

## THE POLITICAL IDEAS OF MACHIAVELLI: A FRESH LOOK

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The early sixteenth century was a watershed period for political writings on the art of governing. In 1516, Erasmus placed into the hands of a printer the manuscript of *The Education of a Christian Prince*. Also printed in 1516 was Thomas More's *Utopia*, which he wrote while Erasmus was a houseguest on one of his frequent visits to England. And far to the south in a suburb of Florence a man unknown to either Erasmus or More, Niccolo Machiavelli, out of work and out of favor with the newly powerful Medici, was at work on *The Discourses*. He had completed his more famous work, *The Prince*, three years previously in hopes that it would win him prestige and power with the Florentine elite. The book was not printed until 1532.

We can but wonder at the irony of the contemporaneous production of these influential and antithetical political texts, the two written by Machiavelli being diametrically opposed to the Christian ideals of the two others. The presence of Machiavellianism, of course, has been prevalent in the East and the West through much of human history. The Machiavelli of the East, Kautilya, eighteen centuries previously had written the *Arthashastra*, a political treatise for a Hindu prince advocating stratagems of perfidy, deception, and ruthless force.<sup>1</sup> The ancient *Arthashastra* and the recently uncovered CIA Handbook for the Contras in Nicaragua (dubbed the "CIA's Manual of Terror")<sup>2</sup> are both evidences of the timelessness of Machiavellianism. But it is Machiavelli, a petty bureaucrat and professional idea man for the republicans of Florence, to whose texts we continue to turn for a thorough, unqualified, and unabashed expression of *Realpolitik* and *Staatsräson*.

*The Discourses* and *The Prince* equal classical texts in clarity. As manuals for self-aggrandizement they are both exact, straightforward, and judiciously employ historical illustrations to inculcate numerous precepts. It seems the only supplement needed for these texts is experience itself.

Even if we concentrate exclusively on the pragmatic applications of Machiavelli's ideas in *The Discourses* and *The Prince* and ignore the author's existential position and philosophical assumptions, we still encounter ambivalence that subvert conclusive interpretation and application. Max Lerner points out that the text implicitly says that the author himself would decry a dogmatic adherence to his politics.<sup>3</sup> Thus beyond the political means employed, it is the end of the means that demands attention, a Machiavellian

truism. The end which Machiavelli has in mind for a politician is, on the face of it, to obtain and maintain power. But the nature of power, as Machiavelli perceives it, is tricky and is extremely idealistic, as idealistic in its own way as the central concepts in the works of Erasmus and More. Machiavelli conceives of power as true and absolute, which grants its possessor unbreachable autonomy conducive to order. Such autonomy avoids dependence on other units or aggregates of power and is subject to its own rationality. Toward the end of *The Prince* Machiavelli opposes dependent politicians who seek support from independent sources to avoid a fall from power. "This may or may not take place," he writes, "and if it does, it does not afford you security, as you have not helped yourself but been helped like a coward. Only those defenses are good, certain and durable, which depend on yourself alone and your own ability." Such an ideal subverts the realism of the text. Freedom from all political dependencies is incompatible with the reality of political life. "If men wish to be free," as Hannah Arendt has said, "it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce."<sup>5</sup> At key points in his writing Machiavelli's marriage between the ideal of securing an autonomous will while avoiding dependency and the political means available in society to achieve this end produce further ambivalence.

Not surprisingly then, historical and political interpretations of *The Discourses* and *The Prince* vary according to how critics assimilate Machiavelli's ambiguities. Bacon, Spinoza, and Lassalle characterized Machiavelli as a supreme realist. But Spinoza, like Rousseau, felt Machiavelli's works depicted such unadulterated evil that it was only an imaginative construct, a satire designed to warn men of the satanic dimensions of tyrants. Most readers take Machiavelli more seriously, though they allow him his undeniable imaginative wit (as did Shakespeare who is said to have modeled his Iago after him).

