

WHO IS MACHIAVELLI?

In 1954 I attended a class on Machiavelli and the Anti-Machiavellists taught by Professor Paolo Treves at the University of Florence in Italy while I was on a Fulbright Scholarship there. The chief text for that class was Meineke's *The Reason of State* (or *Il Ragione di Stato*, in Italian). A few years later, as a Post-Doc at Yale I attended a class by Karl Deutsch on Power Politics based on this book on Cybernetics (this was before he moved to Harvard), and, of course, almost immediately he plunged into the "question" of Machiavelli.

Out of curiosity I asked Professor Deutsch to explain the difference between the Greek concept of *arête* or virtue and Machiavelli's idea of *virtu`*. I thought I knew what he was going to say—but boy was I wrong! He immediately went to the blackboard and began diagramming what he called a "random walk" to connect the two. I am as confused about that today as I was then. Between these two vastly different interpretations of Machiavelli, I also encountered a Jesuit at Fordham who so feared Strauss' version that he deflected me to Giambattista Vico, and a quasi-socialist at Bryn Mawr who thought Machiavelli was probably just a "good old boy" at heart, a popular democrat.

Finally I came to the conclusion, following the empirical theorists of the Yale Graduate School at that time, that Machiavelli was really a policy scientist, a political engineer who said, in effect, "tell me what your goals are and I'll tell you

how to get there”—without the decision trees that economic theorists were proliferating at that time. And I then immediately marched off to spread the word about epistemology and the scientific method to all my students. Along the way, I published a few books in that field, including *Truth and Meaning in Political Science* and *Feminism and Epistemology*.

Finally, in my dotage, I decided to return to Machiavelli to try to unscramble the different strands of thought which his work had provoked over the years, not just in political theorists generally, but in feminists in particular. The result was that fifty years almost to the day of that first encounter with Machiavelli in Florence, Penn State Press published *Feminist Interpretations of Niccolo` Machiavelli*, in which I discovered that women, like others in the field, had concluded that he was everything from a “proto-fascist” to a “proto-liberal”, and, for lack of a better phrase, a “male chauvinist pig” to a feminist in disguise. Professor Nederman was good enough to contribute a co-authored article to the volume and Professor Parel reviewed the book, very positively, I might add, for which I am grateful.

So, after fifty years, what---has anything changed? Maybe the terminology and the emphases on different aspects of Machiavelli’s thought, as well as the *dramatis personae* expressing them---but no; no matter how you look at it, Machiavelli is still an enigma. And, as you heard, this panel clearly demonstrates that.

Let’s take the papers in the order listed in the program.

First Professor Nederman and this co-author Jennifer Willyard say, based on an article by Mary Dietz, that Machiavelli was the ultimate deceiver and was really trying to entangle the Medici in the then near-hopeless enterprise of uniting Italy with the expectation that they would be “disempowered” and Florence would return to being a republic. I personally find this hypothesis fascinating and very satisfying—even in this most “evil” of books, because of the evidence it presents that Machiavelli was really a Republican (from our perspective, at least, a good guy). But since it is not my function simply to agree with everything that everyone says, let me open with this caveat. I’ll try not to be too “picky” so please forgive me if my critiques sound that way.

I like the notion that Machiavelli was “playing games” so to speak with the mind of the surrogate leader of Florence and might actually have been trying to lure him into a trap. What I have difficulty believing however is that he would have done so knowing full well what would have happened to Florence and Italy had Lorenzo taken the bait. Machiavelli had already lived through the devastating invasion of French troops into Italy in 1494, and had seen first hand what had happened to Venice when that Republic attempted to expand into the area beyond the Veneto. In 1508 the League of Cambrai had united the French, Spanish, Papal States and the Holy Roman Empire against Venice, almost destroying not only that city, but except for the timely change of direction of Julius II, the Papal States as well. That is the one alternative that Professors Willyard and Nederman do not consider in their paper although they do rightly consider three others.

So, unless Machiavelli's brain had suddenly ceased to function, I doubt that Chapter 26 of *The Prince*, was anything more than a literary exercise. A cry into the wind by a man who had seen the future and screamed, perhaps, and on this point I have to agree with Professor Von Vacano. Also to go back to earlier readings of that chapter, it may well have been primarily a way of changing his reputation and boosting his position as a supplicant before his "lord" to get a job in the new government. He complained at one point that he was almost reduced to becoming a rich family's tutor!

I know that interpretation hurts, especially those of us who have a fondness for the Republican Machiavelli, but I can't help feeling that it rings true, nevertheless. The most I can see coming out of this enterprise is that Lorenzo, imitating Cesare Borgia and others, may have attempted to unite Tuscany with the Papal States, but even that would have had serious repercussions, not only for Florence but for the rest of Italy as well, especially since the Medici family had itself just recently been returned to power in Florence with the help of Spanish troops.

