The extent to which Niccolò Machiavelli is or is not a ‘Renaissance civic humanist’ remains a controversial issue. In this essay, I argue that Machiavelli’s political thought does not easily conform to the paradigm of Renaissance civic Humanism in at least one fundamental respect: Machiavelli intimates rather strongly that corrupt republics must be reformed by princely figures reminiscent of ancient Greek tyrants. On the contrary, the civic republicans of Machiavelli’s day, following Cicero, hoped that more conservative princely figures would assume the task of ‘setting right’ republics that were beset by corruption and social strife: for example, so-called ‘fathers of their country’, like Furius Camillus, Caesar Augustus and Cosimo de’ Medici; or, the rector rei publicae of Cicero’s literary imagination, Scipio Africanus the Younger. Most civic humanists hoped that a patrician, ‘first citizen’ would step forth to settle the social crises of their cities; anticipating that such an individual would do so with either equanimity toward all classes, or, more preferably, in ways that advantaged their republic’s nobilities.

Machiavelli is the only ‘republican’ who offers the ancient Greek tyrant as a model reformer of corrupt civic orders: figures like Hiero of Syracuse; Agathocles the Sicilian; the Spartans, Cleomenes and Nabis; and Clearchus of Heraclea. If one were to draw an ideal type based on historical accounts of such individuals, and on Machiavelli’s own description of them, the perfect republican reformer would do all of the following: crush the nobility and distribute its wealth to the common people; eliminate all reliance on mercenary arms; greatly expand the ranks of citizen soldiers – especially by freeing slaves to do so; and, finally, manipulate diplomatic alliances so as to reduce external threats posed by more powerful foreign empires. In Machiavelli’s estimation, the con-

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1 See, paradigmatically, Baron 1961, pp. 217–53.
2 For a thorough investigation of Machiavelli’s notion of tyranny, see Giorgini 2008, pp. 230–56. See also Giorgini 1993.
3 See *De re publica* and *De legibus*.
servative, Ciceronian-humanist type of republican reformer – typified, in his day, by the Medici – usually takes the opposite course: he disarms common citizens, exacerbates their status as mere clients of their city’s nobles or senators, and leaves their polity vulnerable to domination by foreign powers.

1 \hspace{1em} \textbf{Humanism and Tyranny}

Quentin Skinner is, of course, the most famous exponent of the idea that Machiavelli is, first and foremost, a civic humanist. Skinner – and formidable students, such as Peter Stacey, and others, like Maurizio Viroli – insist that Machiavelli is a faithful civic humanist because he devotes his most important work, the \textit{Discourses}, exclusively to the cause of promoting republics over principalities.\footnote{See, for example, Skinner 2002, pp. 10–38. See, also, Stacey 2007, and Stacey 2013. See, also, Viroli 1998.} In particular, Skinnerians attempt to confine Machiavelli’s endorsement of unilateral, often violent and criminal, behaviour to \textit{The Prince}, and they work strenuously to cast the \textit{Discourses} as a work in which political action – including action tending toward violence and coercion – occurs exclusively within legally circumscribed bounds.

In contrast to Skinner, Eric Nelson and Jim Hankins have located the rise of ‘exclusivist republicanism’ to eras much later than the Italian Renaissance. Nelson and Hankins have shown that there was greater fluidity than Skinner acknowledges between understandings of principalities and republics in virtually all traditional republican thinkers: for Nelson, it emerged in Dutch and English appropriations of Hebraic republicanism, and, for Hankins, it reached its apotheosis in the dogmatic anti-monarchism of the French revolutionaries.\footnote{See Nelson 2007, pp. 809–35; and Hankins 2010, pp. 452–82.} In any case, history aside, the very text of Machiavelli’s \textit{Discourses} would seem to pose an insurmountable problem for advocates of the civic humanist interpretation: the \textit{Discourses} offers advice, not only to princes, but, quite explicitly, to tyrants.\footnote{See Strauss 1958, pp. 26, 28, 273.}

For instance, in D 1.16, Machiavelli advises individuals who wish to pursue ‘the way of freedom’ to emulate Lucius Brutus, and those who desire to pursue the way of tyranny to imitate Clearchus of Heraclea. Brutus, quite famously, oversaw the trial and execution of his sons who conspired to overthrow the fledgling Roman republic, reinstate the Tarquin monarchy and reassert aristocratic privilege in the city. But Machiavelli invokes the far less well-known