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SARS-COV-2 and the (Dark) Future of Society: A Machiavellian Approach to the End of Body Sovereignty and the Beginning of Bio-Feudalism

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Abstract

As much as the event following 9/11 triggered massive changes in our understanding of privacy rights and increased our level of acceptance of government infringement on individuals' freedom, the pandemic of the SARS-COV-2 is threatening to change our understanding of societal hierarchy and democratic process. In this essay, we imagine a society where two classes, defined by their susceptibility to infection, emerge, and a neo-feudal system is established. We suggest that it is possible to evaluate how likely a dystopian outcome is by using Machiavelli's understanding of the impact of the Plague on medieval Florence. We also recommend following his advice to avoid such a drift by reaffirming the primacy of politics over scientism.

Keywords: SARS-COV-2; Machiavelli; body sovereignty; feudalism; scientism; dystopia.

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1 Introduction

There used to be a world when hopping on a plane carrying food and water, without spending too much time in a security check line or carrying biometric IDs all the time, was the norm. It was a world that was not full of cameras, and facial recognition was, at best, the dream of a minority of sci-fi enthusiasts. On September 11th, 2001, however, when two planes crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, killing nearly 3,000 people and injuring more than 6,000 others, that world changed forever. As terrorism targeted the United States and its European allies, the whole world was told that the quickly implemented invasive security measures were temporary, and that a return to normal life was expected, for everybody, as soon as possible. Nevertheless, after almost twenty years from that terrible day, that world never came back, and we are now living in a new normal where, for instance, boarding a plane has become almost as complicated as breaking out of jail. An everyday life where more and more security layers are added, one after another, theoretically to prevent a tragedy like 9/11 from happening again. We never made it back to the world prior to 9/11 and it seems as though we may not return to it anytime soon.

Most importantly, the events following 9/11 triggered massive changes in our understanding of privacy rights, the limitations thereof, and increased our level of acceptance of government infringement on individuals' freedom to preserve society's greater good (Ravich, 2005; Rotenberg, 2006; Thompson, 2005; Westin, 2003). The principle that individual rights are subject to society's interests has not only been accepted but ultimately sought-after by many (Olssen, 2008; Sullivan & Hendriks, 2009). Scholars in many fields, from psychology (Chanley, 2002; Morgan et al., 2011) to philosophy (Turner, 2020), to legal and security studies (Banks, 2009; Enders & Sandler, 2005) and sociology (Davis, 2005; Foner, 2005), have ever since debated over these complex issues. However, as of today, there is no consensus on whether the status quo has delivered a trade-off that constitutes a betterment or a worsening of the human condition (Cavoukian, 2017; Irani, 2015; Roach, 2011; Rhoads & Smithey, 2007; Steeves, 2019; Warwick, 2014). Today, once again, we find ourselves facing the same dilemma but on a much more abysmal scale as we are not called upon making decisions after the fact (i.e., after the tragedy of the Twin Towers has unfolded), but amid the uncertain development of a crisis we still do not see an end to.

Ever since the pandemic of the SARS-COV-2 virus, and the disease that causes COVID-19, has started, bringing the need of physical distancing, isolation, and sanitation measures that was unprecedented in the last 100 years (Franchini et al., 2020; Long, 2020), we have been told that "we will return to normal as soon as possible." However, thinking back to the events of 9/11, do we believe a return to the old normal is even possible? Or, most likely, must we prepare to adapt to brand-new normality where, simply put, several pre-pandemic behaviors that were so ingrained in our cultural understanding of social life will be eventually considered deviance? Furthermore, what would this new normality look like?

Much along the same lines as the increased attention given to the theme of security after 9/11 and its consequences on the role of government in our daily lives (Body-Gendrot, 2010; Bossong, 2012), the measures implemented since the inception of the pandemic crisis are primarily dealing with ways of controlling the body of individual citizens (Lyon, 2006) so that, by extension, we could preserve the health of the social body. Based on this previous experience, the state's more invasive role (Bloss, 2007; Goldsmith, 2012; Scheppele, 2004) in determining what is socially acceptable in terms of social and physical interactions is not only expected by the public but, under certain circumstances, can be politically rewarding (Cohen et al., 2005; Kell-