So how likely would it have been for anyone, much less Machiavelli, to truly expect, even with his highly charged and perhaps deceptive plea, that the Medici would attempt to unite Italy except through an alliance with other foreign powers? And how independent would such an entity really have been anyway? Hardly more so than the disunited states of Italy before their actual unification three centuries

later—one more reason not to follow the logical conclusion of this “entrapment” thesis.

Professor McCormick’s paper, perhaps without meaning to do so, levels a serious charge against modern republican constitutions that fail to include the “total” populace in the legal process of judging crimes by public officials, at least in the appeals phase. He’s right that Machiavelli was a staunch supporter of popular participation in such trials and that Guicciardini was not, and his historical examples are especially appropriate. Machiavelli did believe that smaller, elite courts were bound to be slanted toward the *grandi* and subject to political corruption, and that the populace could indeed be impartial, even against their own partisans. In his later advice to the Medici on ways to govern Florence, Machiavelli does appear to be a “turncoat” in restricting the numbers involved in the accusatorial as well as the appeals process to what he thought they might accept. Another example of the way Machiavelli sought to cope with changing fortune, perhaps.

That modern juries are an attempt to include the people, drawn by lots, in the accusatorial phase, may have been one way to compensate for this oversight. At least it is a practice that appears to go back to the *missi* of Charlemagne, the eyre courts of the Domesday book, and later the common law in England, to place “jurors” under oath to “tell the truth” or render a verdict (*vere dictus*). It is truly not until the current era of modern communications that one might conclude that

the people have finally been drawn into the appeals process---if not legally, then at least informally so. For how else is one to judge the spectacle of the Clinton Presidency when the partisan Senate impeached, but in the face of popular opposition, the Congress did not dare to convict? A Republic as large and federated as this one, may simply not find it physically feasible to create the type of popular appeals courts that existed in ancient Rome or Athens---unless, of course, a randomized electronic voting system is invented in the future, not just to judge “high crimes and misdemeanors”, but to conduct elections as well. A Brave New World, indeed.

Professor Fontana’s thesis that Machiavelli was a democrat at heart is also one I can thoroughly sympathize with, especially since several of the sources he cites include feminist theorists who see citizen armies as a way to gain greater recognition and equality for women in the political life of the *citta`* through military service. The education of the populace to the *vivere civile* is indeed one of the military’s foremost functions even today, and one that women have been more and more willing to take advantage of. His claim that Machiavelli’s intention was to shape the peasants of the *contado* into true citizens so as to counter the influence of the *grandi* also seems plausible. But the distrust of the power of the upper classes was not an invention of Machiavelli, as we know. This tradition goes well back to the 13th century “Ordinances of Justice” which Florence adopted to deny anyone who was not a member of a guild or *arte* not only the right to vote but also the right to hold

political office. They, as well as Machiavelli, feared the corrupting power of wealth and dominion.

No, my only argument is not with Professor Fontana but with Machiavelli himself on this point. As the fall of Prato in 1516 clearly demonstrated, a citizen militia that was not thoroughly trained and tested could not be expected to prevail against war-hardened troops. They fled ignominiously before the onslaught and barely engaged the enemy at all. In this instance Machiavelli's wish was a dream more than a probability. But by then he was not on the field to urge them on and to see them through this their first genuine trial—he was stuck in limbo at his country estate, praying that someone would recognize his abilities and put him to work. Eventually he was put in charge of designing a defensive system of walls around the city but he did not live to see it brought to consummation. With Michelangelo's help those walls held the Spanish troops at bay for eight months in 1530, and the newly revived Florentine Republic died a ghastly but noble death.

So once again we are drawn to explore possibilities which our instantaneous means of communication and debate may be extending to the public space of the "*citta`*" and the civil life (*vivere civile*) today, almost perhaps, throughout the entire world: a situation Karl Deutsch and his predecessor Norbert Wiener, the inventor of cybernetics, accurately predicted, by the way. It may be only a matter of time before everyone will have to engage in the discussion of the preferred outcome for this tiny planet of ours, whether they want to or not.

Another of Professor Fontana's points that competition and diversity of desires is the "motivating force of political life and the mechanism by which conflict and strife" is resolved, according to Machiavelli, sounds almost Spencerian to modern ears—but once again—is expansion and empire the necessary or logical outcome? Maybe. As a theory, perhaps. It certainly sounds a lot like the doctrine of Manifest Destiny proclaimed by the United States in the 19th century, and some might say, even today. But what is theoretically possible may not have been practical in 16th century Italy. And, one might argue, Empires do not owe their origins exclusively to republican regimes or even to democratic pressures upon non-republican regimes.

