For or Against the People?
Republican Violence in Arendt and Machiavelli

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Machiavelli’s Treatment of Republics:
• Based in violent foundings and must constantly be returned to their beginning
• Composed of two humors: people and the great. The great (i.e., nobles) want to oppress and exert ambition; the people want to not be oppressed
• Surest guarantors of liberty if good orders are maintained

Machiavelli’s Conclusion:
Violence is a necessary tool in republican governments. Good republics are founded in violence, so violence returns men “to the beginning” which is the only way to ensure good orders are maintained.

Arendt’s Treatment of Republics:
• Power, authority, and violence are based in consent and thus democratized.
• Power and authority can and must be based in legitimacy, which comes from the tacit or explicit consent of the governed.
• Legitimacy is based in the past (consent) and justification relates to the future (an end). Power is legitimate; violence can be justified.

Arendt’s Conclusion:
Violence is acceptable only in very specific circumstances, and then only narrowly. Republican governments must be based in legitimacy; violence can never be legitimate.

Question:
What is the proper role of violence in republican governments?

Texts:
Discourses on Livy, Niccolò Machiavelli
On Violence, Hannah Arendt

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