ner, 2015). In the United States, for example, the political agenda has already been colonized by the issue of controlling physical interactions and monitoring individual health (Briscese et al., 2020), with most citizens certainly expecting the government to enforce science-based limitations over individual behaviors but, more so, with an increasing share of the population even demanding them, as to them public health is valued higher than individual rights concerning their own body (Painter & Qiu, 2020). Self-isolation has now become a virtue, and people who will not or cannot practice it are increasingly stigmatized, accused of threatening public health, and ultimately censored (Everett et al., 2020; Prosser et al., 2020). This polarizing fracture in the United States, which is not exclusive to public health but started with the issue of climate change (see for example Antonio & Brulle, 2011; Fisher et al., 2013; McCright & Dunlap, 2011), has shaped a struggle between a conservative and a liberal political field (Barrios & Hochberg, 2020; Jiang et al., 2020). From a legislative perspective, conservatives and libertarians, who do not favor more regulation, try to roll back several pieces of federal legislation they consider unlawful limitations of individual freedoms, and promote extensive deregulation policies where they are in control of local governments. Progressives, on the other hand, have worked to increase regulation. From a broader perspective, while the former has apparently rejected science as a way to inform social behavior and political decisions, putting the naïve notion of protecting “God-given” individual rights at the top of its priority, the latter succeeded in hijacking the very idea of science and, often by repacking it into a simplistic and scientific fashion, continually uses it to justify its political actions and claims of moral superiority (Beiner, 1992; Lakoff, 2010; Segerstrale, 2000). In the social media bubble, this strategy has also become a convenient way to silence conflicting voices, labeled on a scale from “stupid” to, at best, “controversial,” and completely avoid any serious debate. By itself, this is already a profound change to the way we understand society and practice democracy that is certainly worth investigation.

In this essay, however, we do not aim to focus on such interesting political issues, not to analyze the reactions to the current pandemic as a pure securitization problem (Nunes, 2020; Stott et al., 2020). Instead, we aim to offer a thought experiment into how the consequences of containment and mitigation policies could result in a dramatic shift towards a non-democratic system. By imagining an extreme, dystopian, neo-feudal system, we explore a way the COVID-19 pandemic could contribute to promote significant system changes in society and thereby accelerate a substantial push towards a tyrannical regime. Certainly, entertaining the possibility of a fully dystopian society materializing in our time could be labeled as implausible or utterly ridiculous if presented as a prophecy or prediction. We want to reassure the reader that this is not the case, and we opted for an extreme scenario only as a Weberian ideal type. But again, nobody besides fiction predicted our current post 9/11 society, and we have seen attempts to realize a dreamlike society happening before and almost every time turning into nightmares (Kunkel, 2008). Instead of looking at such a dystopian society through the habitual lenses of Marxism (Spracklen, 2015) or Classical Liberal philosophy (Tufan, 2017), we believe such a scenario could be better analyzed through a political theory framework inspired from the works of the Renaissance philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli. There are, of course, several important limitations to our thought experiment, which we do not mean as a forecast for the immediate future, but only to entertain the idea of some potential unexpected consequences of the pandemic crisis. For example, we rely on incomplete information on the still evolving COVID-19 pandemic and the research for a vaccine. Also, we assume a very simplified mechanism of power transition and we do not address the complexities, and resilience, of actual democratic institutions. Finally, we look at science in the form of a quasi-religious social insti-

tution, functionally equivalent to religion and a major driver of authoritarianism, and we do not discuss how the increasing involvement of science in the political conflict could promote democracy instead. With all these limitations, we propose to focus instead on the notions of “body sovereignty” and “bio-feudalism” to understand how it would operate and what the risks are to the endurance of the democratic process.

