They must use practical judgment, strategic awareness and moral flexibility instead.

## 3. From theory to practice

One important point made by Machiavelli in *The Prince* is that political actors need to see the gap between morality and practice. However, without examples from real civic experience, "learning how not to be good" stays an abstract idea which most people find hard to grasp. The author's own participation in local prenatal checkups in Kenya is one clear example behind the idea put forward here, that ordinary citizens must, and often do, act "not to be good" in order to survive under unequal power structures, formal bureaucratic systems and limited resources. In the work with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) the author found that most ordinary citizens cannot solve their own real-life problems only by following traditional moral principles such as complete honesty, complete neutrality or a rigid pursuit of full equality. In contrast, effective civic action needs strategic judgment, moral flexibility and political awareness. These experiences show that Machiavelli's political lessons apply to rulers and also to the "ordinary people" who live and struggle in an unequal system.

To support this point, *The Prince* states that "A prince, if he desires to keep his state, often finds himself reduced to be not good" [2]. Many people take the sentence to mean that immoral acts are allowed, but Machiavelli means that one has to see the situation as it really is, and moral values are not his point. The author met the same problem in Nairobi, during work on projects for prenatal health. Before this work, the author believed that girls got pregnant in their teens because they chose to or were not responsible enough. After talking with young mothers living nearby, the author saw that their situation was much more complicated than expected. Many of the teenage girls there are poor because of the system they live in; they cannot really choose their education, and food and health resources are out of their reach. For this reason, early pregnancy has to be seen partly as a result of inequality, and a personal decision is only one part of it. In this case, "Learning how not to be good" means that people stop making quick moral judgments and look at the facts; morality itself is still kept. For "ordinary citizens" Machiavelli's point is that real conditions come first, and moral virtue on its own will not fix every problem.

Machiavelli also discusses how a person with authority should be both kind and firm when making decisions and using power. In Chapter 17 the question is whether a ruler is better off loved or feared, and his answer is that "it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one must lack one of the two" [2]. His advice was for rulers, but the leaders of groups of ordinary citizens can follow it too. The local NGOs running prenatal checkup programs in Kenya are one example; with limited resources, they must decide which communities or families get help first. Doctors and volunteers cannot give every family the same support, and a program that wants to be kind to all may end up helping less overall. The organizers therefore need clear rules, and they sometimes make hard and unpopular choices so that the most urgent cases are handled first. This fits Machiavelli's point about the limits of being popular, and it is true of politics more widely; a responsible choice often means doing something people dislike in order to reach a bigger goal. Citizens who do civic work can thus learn that they need empathy, and that they also need courage when a choice is hard.

In addition, Machiavelli stresses that people need strategic awareness in dealing with political actors and institutions. In Chapter 18 he makes the well-known remark that "one must be a fox to recognize traps and a lion to frighten wolves" [2]. Strength and decisiveness are represented by the lion, and wisdom and caution by the fox. In a complex political system people are expected to have

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

both abilities. In Kenya, local NGOs are in a complex situation when they cooperate with global organizations that work inside rigid international structures. For example, in order to obtain resources, local organizations often depend on funding and institutional support from international actors such as maternal health initiatives or sustainable development programs. Such organizations want to solve problems on a global scale, and they pay more attention to broad objectives, for instance maternal health and the Sustainable Development Goals, which take a long time to reach. To get these resources, local NGOs often change their requests into forms that fit what the global institutions are already doing. In other words, the local organizations sometimes oversimplify their situations and needs, or do not state them clearly. Therefore, the aid from global institutions may fail to provide the most critical support. To be really effective, NGOs should act like Machiavelli's fox and recognize bureaucratic "traps" such as bureaucratic procedures and institutional language. At the same time they also need to act like Machiavelli's lion and have the courage to defend the needs of their communities. Ordinary citizens must therefore develop strategic awareness and keep their moral purpose when they negotiate with powerful institutions.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli also discusses reputation and the way others see a person in politics; he says the public image should be looked after, since political stability is affected by it. A leader, according to him, should seem to have "greatness, spiritedness, gravity, and strength" [2]. This was meant for rulers, but it is useful for civic action in Kenya as well. In the prenatal healthcare programs there, cooperation starts with trust, and nothing else works if trust is missing. The NGOs work outside the normal hospitals, and so the volunteers they train need to show that they are reliable and care about the people. A lot of people take part in these programs in Kenya, such as the people who need help, community leaders, doctors, donors and other parties. Since these groups judge the programs mainly by credibility, the NGOs must keep a reputation of being competent and determined. Machiavelli's view of reputation thus shows that, in real life, kindness is only one source of credibility and influence; people also gain them by acting consistently and by being seen as strong and reliable.