While there are scholars who have labeled Machiavelli an agent of evil, there are others who believe he was first and foremost a patriot. Others see him either as a tough-minded advocate of *raison d'état* or as a romantic who idealized ancient Rome; either a passionate patriot or a cynically objective observer; either a teacher of evil or a codifier of *Realpolitik*; either a republican or a worshipper of strong leaders and military might. Marx embraced Machiavelli as a man "free from the *petit-bourgeois* outlook," but Marxist criticism is more ambivalent. One such scholar praises Machiavelli's analysis of what he calls the "sociological" jungle that preceded the formation of "a powerful, national, essentially bourgeois" Italian state. He then characterizes Machiavelli as an active publicist

preoccupied by the "mechanism of the struggles for power" in bourgeois society.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, Isaiah Berlin has proposed that Machiavelli's values are based on the Roman *antiqua virtus*, the classical morality which reveres the state over all other interests.<sup>7</sup> In putting forward the opinion that Machiavelli's central preoccupation is autonomy based on personal *machismo*, Hannah Pitkin observes that though each reading of Machiavelli claims foundation in the texts, none has ever succeeded in displacing the others.<sup>8</sup> George Carpetto thinks that *The Prince* is merely an "emotional outburst" because it does not fit the more canonical *Discourses* as authentic Machiavelli--rational, coherent, and Republican.<sup>9</sup> However, both texts do indeed possess moments of internal discord. J.G.A. Pocock suggests that in the history of secular political self-consciousness, the "Machiavellian moment" is one which denotes the time when man attempts to "maintain stability in a stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of security."<sup>10</sup> It is a moment striking in its ambivalence, when the ideal confronts the real, and, more particularly in *The Prince*, when the ideal of what power should be confronts the reality of the means available to achieve that power. At that point the struggle to maintain autonomy and avoid any form of dependency reaches its fiercest pitch.

One such moment when Machiavelli's ideal of power threatens to subvert the otherwise realistic precepts in *The Prince* occurs in his discussion on whether it is better for a ruler to be loved or feared. The Florentine theorist concludes that though it is better to be both loved and feared, "it is safer to be feared than loved."<sup>11</sup> The obligations of love, he writes, are weak in comparison to the force of fear. Fear never fails, while love may. This seemingly realistic, certainly cynical, analysis then suggests securing power through a primary reliance on fear. Yet, a few statements later, Machiavelli cautions that "a prince should make himself feared in such a way that if he does not gain love, he at any rate avoids hatred." The necessity of avoiding hatred threatens the autonomous power of the prince which Machiavelli so eagerly desires. A dependency on the people's lack of hatred (a quality quite different from love) is counseled for holding power securely. But Machiavelli is not content with the dependency. Thus throughout this passage he vacillates between advising the prince to show "inhuman cruelty" by holding up Hannibal as an example and advising the prince to "desire to be considered merciful and not cruel." He warns the prince against what he wittily terms the "misuse" of mercy while he cautions against incurring revengeful wrath. He ends the juggle between ruthless action of

autonomous power and the cautious execution of decrees to avoid hatred with this startling summary: "A wise prince must rely on what is in his power and not on what is in the power of others, and he must only contrive to avoid incurring hatred, as has been explained."<sup>12</sup> A wise prince may well ask whether such advice is realistic given what has and has not been explained.

Machiavelli's awareness of the nature of his ambivalence is reflected in the differences between *The Discourses* and *The Prince*. In the first book he tends to favor republicanism and shared power; in the second he shuns all but autonomously held power. *The Discourses* are written in the erudite, expansive, Quattrocentesco manner typical of the humanistic style; *The Prince*, however, disrupts and reacts to this genre, though the form remains the mirror-of-princes of medieval and humanist tradition. Frederic Chabod notes that while the literary style of *The Discourses* reveals its hypotactic, non-reductionistic approach and polyvalence in decision making, *The Prince*, in contrast, is written in a paratactic style that reduces decision making to an "either . . . or" choice. Chabod terms the contrasting features "dilemmatic."<sup>13</sup> In developing the etiological foundation of this "dilemmatic" critique, George Carpetto employs Freud's notion of ambivalence and the Primal Father. The mechanism of ambivalence arises when unconscious conflicts lead to attitudes and feelings that oscillate between extremes. The Primal Father is absolute in power whereas the antithetical impulse of the parricidal Primal Horde disallows such concentrated power.<sup>14</sup> When Herbert Butterfield called *The Prince* "a textbook of usurpers,"<sup>15</sup> he was in a sense addressing the same issue. *The Prince* usurps the *quattrocento* myth of republicanism and replaces it with autocracy. But, as Carpetto points out, this break with an established ideal contains a revitalization of another myth, the thirteenth-century myth of *renovatio*, a return to the political origin, a primal renewal.<sup>16</sup>