2 Body Sovereignty and Bio-Feudalism

Body sovereignty is a straightforward, yet powerful, idea; that each person has the right to fully control their own body (Gillon, 2020; Wilson, 2015; Ecks, 2004). It is also common sense to consider body sovereignty as the foundation of any other individual rights and, by extension, to state sovereignty. However, its implications are complex, multifaceted, spanning from reproductive rights to euthanasia, gender transitions, and much more. As scholars studying body sovereignty, traditionally, assume that exercising it hardly impairs others' safety, we have recently struggled with the limitations of the concept in dealing with vaccinations, a complex public health issue (see for example Capurro et al., 2018; Gobo, 2020; Vanderslott, 2019). What about following a pandemic crisis? If the “jury is still out” on whether allowing a minority of individuals to waive mandatory vaccinations, based off religious or safety concerns, for example, could weaken herd immunity for good or not (DeRoo et al., 2020; Thunstrom et al., 2020), we will probably not extend the same courtesy to the recent COVID-19 pandemic disease, if not to a very limited amount of individuals for exclusively medical reasons, or take any chances that an event like this would happen again. Even if governments around the world were to adopt a less strict policy than a mandatory mass vaccination plan, and given the fact that is unclear if a vaccine against this specific coronavirus will offer long-lasting and broad protection against future viruses of the same class (McAlear, 2020), it seems plausible that most countries will also need, at some point, to create a technological infrastructure to extinguish the progression of future outbreaks quickly. To operate efficiently, such infrastructure will surely include a network-level system of tracking, like the one put in place in South Korea, Germany, Italy, and currently planned in several other countries, that could eventually and permanently monitor every individual and social interactions.

The protocol is relatively standard: upon diagnosis, an infected individual will be required to isolate, and precautions will be taken for any other individuals the subject has come in contact with. In most cases, as it happens now in several European and Asian countries, participation in this program would be voluntary and anonymous. Still, it is not hard to imagine how — through social pressure and a fast-emerging punishment/reward structure — it will become a *de facto* diffused enhanced surveillance network. Submitted to public health concerns, body sovereignty will then be indefinitely voided or limited to the immunes, as infected and potential ones will be deemed a public concern. For example, if an individual refuses to cooperate and abide by regulations, their general movement, such as work activities, social gatherings and big events, could be hindered or prevented; consequentially, they will be treated along the same lines as criminals, terrorists, or other radicalized individuals. But with two substantial qualitative differences. First, becoming a criminal, a terrorist, or radicalized, is, in most cases, the end of a long-term process and a voluntary act (Akins & Winfree, 2016; Silke & Brown, 2016; Borum, 2010), whereas becoming infected with a virus is, by definition, accidental. More so than religion or ethnicity, it lacks the elements of choice and individual responsibility. Second, this label is exceptionally volatile because people can gain or lose their immunity status following reinfection or the introduction of a new virus in society. Therefore, it is not hard to imagine

that the quality of immune might acquire the same value and transience of the old medieval status of a freeman, a condition that comes with substantial political power over non-free individuals. At that point, through the demise of body sovereignty, the idea of individual freedom might change forever and eventually modify our understanding of the democratic process from universal to mostly limited to the immunes.

As we define a biological threat as a repeated game, a possible objection is that it would be implausible for any individual to maintain their immunity status over a long period of time without any external intervention, such as a vaccine. However, epidemiological studies of pandemic diseases (see for example Silk et al., 2017; Vasylyeva et al., 2016; El-Sayed et al., 2012; Stattner & Vidot, 2011; Périssé & Nery, 2007) suggest how, most of the time, infections' behavior is predictably contained in specific social networks and neighbors. Therefore, in a highly stratified society, with very distinct groups, such as the one we imagine in this essay, it would be relatively easy for the immunes to isolate themselves from the susceptible. Moreover, since new pandemic events historically appear to be cyclical, occurring every one-hundred years or so, (Dunning et al., 2020), we can reasonably assume a relatively short period of stability of the established bio-classes. A new pandemic event, or a similar extinction-level event, could hypothetically act as a form of reorganization of the social body, which will functionally prevent its stagnation and provide a fresh stimulus for individual improvement in a system that otherwise would not allow upward social mobility. Such an event, however, is not accounted for in this essay.

