
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Harding, Brian. Not Even a God Can Save Us Now: Reading Machiavelli after Heidegger

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Volume 41, Number 1, Winter 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086050ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i1.29542>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Khoury, J. (2018). Review of [Harding, Brian. Not Even a God Can Save Us Now: Reading Machiavelli after Heidegger]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(1), 209–211. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i1.29542>

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Harding, Brian.***Not Even a God Can Save Us Now: Reading Machiavelli after Heidegger.***

Montreal: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2017. Pp. xi, 202. ISBN 978-0-7735-5051-3 (paperback) \$34.95.

There is much to admire about Brian Harding’s book, whose aim is “to put Machiavelli in dialogue with a number of philosophers with whom he is not often associated” (xii). Harding acknowledges that “this work is undoubtedly eccentric” (xii), but he is correct to point out that Heidegger and “post-Heideggerian” philosophers’ ideas, especially those of Derrida and Girard, “echo many Machiavellian themes” (xii), especially violence and sacrifice. It is not surprising, therefore, that Harding’s approach presents a profound methodological problem: how could one read an author through a future thinker’s lens? Harding is clearly aware of this methodological problem, admitting that “a certain amount of decontextualizing [is] at play” but insisting that the benefits of such a reading outweigh the risks (6). He hopes that “Heidegger and Derrida can be illuminated by dialogue with Machiavelli, and vice versa” (192). Ultimately, Harding’s bet succeeds, but there are costs that come with his gamble.

The title of the book plays with one of Heidegger’s most famous phrases, from an interview given to *Der Spiegel* in 1966 but not published until five days after his death in 1976. To the question of whether we can reverse “the uprooting of man that is now taking place,” Heidegger responds, “philosophy will be unable to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human reflection and endeavor. Only a god can save us” (57). Harding concludes that both Heidegger and Derrida look for something to save us from our current mess, but that Machiavelli does not believe that anything from the future could save us; that instead we must look to our past, where “we were already saved; but we didn’t and don’t want to be saved” (192). Why, then, write a book that is so pessimistic, that gives us no answers to our presumed problems? Harding says that he does not blame Machiavelli “for reintroducing sacrifice and persecution into the world,” arguing that the Secretary actually anticipated much of the current thinking about violence, and therefore “he enables us to better understand ourselves and our situation” (193).

The introductory chapter sets up Machiavelli as a philosopher worthy of reading *as* a philosopher, and especially alongside the Continentalists, specifically Heidegger, Derrida, and Girard, all of whom focus on themes of violence and sacrifice. Harding handily summarizes a number of the salient scholarly approaches to Machiavelli scholarship, but his interest is largely to focus on the themes of violence and sacrifice.

The second chapter, "Sacrifice and the Eternity of the World," is historical, has several disjunctions, and has more than a few stylistic infelicities, but is a worthy addition to the fascinating discussion of Machiavelli's thoughts on religion. Harding shows that Machiavelli believes in the eternity of the world, that he follows Lucretius in this thinking, and that violence and sacrifice are coeval with human existence. Harding's reading of Machiavelli concludes, rightly, that it is important to distinguish between good and bad violence and sacrifice, with good violence helping to secure the state, and bad violence to dismantle it. Harding also correctly concludes that for Machiavelli, as for Heidegger and Derrida, because "one cannot surmount the world, one only has access to things within the world [and thus there is] no recourse to the supernatural or supermundane" (44). Harding goes even further, to declare that, like Heidegger and company, Machiavelli believes that "the only truth is the truth of this world, the visible world, the eternal world" (58); that he rejects the idealistic, Platonic tradition in metaphysics, insisting that a transcendental signified does not exist, and that "interpretations are due to the princely impositions of modes and orders" (63).

The third chapter, "Truth and Sacrifice in Machiavelli," follows up on the previous chapter, extending the argument that Machiavelli is "a kind of nominalist, denying the existence of transcendent universal entities so as to focus on the particular sensory things at hand" (52). More bluntly, Harding writes that in Machiavelli "there is no preordained structure to which the world or our actions in it should conform" (62), and that "Transcendence is an illusion created by the prince's modes and orders" (64).

The remainder of the book tries to unpack the dense ideas of the first three chapters, and largely succeeds, landing on the thesis that Machiavelli supports sacrificial violence that founds, or is instrumental for the preservation of, the state, but rejects self-serving violence. In other words, Machiavelli is not the bogeyman he has been made out to be. Harding proceeds to engage in several fascinating readings of Machiavelli: for example, "Machiavelli's account

of the origin of religion denies [that people] naturally seek God; instead, God is introduced only after the primary political problem of ordering our lives together has been solved” (144). This one is easy, and certainly can be argued. But then Harding who, earlier in the book had dropped Jean-Yves Lacoste into the discussion out of nowhere, comes back to him eighty pages later and concludes that “Machiavelli’s discussion of the entire [Pazzi] conspiracy can be taken as a historical critique of liturgy” (174). I find this reading to be an act of over-interpretation. This example is a direct result of the many disjunctions in this book, and of the methodological problem I mentioned earlier. But other, largely stylistic problems also exist. Harding too often writes, “Obviously, there is more to say...” Or, “I will say more later.” He also uses many colloquialisms, for example, “So...” or “off of.” This tongue-in-cheek style distracts the reader from an otherwise intelligent and creative discussion. Regardless, the book is worthy of one’s time, even as several moments warrant a healthy skepticism.

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King, Margaret L.

A Short History of the Renaissance in Europe.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. Pp. xxvii, 424 + 14 maps, 10 ill., 92 fig., 13 graphs, 10 tables. ISBN 978-1-4875-9308-7 (paperback) \$62.95.

If you are teaching an introductory course on the Renaissance, you will find this third and substantially revised edition of Margaret King’s beautifully written survey an excellent prospect for adoption as a core course text. In eleven expansive chapters, *A Short History of the Renaissance in Europe* unfolds a narrative of historical change grounded in the cultural transformation of early modern Europe as it began in Italy. Equally conversant regarding the cultural and social foundations of this era, this volume is interdisciplinary in execution and appeal. As befits a history that King sees as situated in the studios and studies of the communes and city-states, this volume is a work of art. Thoughtful and well-explained maps, graphs, and figures lend substance to an elegant history that will also appeal to readers outside the classroom. Excerpts from primary sources and artfully explained reproductions of sculptures, paintings,