While Machiavelli's struggle with his ideal conception of power as concentrated and autonomous can be seen in Carpetto's paradigm, Hannah Pitkin feels that the struggle is based essentially on a personal issue of *machismo*. At those points in the texts where "masculine" desires of autonomy, sovereignty and domination in the public realm usurp the republican politics of freedom, we see symptoms of the destruction of "feminine" desires in the private realm. Pitkin links Machiavelli's fear of dependence with the fear of malevolent feminine power and consequently with an anxious and defensive stress on solipsistically conceived autonomy and *machismo* which traditionally has been expressed in the cult of violence, cynicism, or in submission to a supermasculine leader.<sup>17</sup>

There is no doubt that Machiavelli felt the possession of power, whether as a satrap or as a Roman emperor, to be the highest good. When the Medici were restored to power in Florence, Machiavelli had been a secretary to the Second Chancery. Because he had always been staunchly Republican and anti-Medici, he found himself without a job at the age of forty-three, a dejected liberal in a world suddenly changed by a deluge of irrational events. The last fourteen years of Machiavelli's life were spent trying to make peace with the Medici. His letters, comments Max Lerner, "are full of pleas to be reinstated in the favor of the Medici and the Pope, plans to recommend himself to them, strategies by which his abilities could be brought to their attention." Lerner further notes:

It is, as so many commentators have pointed out, neither a pretty nor a graceful picture. Yet we must reflect that Machiavelli out of office felt himself a vessel without use. The letters he has left us during this period, for all their bitter pride and the unbreakable gaiety of their style, show that reinstatement in office spelled for him nothing less than a return to life.<sup>18</sup>

It was also during these last years of his life that he began and completed *The Discourses* and *The Prince*. We can sense in these the personal desire for absolute, uninterrupted power, the ideal of complete control over one's own destiny. We also find in the ambiguities of the texts the clash of this ideal against the reality of political dependency, power sharing, and the unexpected loss of power.

Historians like Lerner have long charged that Machiavelli, while seeking to separate the realm of what ought to be from the realm of what is, ignored the third realm of what can be. But, of course, it is precisely because Machiavelli did concern himself with the realm of what can be that his works evince ambivalence. And by pursuing absolute autonomy and power as if they existed in the realm of what can be, Machiavelli embraces freedom from morality. But this freedom brings a shifting and uncertain perception of reality in which the only code a politician can follow is the one which will gain him power. Isaiah Berlin contends that Machiavelli cuts the Gordian knot of real political life and the demands of Christian faith by rejecting ideal behavior and embracing a political morality.<sup>19</sup>

But though Machiavelli rejected Christian principles in the political jungle, he did not replace them with another set of precepts,

another morality. Instead he retreats to the realm of myth which affords him an autonomy of perception, unregulated except in the barest sense. That is, his ideal of autonomous and entirely self-dependent power roams in a secure, mythical reality where men are seen as half-animals. Machiavelli's famous allusion to the myth of Achilles and the centaur is evidence of this. According to story, the able teacher of Achilles and other mythical heroes is the centaur Chiron, half-man and half-beast. Leo Strauss writes that according to Machiavelli man must be seen as Beast Man rather than God Man.<sup>20</sup> But Machiavelli himself writes, "The parable of this semi-animal, semi-human teacher is meant to indicate that a prince must know how to use both natures, and that one without the other is not durable."<sup>21</sup> Thus one nature is not favored over the other, but both come into play in an essentially ambivalent union.