Just theorizing the possibility of a hypothetical scenario, the most dramatic change in our societal landscape since 9/11, where citizens can be labeled as quasi-public enemies based on a blood test, sparks several fundamental questions that social scientists have already started to reflect upon (Stark, 2020; Marres & Stark, 2020). From a political science perspective some of these questions are: To what extent would individuals belonging to each of them be signaled, recognized, and policed? Will those new bio-classes be given different political, social, and economic rights? Would a distinction between immunes, susceptibles, and infected be the future of social classes? Would the tracing system operate independently from the political system of democratic institutions? Would this system eventually be politically weaponized and used as a trojan horse to control and manipulate citizenries into compliance while expunging the marginalized and non-conforming? All these questions can constitute a comprehensive reflection of a new social system that can be labeled as "bio-feudalism." A foreseeable change in our understanding of how body sovereignty operates and, mainly, how it will be limited to prevent threats to society, particularly biological threats, could eventually set up the foundation for a new social hierarchy. The core principle of which will be to avoid democracy to get in the way of public health. The feudal system was defined by Bloch (2014/1939) as the "continuing assertion and enforcement of ownership" over land and "the extraction of rent from peasants continuing to till the soil." Consistently with the centrality of the land to the feudal experience, the concept of "bio-feudalism" was initially suggested to describe a situation where small farmers' profits are limited by multinational control of seed property rights (Herring, 2010). Scholars who engaged with it utilized the concept to compare the contemporary world of agriculture to the rigid structure of medieval times and likened corporations to ancient feudatories forcing small farmers into servitude by exploiting unlimited property rights over seeds and, by extension, crops (Herring, 2015). Our suggestion is to extend the concept beyond land, or agricultural relationship, to a situation where membership in a social class, and immaterial servitude as well as other inter-class interactions, is determined by biological affinity. We imagine such a social system deemed possible by the increased relevance of Biopower and

Biopolitics as described by Michel Foucault (1990/1976). For Foucault (McWhorter, 2004), Biopower is a form of power exerted by experts that allows for the control of entire populations by penetrating traditional forms of political power. According to Foucault, Biopower does not replace repressive and deductive functions of power. In contrast, he claims that the emergence of Biopower as the primary form of power implies that the rule of law has subsided in favor of capitalistic regulative and corrective mechanisms based exclusively on scientific knowledge which made possible “the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes.”

In the hypothesized society, such Foucaultian processes will not be determined merely by kin, census, or deliberate choices, but by susceptibility to infection and enforced based on the principle that the social body’s best interest overrules individual rights and liberty. Some individuals will be labeled as being at risk of becoming victims or super-spreaders of the disease and will be highly monitored and limited in their behaviors and democratic participation rights, thereby ending towards the bottom of the social ladder. In contrast, low-risk individuals will be given more freedom and more substantial rights. For simplicity, we can conjecture that such a new hierarchy will consist primarily of the two (bio)classes. The first one will be composed of immunes and individuals who can afford to shield themselves from the infection through social distancing or potentially costly medical treatments in which the vaccine might not be completely effective in preventing the development of the disease. The second one will be entirely composed of susceptibles; those who, for either medical reasons or because their profession does not allow them to engage in safe behavior, are most likely to become infected and spread the infection to others. Both groups will be extremely homogenous from a socio-economic status perspective, as well as in their behaviors and lifestyles; a fact that will reinforce segregation and prevent social mobility. Finally, infected will be removed and reintegrated into society as needed, and the class of susceptible further specified based on their risk of becoming infected. We argue that immunes will eventually develop into a form of aristocracy or the ruling elite. In contrast, the susceptibles, mostly essential workers, will constitute the new plebeians, thereby establishing a system of interdependence like what was experienced under medieval Feudalism. We are aware of the fact that some immunes might be excluded from the ruling class due to their low socio-economic status. We argue, however, that immunity will be a *conditio sine qua non* to belong to this new aristocracy. In this system, full participation in political decision making will be eventually granted almost exclusively to the immunes. In contrast, the susceptible will only have a nominal right to be heard, not much unlike an ancient feudal society. In exchange for their labor, they will be granted protection and economic stability partially independent from their productivity through, for example, a form of universal income and relative welfare protection, all of that will increase their dependency from the ruling elite. In such an extreme scenario, the very idea of democracy will change and, rather than being universal, become a concern limited to the ruling class, which will probably maintain it internally. At the end of the day, the safety of the social body must be preserved from any attempt of the infected to reverse, through a vote, what is sanctioned by scientific evidence, especially in order to protect the weakest members of society. The amount of freedom given to the immunes will resonate with some of the arguments of the debate around the notion of “liberal Eugenics” (Fox, 2007). Liberal Eugenics postulates that the ideal form of genetic control is to leave decisions about what sort of people to produce in the hands of individual parents, absent government intervention. In our example, such level of control will only be given to the immunes, whereas the susceptibles will be forced to accept the formers’ decisions. Given the increasingly popular narrative that sees science as able to make “better” policy decisions than politics, a representative system

of divergent interests might not be needed in a paternalistic environment (Saint-Paul, 2011). The important question is, therefore, if there exist any incentive for the government and other political actors, such as corporations, to allow such a dramatic shift? We believe the answer is yes and is to be found in the nature of the system itself, as outlined by Niccolò Machiavelli.