Lastly, Machiavelli stresses that successful political action needs sensitivity to the social environment and a willingness to adjust plans to the humors of the citizenry. In his discussion of leadership he notes that a prince must sometimes follow the humor of the citizens in order to keep stability [2]. During the author's work in Kenya, before the prenatal checkups took place, the team talked with individuals about family backgrounds and gender roles, so as to build trust and to collect their views on gender roles and their attitudes to the team's medical work. If the voices of the people are neglected, participation will be poor and support will be lacking. Thus, effective civic action needs flexibility and a willingness to change plans according to the demands of the community. Whether a political action succeeds depends largely on whether NGOs really understand the minds and motives of the people, not on imposing abstract concepts on real life without evaluating it.

On the whole, the experience in Kenya shows that Machiavellian realism fits everyday civic life without much difficulty. The medical work involved structural inequality, the allocation of resources, handling institutional power, staying reliable and adapting to local conditions, and these are close to the problems in *The Prince*. No ruler was conquering land or founding a regime in any of these cases; they showed the conflict between moral ideals and the needs of politics. So in civic work, ordinary citizens have to judge situations in the practical way Machiavelli asks of princes.

None of this means that ordinary citizens should drop their moral standards; however, people who join civic life responsibly must understand political conditions clearly and realistically. The line between "not being good" and "evil" is drawn by intention. A person who really wants to improve the community, to help others and to resist domination is using practical wisdom when "learning

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

how not to be good", and this is not moral corruption. So "learning how not to be good" does not turn people into evil people, and it gives them the ability to decide wisely. In this way ordinary citizens can use Machiavelli's ideas to face moral dilemmas of many kinds in imperfect political conditions and to reach responsible decisions in different situations.

## 4. Findings

The first finding is that Machiavellian ethical reasoning is not triggered by elite status alone; unequal power inside the system itself also triggers it. In fact, traditional interpretations limit Machiavellian ethics to rulers, as it is the rulers who hold strong power. However, Machiavelli's own writings show that political necessity appears whenever people are in unequal power relations and under a potential threat of domination [1, 2].

The second finding is that democratic institutions, in order to restrain elite domination, depend on civic attitudes which go against mainstream moral ideals. Green shows that plebeian mechanisms such as popular trials, class-based differentiation and the burdening of elites all rest on one assumption, namely that ordinary people can keep up indignation and suspicion over a long period and can tolerate institutional imperfections [3]. These attitudes, then, cannot be accidental; they must be consistent if the institutions are to keep working. Without such attitudes, plebeian institutions cannot limit those who hold power effectively. These attitudes, emotions and behaviors are in conflict with the citizens' ideals of neutrality and civic harmony, and McCormick's institutional arguments still rely on them as democratic resources [20]. In this way the second finding questions the liberal democratic assumption of citizenship, that is, the assumption that citizens are guided mainly by goodwill and reasonableness. Such virtuous assumptions may be morally attractive, but the analysis above shows that they are not enough under conditions of deep and persistent inequality [21, 23].

