

DI/SPERARE: HOPE AND DESPAIR IN MACHIAVELLI

THURSDAY, MARCH 26, 12pm EDT / 5pm CET

International Machiavelli Society

2026 Lecture Series, First session

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CHAIR: Andrea Polegato, California State University, Fresno

PRESENTERS:

Colleen Mitchell,

Villanova University



The Overlooked Role of Hope in Machiavelli's Thought

Machiavelli is “not, in the usual sense of the word, hopeful,” Isaiah Berlin observed in his essay on “The Originality of Machiavelli” (2001, 49). Berlin’s observation agrees with a standard reading of Machiavelli, whom most readers associate with fear rather than hope. While it is true that fear is the most important political passion for Machiavelli, the role of hope in Machiavelli’s thought has been overlooked. In this lecture, I will offer an explanation of what Machiavelli means by “hope,” examine the relation between hope and fear, and identify the benefits, dangers, and limits of these two foundational and complementary passions. I will argue that greater attention to the role of hope in Machiavelli’s thought can help us understand the significance of this passion for Machiavelli’s political project, particularly his view of freedom.

Alessio Panichi,

Università di Napoli L’Orientale



“He Who Does Not Hope for Good Does Not Fear Evil”: Despair and Punishment in Machiavelli’s Thought

The lecture seeks to accomplish two different but closely related goals. The first goal is to provide an overview of Machiavelli’s thoughts on despair, which he usually conceives of as a dangerous and disruptive passion. Machiavelli believes indeed that despair leads humans to be ruthless and act violently, regardless of consequences as they have nothing to lose. It “was never a wise course to make men desperate,” writes Machiavelli in the *Florentine Histories*, “because he who does not hope for good does not fear evil.” The second goal is to show that Machiavelli’s ‘dark’ view of despair relates to his complex take on punishment, whose advantages and disadvantages he points out in the *Discourses on Livy*. It is true that Machiavelli sees in punishment a necessary *instrumentum regni*, a powerful tool to tame and restrain humans’ destructive tendencies. It is also true that Machiavelli emphasizes that punishment, when misused and abused, becomes counter-productive and backfires: it brings humans to despair and, as a consequence, ignites their aggressive behavior.