3 Machiavelli and the Plague

What does Machiavelli have to do with COVID-19 and our hypothetical dystopian endgame? To begin discussing the applications of his work on the future of our political institutions, we need to start from his own experience with the several waves of Plague, the Black Death, that ravaged the Italian peninsula during his lifetime. Readers of *The Prince* (2008/1532) already know that Machiavelli was fond of utilizing diseases as a metaphor for the corruption of the “body politic,” a medieval anatomical metaphor that likens the state to a corporation (Orum, 1978; Chroust, 1947). However, most people might not be aware that the Plague, what we would call the pandemic in modern times, played an actual role in the development of Machiavelli’s political philosophy. According to several historians (see for example Ridolfi, 2013; Najemy, 2010; Viroli, 2002), experiencing the Plague directly impacted Machiavelli’s understanding of statecraft. The Italian political philosopher was primarily fascinated by its effects on society. Naturally, some of his intuitions about the infection mechanisms are incredibly naïve to us, but, if viewed in context, his comprehensive political analysis of the Plague’s effects on society closely resembles today’s experience with COVID-19. Furthermore, his ideas about how we should handle crises seem as relevant as ever to pandemics. Thus, some of his advice could be seen as a plan on how statesmen should address a pandemic to reduce the impact on the state’s life (Fuchs, 2020; Freeman, 2009).

Let us peek more into Machiavelli’s plagued world. Having been endemic to the Italian peninsula since 1348, the shadow of the bubonic Plague would accompany him for most of his career as an adviser to the Medici’s dynasty. Before his time came to pass, he would witness at least five outbreaks and even feared for his life or the ones of his family. To Machiavelli, much likely to many of us experiencing COVID-19, most of what made the disease terrifying was not knowing much about it. Almost everything about the Plague was a mystery to medicine of the time, and such uncertainty made treatment as well as prevention difficult, if not impossible. The lack of predictability of the Plague, much as what is now happening with COVID-19, made its epidemiological effects even more devastating. As casualties increased, fear took hold, and society started coming apart, thereby increasing the death toll in a vicious cycle. It was not unexpected, however. In the *Decameron* (2019/1350), Boccaccio described society’s reaction to diseases. The rich generally fled the city for the countryside, while the poor were forced to remain in their houses. Not unlikely to what we see today, while some tried to minimize the risk by living in quasi-complete isolation, others decided a better way to approach the Plague was to get drunk and enjoy life to its fullest or ignore it as one enormous fake news. In Machiavelli’s Florence, little had changed. Whether citizens chose to flee or remained at home, economic activity in the city eventually halted, and many found themselves out of work and financially broken; credit dried up as bankers refused to lend money to those who had no income and might as well die before the loan could be repaid (Caferro, 2013).

By the same token, even the most basic necessities suddenly became a rarity or outrageously expensive. Inevitably, the poor were the hardest hit. Florence’s government tried to handle the outbreaks as best as it could by building plague hospitals (Lazzaretto) and imposing a mandatory quarantine. The city gates were closed both ways, while efforts were made to alleviate the

suffering of those impacted the most by the economic crisis. In 1383, officials were authorized to “lend” the food to the poor from the commune’s reserves and take whatever steps to assure the grain supply lasted, including expropriating from those who had hoarded it. In 1417, several members of the city’s elite demanded that the poor be subsidized, and argued that the rich should pay the price of helping them through forced loans or, in some cases, expropriation (Carmichael, 1983; 2014).