The third finding is related to plebeian bad conscience. "Bad conscience" is described by Green as the moral discomfort which citizens must endure when they support practices that are morally wrong but politically necessary [3]. The present analysis supports Green's idea and shows that bad conscience is not an occasional stage, nor a problem which can be solved in a moral way; it is a lasting condition for citizens in non-ideal systems. Plebeian democracy does not remove ethical tension; it turns the tension into an institution. In other words, ordinary citizens must take actions which violate their own ethical intuitions. For example, they must accept differentiated citizenship, tolerate punitive regulation without individualized guilt and stay watchful towards elites, even when they know that these actions will bring moral discomfort [3, 14]. This lasting bad conscience corresponds to Machiavelli's insistence that political actors must endure suffering when their actions go against moral standards, and that they cannot expect absolute ethical harmony [1, 2].

The fourth finding is that moral innocence often becomes a political weakness under domination. Moral innocence refers to the expectation that political life can rest on honesty, openness and good faith alone. Citizens who expect politicians to follow shared moral rules are not ready to see manipulation, symbolism, deceptive compliance or strategic instrumentalism [3, 29, 30]. Green has warned ordinary citizens not to fall into moral optimism once their indignation and political awareness are lost. If they believe that politics rewards goodness, politeness and kindness, they will probably take strategic behaviour for open cooperation and will not respond to new forms of domination [3]. This finding corresponds to Machiavelli's advice that political theory should assume human badness and never presume moral reliability [1, 31, 32].

In the fifth finding "learning how not to be good" is presented as a kind of political literacy, not as a corruption of morality. Political literacy here means the ability to understand political situations, to

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

predict what political actors will do and to choose an action that keeps control, in circumstances where the actors themselves may have only limited choices [3, 28]. A citizen with political literacy can see through the mask and will recognize how political language such as "justice", "morality", "responsibility" and "the common good" is used as a tool of control over people, rather than as a sincere and moral thing to do. Such a citizen also recognizes the situations in which procedural equality disfigures substantive inequality. It is clear to them as well when political actors use "unity" as a mask for silencing legitimate conflicts [25, 26]. To understand politics well, people must also see that political goods such as freedom from domination cannot always be achieved through honourable means [2, 3]. Turning Machiavellian ethics into a political literacy goes beyond a neat division between moral and immoral. Ethical reflection is still there, but it now has to readjust itself to real political life.

The sixth finding is that Machiavellianism has moral boundaries; this matters, since ethical flexibility is not moral meaninglessness. Green's main distinction between plebeian and elite Machiavellianism depends on the motives for acting. Plebeians bend moral norms in order to protect themselves and to resist domination; the elites may bend the same norms in order to increase their power [3, 20]. A moral boundary is created by this defensive motive. In moral terms an action driven by the wish to defend freedom differs from one driven by the wish to take advantage of vulnerability. At the same time, bad conscience can work as an internal moral boundary. Once people know that they are behaving immorally, they hold themselves back from cruelty or indifference [3, 11]. A common criticism of Machiavellian ethics is that moral compromise will be abused, and the sixth finding answers it. According to the analysis, moral judgment does not disappear so long as there is defensive intent, proportionality and moral discomfort.

Lastly, this study finds that daily political life already contains the ethical demands Green describes. Ordinary citizens have to deal with bureaucracies that are not transparent, with political messages designed for strategy and with rules that treat people unequally. Under these conditions, the choice between complying, concealing and resisting has to be made by them many times [27, 28]. The dilemmas that appear in their lives and choices are the ones Machiavelli assigns to rulers, although the social scale and the class position are different [1, 3]. Therefore, Machiavellian ethics is a normal and necessary part of ordinary citizenship, and it is not an exception kept only for elites.

In the seventh finding, a different ethical system is built; democratic virtue gets a new definition, and the people under power receive attention along with the people who hold it. This analysis shows an important change, and after that it splits democratic responsibility into three main implications.

