

GENEALOGIES OF MODERNITY (/)

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# Augustine, Violence, and the Novelty of Machiavelli



Machiavelli, despite his regular use of examples drawn from antiquity, consistently emphasizes the novelty of his approach to political philosophy. In *The Prince*, he is famously interested in, above all else, the problems faced by new princes. In his more explicitly republican work, *The Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli points to the new modes and orders that

his thinking will introduce. His insistence on his own novelty aside, what exactly can we say is new about Machiavelli?

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We can get a better grasp of his novelty by contrasting his interpretation of the early history of Rome with Augustine of Hippo's in his *City of God*. Augustine's discussion of Roman history was perhaps the most widely read one in the Latin Middle Ages, and it was tremendously influential on Machiavelli's predecessors and contemporaries. We will find, I think, that the novelty of Machiavelli's new modes and orders is more than merely the approval of that which Augustine condemns—it is instead a radical rethinking of the role that violence plays in human sociability.

*The City of God* is fully attuned to Rome's history of violence. However, in contrast to Livy's presentation of these as heroic escapades, fully of glory and honor, many chapters of *The City of God* demythologize Rome's early history by showing the sordid criminality of her great victories. Ultimately Rome's violence is, for Augustine, rooted in Cain's murder of Abel. Following his brother's murder, Cain founded the first city, the City of Man. The murder of Abel represents a second fall, a fall away from the bucolic life of farming and shepherding into cities. Each city, Rome especially, participates in Cain's crime.

Juxtaposing Cain and Abel with Romulus and Remus, Augustine concludes that violence is inescapable in the cities of men. This violence, moreover, is lauded as heroic and glorious. "Two loves built two cities"—while the city of man is founded on a love of self and violent self-assertion, the city of God loves God above the self. In seeking God above all things, the city of God is freed from the desire to lord oneself above others. For the children of the city of God, every instance of political violence is only testimony to the sad failure of human beings to choose love of God over love of self.

This Augustinian picture (a) recognizes the role that violence plays in the history of human societies and (b) contextualizes this recognition via the distinction between the city of man and city of God while (c) affirming that the city of God precedes the city of man temporally and metaphysically. Augustine's



history does not deny the  
existence of violence—he  
foregrounds it and laments it

***Saint Augustine in His Study* by Sandro Botticelli.**

—but it does deny its  
inevitability, utility, and glory. Machiavelli's novelty consists in  
joining with Augustine on point (a) while rejecting (b) and (c).  
Machiavelli not only denies the distinction between the city of  
man and the city of God, he goes so far as to declare that the  
belief that one's true citizenship is (or ought to be) in the city of  
God is a cause of weakness. Teaching that it is better to accept  
one's beatings than to stop them (via violent self-assertion)  
only ensures one gets beat more often.

Against this enervation, Machiavelli suggests that one should  
lean into (a) and work to use that violence for salutary ends.  
Whence—and in sharp contrast to Augustine—he praises  
Romulus' murder of Remus. While Augustine sees this as a  
recapitulation of Cain and Abel, Machiavelli (having the Bible  
nowhere in sight) sees Romulus' murder as entirely acceptable  
and praiseworthy. Why? Because, given the inevitability of  
violence, it is necessary to show those you would rule over that  
you are better at violence than they are. As he says in *The  
Prince*, a new prince must be armed and force the people to  
accept his or her authority. By killing Remus, Romulus removed  
a potential rival and demonstrated what happens to those who  
disobey. This killing worked to the benefit of the Romans,  
providing stability and enabling Romulus to introduce his  
modes and orders. Unlike his ancient sources, Machiavelli does  
not present the violence and killing necessary for the  
foundation and preservation of regimes as heroic. Here he  
follows Augustine: by demythologizing violence, stripping it of  
the gloss of legend and heroism. He departs from Augustine by  
adding that it is necessary, excusable, and worthy of imitation.



Dig deep enough into  
Machiavelli's thought and  
violence appears radically  
fertile. All cities are rooted in  
violence and renewed by  
violence. It is through the  
death of some that the rest  
can live in relative peace and  
security. Violence is the  
deepest reality of human life,  
and those philosophies and  
theologies that would say  
otherwise are fooling  
themselves, others, or both.

Portrait of Machiavelli by Santi di Tito  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santi\\_di\\_Tito](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santi_di_Tito))  
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This is all miles away from  
Augustine's distinction  
between the city of man and  
the city of God, and it is this

distance more than anything else that accounts for the novelty  
of Machiavelli. There is no city of God, only the violence of  
man. Machiavelli has influenced modern political thought in  
many ways, but his most enduring legacy is the stress he lays on  
violence as the fundamental political reality.

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Genealogies of Modernity is a project in collaboration with  
the Collegium Institute for Catholic Thought & Culture  
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Pennsylvania, and Beatrice Institute  
(<https://www.beatriceinstitute.org/>), based in Pittsburgh.

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