The problem was that all these measures rarely worked (Henderson, 2019; Manetti et al., 2017; Aberth, 2016; Alfani, 2013). As the infection spread and hospitals were overwhelmed, the citizens of Florence resisted confinement. Then, quarantine brought resentment, and food shortages led to anger. During a crisis like that, as Machiavelli would say, if left unchecked, widespread frustration would quickly boil over into public disorder and result in an increase of crime. For him, that was also the most disconcerting feature of any crisis. In *The Prince* and *Discourses* (2009), he pointed out that any state’s success depended on a delicate balance between social classes. It was clear to him that if the order was to be preserved, a more effective way of containing the crisis, minimizing economic suffering, and maintaining public safety was needed. As a result, the advice of Machiavelli can therefore function as a brilliant guide on how governments must act during an epidemic or pandemic outbreak.

As he explains, the key in a crisis is for a government to realize how dangerous their good intentions are or, as sometimes we say today, that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” It was apparent to him that the virtues of honesty, generosity, and compassion risked causing panic, bankrupting the state, and encouraging dissent or civil unrest, while doing nothing to mitigate the infection. As such, unsurprisingly to anyone who is familiar with his work, Machiavelli cynically suggested that Princes should refrain from being virtuous. Therefore, the first step in his playbook was to be frugal with the truth, not allowing too much information to circulate freely. The second step he recommended, was to keep a fiscally conservative posture. Whereas some public aid is undoubtedly necessary, Machiavelli insists that care must be taken to ensure that it did not come at the expense of excessive taxes. Finally, the Prince should use soldiers to increase the fear of retaliation. Given that people always seem not to be frightened enough, for example by the Plague, to control their selfish instincts, the government’s only chance of combating the disease is to punish infractions so severely that they would be too terrified to do anything. These are, evidently, draconian principles worthy of a Greek tyrant but, according to Machiavelli, the only way to avoid the collapse of society. Still, later, the Florentine government took the advice and implemented what we would like to label as a Machiavellian response to the Plague. When the disease struck again in 1630, a survey of the city’s needs was conducted to assess how much food would be needed to minimize health hazards. Information was carefully controlled and, before the infection spiked, the government enforced a rigid lockdown policy, which included harsh penalties for the transgressors. According to historical epidemiological data (Cohn, 2008), all these measures kept fatalities to a minimum and, most crucially, protected the political institutions of the time so that after the wave passed, things could go back to normal.

COVID-19 bears little, if no, biological resemblance to the Plague, but the world it has created, with all its dramatic social and political dynamics, is not far from the one that Machiavelli experienced. Starting in March 2020, all over the world, we witnessed hoarding, scarcity of resources, price increases, and a historical spike in unemployment and business bankruptcy (Atkeson, 2020; Nicola et al., 2020). An information war burst on social media, while many governments were accused of hiding facts to the public, a battle for authority started between politics and science (Orso et al., 2020). More recently, we are facing increased criminal activity

(Mohler et al., 2020) diffused civil unrest that might not be directly associated with the pandemic, but frustration provoked by COVID-19 admittedly fuels it. Hence, given that we face very similar socio-economic challenges, Machiavelli's three-step strategy of responding to a crisis remains as pertinent as ever. Its relevance is proven by the fact that many governments are now admittedly drawing from Machiavelli's playbook, within the legal limitations of modern democracy, to inform their battle with the virus. In this phase, besides the management of the pandemic and its chances of success, we argue it is essential to focus on what comes next in terms of survival of our political institutions and democratic system.

Unlike many others in his time, who believed the Plague was a God sent punishment (Palmer, 1982), Machiavelli was inclined to think that it was nature's way of controlling the population. In his works, he seems to explain his view in almost Malthusian terms. Just as when the human body expels superfluous material during a fever, an overpopulated world is purged and reshaped by devastating events such as wars or diseases. Though he rarely spoke to this subject directly, Machiavelli was aware that it is in times of such extraordinary, extinction-level, events that the endurance of free political institutions was most in danger. Depending on who emerged victorious, liberty would surrender to either anarchy or tyranny. Naturally, he wanted to prevent both from happening and ultimately favored a return to the *status quo*.