First, the analysis shows that Machiavellian moral dilemmas come from a person's structural position and not from holding office; this argues against the long-standing idea of the "separation of moral tasks" [11]. In that idea the rulers are responsible for bearing moral costs, and the citizens can keep away from the dirty-handed realities of politics. This study criticizes that view; moral innocence is in fact a weakness. The point is not only a factual observation; it is also a normative readjustment. Realism is democratized in this way, and ethical judgment (*phronesis*) is then not a special skill kept for leaders but a capacity which every citizen should develop. Therefore, the citizen is no longer a passive beneficiary of institutions whose moral discomforts are carried by the elites. Citizens become instead a part of the protection of democratic institutions, and they share the moral costs of maintaining common ethical standards. As the third finding has discussed, "bad conscience" is the emotional sign of this new shared responsibility. In liberal contract theory people should enter political society without moral discomfort and should not bear moral costs inside it continuously; the study questions this view, since moral conflict does not and cannot disappear, and citizens must go on facing it within political society.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

Second, democratic institutions rely on the indignation and suspicion of citizens, and this fact is a strong function-based critique of deliberative democracy. According to the analysis, the issue is not a simple conflict of values; it is a conflict about how democracy actually works. Rational conversation, together with kindness, reasonableness and equality, is what deliberative democracy advocates [33]. However, in plebeian democracy, democracy must also depend on conflict, emotion and such attitudes as anger, suspicion and reasonable indignation. The analysis shows that a democracy which relies too much on civility and reason and overlooks the forces that drive conflict may become morally innocent but politically weak. A healthy democracy needs an "ecology of dispositions," in which polite discussion and cooperation are necessary but must also be balanced and corrected by suspicion, vigilance and "negative virtues." Thus, plebeian Machiavellianism is not intended to replace deliberative democracy; it works as a crucial counterpart in reaching a more complete democracy in a non-ideal world of persistent inequality.

Third, "learning how not to be good" is turned into a political literacy used for defence, and a new type of *virtù* comes out of it. The princes of Machiavellian politics used their *virtù* to conquer, win glory and set up new orders; this *virtù* is a different one. Plebeians have this *virtù*, and with it they keep their freedom, keep an eye on power and act well when under pressure. As a practical skill, this political literacy lets ordinary citizens stay politically autonomous even with heavy pressure and strong limits on them. Here freedom does not mean noninterference, nor only taking part in rule together with others. It means being able, over time, to notice domination and fight against it in a political life that is complex and hard to see through. Also, the defensive limit matters; without it, citizens could be carried away by indignation, make foolish choices, and even turn into the kind of domination they want to escape. Most importantly, defensive plebeian political action takes "bad conscience" as its guide; thus, the action stays cautious, self-critical and self-limiting.

## 5. Conclusion

From Aristotle to Mouffe one central tension has always remained, that is, how elite skill, public power and individual virtue can be coordinated inside a stable political system. This problem was already faced by ancient thinkers. Polybius, for example, approved of institutions which restrain conflicting social ambitions, and Thucydides showed how internal conflict can ruin a political system. Their common core argument is the design of an institution which limits the desire for power and at the same time encourages civic behaviour. Machiavellian thinking marks a turning point. He does not speak of harmony; he separates political efficacy from the classical idea of morality and describes an ideal republic which even uses laws and harsh or violent means in managing class conflict.

Power, conflict and virtue are still a central problem in modern political theory. On one side there are thinkers such as Rawls and the deliberative democrats, and in their view politics should rest on rational agreement, fair procedures and consensus. In their account democracy survives through peaceful discussion, through rule making and through fair operating systems. Schmitt, Strauss and McCormick stand on the other side, and they insist that conflict, exceptionalness and elite power cannot be taken out of ordinary political life. Ideas such as "the servile mind" (Minogue) or "the democratic paradox" (Mouffe) press one real question, namely whether modern democracy has reached its goal of producing active citizens conscious of their own existence, or whether what it produces is passive citizens under the government of institutions and elites.

In the end these thinkers and political texts come back to the original point and put the question again, what politics is all for. Is it only for stability, freedom and justice, or is it also for helping human beings to become human beings in the best possible way? In a society that is more and more

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

shaped by technology, social division and fragmentation, such fundamental human questions are perhaps more pressing than ever. It is still necessary to think about what kinds of institutions, whether rediscovered, reformed or newly invented, can best control power, build real forms of consensus and give citizens the real power to shape the future together. A dialogue of hundreds of years, based on ideas of thousands of years, offers no easy solutions. However, it does offer a deeper historical consciousness and clearer conceptual tools for facing these questions. As such, the future of this world depends on whether humankind has the time to think carefully about the past, understand it and face it.