The Machiavellian ambivalence that centers upon the desire for autonomy and the avoidance of dependence poses various pragmatic problems. But it has not deterred its devotees. In his *Anti-Machiavelli* Frederick the Great deemed Machiavelli "the enemy of mankind," but the King's later career showed how much he was captivated by Machiavellian power. After having encouraged Frederick to write his treatise against Machiavelli, his friend Voltaire wryly comments in his *Memoirs* that "if Machiavelli had had a prince for a disciple, the first thing he would have recommended him to do would have been to write a book against Machiavellianism."<sup>22</sup> More recently, Ferdinand Marcos has ranked among the foremost in the practice of Machiavellianism. He has not admitted to having read the works of Machiavelli, but then, neither has he admitted that the last Presidential election in the Philippines was touched by fraud.<sup>23</sup> Among Machiavelli's famous pieces of advice to a prince is that "men should either be caressed or eliminated." Marcos followed the advice by murdering Benigno Aquino. But the Florentine would not have recommended that he do it in full view of television cameras. The media is a threat to Machiavellianism that the unprophetic Florentine could not have foreseen.

The CIA, too, has embraced the ideals of Machiavellianism. A recently discovered manual for operatives in Nicaragua includes instructions for "neutralizing" not only combatants but also public officials whose death would have the desired psychological effects on the population. As described by Senator Daniel P. Moynihan of the Senate Intelligence Committee, this booklet can trace its ancestry back to a Vietnam primer prepared for the Green Berets in 1968, which in turn was based on Maoist tactics for waging guerilla warfare in the 1940s.<sup>24</sup>

Machiavelli conceived of true power as that which grants its possessor unbreachable autonomy conducive to order: an autonomy that avoids dependence on other units or aggregates of power and is subject to its own rationality. He attempted to secure this ideal for his prince within the constraints of political reality. The ambiguities in his writings attest to the enormity of the challenge and his failure to meet it. History attests that those who act in the spirit of Machiavellianism are likewise doomed to failure.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Max Weber, an Indologist, characterizes Kautilya as the "Machiavelli of India." Kautilya lived in northwest India probably in the 4th century B.C. An excellent study examining the thought of both Kautilya and Machiavelli has been done by B. K. Joshi: "Kautilya and Machiavelli: A Study in Comparative Political Thought" (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgia Washington University, 1972).

<sup>2</sup>"The CIA's Manual of Terror," *America*, 10 November 1984, p. 286.

<sup>3</sup>Max Lerner, Introduction, *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: Random House, Modern Library College Edition, 1950), p. xiv.

<sup>4</sup>Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: Random House, Modern Library College Edition, 1950), p. 90.

<sup>5</sup>Hannah Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 324.

<sup>6</sup>Isaiah Berlin, "The Question of Machiavelli," *The New York Book Review*. Special Supplement, 4 November 1971, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 20-32.

<sup>8</sup>Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup>George Carpetto, "Machiavelli's *Prince*: Stylistic Ambivalence and the Primal Father," *American Imago*, 41 (Fall, 1984): 310-311.

<sup>10</sup>J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. viii.

<sup>11</sup>Machiavelli, *The Prince and The Discourses*, p. 60.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Carpetto, "Machiavelli's *Prince*," p. 310.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>15</sup>Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1955), p. 92.

<sup>16</sup>Carpetto, "Machiavelli's *Prince*," p. 316.

<sup>17</sup>Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman*, pp. 326-327.

- <sup>18</sup>Lerner, Introduction, p. xxviii.  
<sup>19</sup>Berlin, "The Question of Machiavelli," p. 31.  
<sup>20</sup>Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 296.  
<sup>21</sup>Machiavelli, *The Discourses* and *The Prince*, p. 64.  
<sup>22</sup>Lerner, Introduction, p. xli.  
<sup>23</sup>Walter Goodman, "Fair Game," *New Leader* 69 (March 1986): 9.  
<sup>24</sup>"The CIA's Manual of Terror," p. 286.