Reading all Machiavelli's work, we can also imagine his aversion towards a feudal system. Besides his documented hostility towards Christianity (Parsons, 2016; Lukes, 1984), the cornerstone of the feudal system, which he sees as a religion that delivers power into the hands of cruel and wicked men, Machiavelli had a very modern view of individual rights (Kirby, 2020; Gatti, 2017; Sullivan, 2006). A prominent avenue of interpretation of his works has focused on the concept of "Libertas" concerning a republican mode of government. Colish, for example, has pointed out that, in domestic politics, Machiavelli connected liberty with certain individual rights. She affirms that Machiavelli "clearly identifies freedom with the protection of private rights" (1971). As Machiavelli was envisioning economics and politics as two independent spheres, in his writing, he stated that the highest form of the common good is "the possibility of enjoying what one has, freely and without incurring suspicion [...], the assurance that one's wife and children will be respected, [and] the absence of fear for oneself." (Machiavelli, 2009/1531) Consequently, the most extreme form of infringement on the common good is that upon one's person and included properties, negating the most basic right of self-ownership or "body sovereignty." In *The Discourses*, for example, Machiavelli made clear that he believes removing men from the land they own is horrendous and goes against universal law. For Machiavelli, not even the power of a King could infringe so dramatically upon human freedom. He also postulated how a condition of entitlement, supported by political and military force, can spring a scenario in that political power both creates and feeds off a system of privilege. Historically, Feudalism is one the ways of how, according to Rothbard's definition, "the State provides a legal, orderly, systematic channel for predation on the property of the producers; it makes certain, secure, and relatively 'peaceful' the lifeline of the parasitic caste in society." (Rothbard, 1978) In return, such a parasitic caste, whether composed by individuals, guilds, or corporations, protect the state from being overthrown. The government is, therefore, naturally incentivized to create such a stratified and polarized system for its own well-being, especially following the opportunities given by a societal crisis. Creating differences amongst citizens will then be impacting communities. The recently developed tier system in California, for example, establishes criteria measured at a county level for closures and reopening of businesses and public services, including schools. While it is certainly a short-term solution to

contain the spread of COVID-19, it is not hard to imagine such a system to be kept in place and reinforce marginalization and economic deprivation for those who are not in a position to move to more affordable areas due to lack of resources. Moreover, resorting to scientific orthodoxy to legitimize such a system, or claim to adopt exclusively evidence-based decisions, waives any political responsibility for the impact on marginalized communities. Not much different than invoking the will of God(s), it can be used to justify one's call in front of a public of believers, who, despite their deepest convictions, know little or nothing about its functioning. As pointed out by Feyerabend (Feyerabend & Oberheim, 2011), science, when it is obsessively mythicized and makes claims of truth beyond its capacity, can quickly turn itself into a form of technological tyranny (Todorov, 2001) or, at the very least, be used as a pillar for an autocratic regime to impose their will beyond any possible doubt. If religion, particularly Christianity with its rational organizational structure, was the pillar of Feudalism (Duby, 1982) as much as the source of body sovereignty, post COVID-19 science can be the natural candidate as being both the pillar of bio-feudalism and the suppressor of the latter.

4 Conclusions

In summary, by comparing the current situation to medieval Florence, Machiavelli tells us that we are experiencing all the signs of a collapsing social order. It appears that Governments around the world are, within the limitations of democratic institutions, applying measures that are reasonably close to the three steps suggested by the Italian political philosopher. That is undoubtedly good news. Nevertheless, we detect a noticeable difference for the protection of the common good could be also used as an excuse to enact profound changes in the political system. Those changes might result in future limitations of democratic processes in order, nominally, to preserve public health and increase society resilience and the effectiveness of political response. With no exclusions, political leaders and competitors of most advanced economies seem to be polarized between a complete denial of scientific expertise in handling the pandemic, nullifying the efforts to control it, and a complete surrender to a form of scientism that crosses over religion (Stenmark, 2017; Roy, 2005) and is extremely functional to authoritarian drifts. As we understand, these are both troubling postures; we believe the current risk for the endurance of democratic institutions is mostly represented by the latter. With the masses more and more tired by politics, a trend that emerged in the last decades, the temptation of entrusting scientists with the fate of the world has grown quite large. It must be noticed that it is indeed met with a comparably strong denialist and conspiracy movement. Hence, the threat is represented by the longstanding incompatibility between science and democracy, as it is proved by the scientific process and by the high incentive for politicians to use science as a way to legitimate their goals (Stenico, 2018; Turda, 2006) or even a form of social control free of political responsibility (Konstańczak, 2013). More than ever, it is necessary to resort to science to solve complex issues, from COVID-19 to climate change, but decisions over policies must be political. Otherwise, the dystopian feudal system we described in this essay might not be that far away.

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