## References


[1] Machiavelli, N. (1996). *Discourses on Livy* (H. C. Mansfield & N. Tarcov, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
[2] Machiavelli, N. (1998). *The Prince* (H. C. Mansfield, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
[3] Green, J. E. (2011). Learning how not to be good: A plebeian perspective. *The Good Society, 20*(2), 184–202. https://doi.org/10.1353/gso.2011.0013
[4] Cicero. (1991). *On duties (De Officiis)* (M. T. Griffin & E. M. Atkins, Eds.). Cambridge University Press.
[5] Thucydides. (1998). *The Peloponnesian War* (S. Lattimore, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.
[6] Tacitus. (2004). *The Annals* (A. J. Woodman, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.
[7] Kautilya. (1992). *The Arthashastra*.
[8] Skinner, Q. (1978). *The foundations of modern political thought* (Vol. 1). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511817892
[9] Gilbert, F. (1939). The humanist concept of the prince and The Prince of Machiavelli. *The Journal of Modern History, 11*(4), 449–483. https://doi.org/10.1086/236395
[10] Weber, M. (2004). Politics as a vocation. In D. Owen & T. B. Strong (Eds.), *The vocation lectures* (R. Livingstone, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.
[11] Walzer, M. (1973). Political action: The problem of dirty hands. *Philosophy and Public Affairs, 2*(2), 160–180.
[12] Strauss, L. (1958). *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. The Free Press.
[13] Machiavelli, N. (1989). The history of Florence. In A. Gilbert (Ed.), *Machiavelli: The chief works and others* (Vol. 3). Duke University Press.
[14] Forsdyke, S. (2005). *Exile, ostracism, and democracy: The politics of expulsion in ancient Greece*. Princeton University Press.
[15] Parel, A. J. (1992). *The Machiavellian cosmos*. Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300157208
[16] Lintott, A. W. (1999). *The constitution of the Roman Republic*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198150688.001.0001
[17] Millar, F. (1998). *The crowd in Rome in the late Republic*. University of Michigan Press. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.15678
[18] Jones, A. H. M. (1972). *The criminal courts of the Roman Republic and Principate*. Basil Blackwell.
[19] Veyne, P. (1990). *Bread and circuses: Historical sociology and political pluralism* (B. Pearce, Trans.). Penguin Books.
[20] McCormick, J. P. (2011). *Machiavellian democracy*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511975325
[21] Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Harvard University Press.
[22] Fishkin, J. S. (1983). *Justice, equal opportunity, and the family*. Yale University Press.
[23] Bobbio, N. (1987). *The future of democracy: A defence of the rules of the game* (R. Bellamy, Ed.; R. Griffin, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.
[24] Smith, R. M. (2010). Differentiated citizenship and the tasks of reconstructing the commercial republic. *Journal of Social Philosophy, 41*(2), 214–222. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9833.2010.01490.x
[25] Mouffe, C. (1999). Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism? *Social Research, 66*(3), 745–758.
[26] Mouffe, C. (2000). *The democratic paradox*. Verso.
[27] Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press.
[28] Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press.
[29] Williams, B. (2005). *In the beginning was the deed: Realism and moralism in political argument* (G. Hawthorn, Ed.). Princeton University Press.
[30] Kateb, G. (2011). *Human dignity*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.38347

[31] Hume, D. (1994). Of the independency of Parliament. In K. Haakonssen (Ed.), *Political essays* (pp. 24–27). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139170765.011
[32] Schmitt, C. (1996). *The concept of the political* (G. Schwab, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
[33] Habermas, J. (1990). *Moral consciousness and communicative action* (C. Lenhardt & S. W. Nicholsen, Trans.). MIT Press.