It would be difficult to demonstrate for example, that the huge empires constructed by the Egyptians in the ancient world, or by the Chinese in the medieval, were due to republican forces, and I am not sure that Machiavelli would have so maintained. He was dealing with a history peculiar to Rome and was probably hoping, through the doctrine of cyclical return, as Professor Parel so amply demonstrates, that such an eventuality might occur if the "humors" and the "heavens" would allow—a big IF. Empires may be created and expand for any number of reasons, but the space-speech continuum is probably not a necessary component of this phenomenon.

Professor Parel's paper does not wander far from the thesis of his earlier book, *The Machiavellian Cosmos*, when he traces Machiavelli's natural philosophy back to its roots in the medieval sciences of medicine and astronomy. I was fascinated when I

first read his thesis over a decade ago and I still am, in part because I find nothing to argue with him about it. That Machiavelli's science is not modern in any sense of the word despite what many political scientists have said before or since (including myself), is, I think, based upon his evidence, beyond dispute.

But did Machiavelli make a near total break with the political values of the ancients, or perhaps did he bend them a little—for example regarding their understanding of virtue, prudence and ethics? Did he also bend the facts of history to make a point (well in this was he any different than Heroditus and Apuleis)? Did he separate the “is” from the “ought”? He is certainly the first to do so openly and admit it. Did he say “the end justifies the means”? No. What he said was “*si guarda al fine*”, or when people examine the actions of a prince they tend to allocate praise or blame by “looking at the outcome”. Justification, to make just or right, was an ethical and religious concept that was not part of his vocabulary, as we all know. That was for Martin Luther to explore in 1517, not Machiavelli.

So how do we determine if Machiavelli was a modern or not? Ernst Cassirer went even further in distancing some of the great minds of the Renaissance from modernism when he pointed out that both Pico and Ficino pretty much held to the same concept of *Fortuna* that Machiavelli did---the only person really opting for the “rational” approach being Lorenzo Valla, that inventor of philology who demonstrated the forgery of “the Donation of Constantine”.

But since this controversy still persists, might I suggest a solution? With your permission, Professor Parel, I'd like to ask why we should not do what Machiavelli said all people do anyway—look at the results? (“The masses are always impressed by the superficial appearance of things”, he said “and the world consists of nothing but the masses.”) Your response, I am sure, would be, “let’s hope not—we scholars are supposed to be looking for the truth.” Exactly. But the judgment of history, if you will, is that, if he himself was not a modern, his works and thoughts, just as those of Pico and Ficino, and many others of similar bent of mind, were certainly instrumental in precipitating the radical transition from ancient/medieval to modern ways of thinking. Machiavelli, as well as being a humanist, was perceived then and now as being possibly the most influential rational instrumentalist, of all time. I could cite you many instances of that, but so could we all.

It is well known that some of those who were loudest in condemning Machiavelli as being an “immoralist” were among his most adept students. (Frederick of Prussia, comes to mind, certainly.) So when you correctly classify his cosmology as medieval you must admit that those who read his works after his death did not see that flaw in his thinking; they just grasped the major points so far as they were capable of doing so, with the resulting brouhaha over his meaning. Eventually modernists, correct or not, took him over and made him their patron saint, if Hans Morganthau and Henry Kissinger are any guides. So, modern or not, whether it was his intention or not (and he did say he was trying to accomplish something “new”) it is certainly

plausible to argue that his work did lead to the revolution in political thought that the moderns attributed to him. “Apres-moi le deluge” as Louis XIV said.

With regard to Professor Von Vacano’s paper, I found it rather fascinating that it raises the question of the “Three Masks” of Machiavelli in presenting the solution to this problem that you prefer: the contradiction between the “immoralist” interpretation of Machiavelli, and the belief in his credentials as a proto-democrat. Of course this is a reference to the “*personae*” or dramatic masks used by the ancients to depict the characters in their plays---primarily comic and tragic. If I were going to be irreverent I might say sort of like the doctrine of three persons in one God. That’s preferable to saying that Machiavelli suffered from multiple personality disorder, I suppose.

But yes, I agree, certainly with regard to Chapter 26 of *The Prince*—it was a literary exercise par excellence. But I do have one question: Why that exact juxtaposition of alternatives? I find it hard to believe that you mean to imply that prior to your (or maybe Varoli’s) discovery of his theatrical mask, Machiavelli was thought to be either an immoralist or a proto-democrat, and nothing else. This dichotomy between “good” and “evil” barely covers all the alternatives one might list. For example, many hold that Machiavelli wasn’t an “immoralist” after all, but an “a-moralist”. And you must admit, Machiavelli is not the only one to present different masks to different people, depending upon the situation. However, your emphasis on his dramatic/aesthetic mask is certainly an important one and needs to

be more fully explored. With you I agree it would explain a great deal that up to now has been a source of great confusion.

I have always found it rather interesting that Machiavelli reportedly read selections from *The Discourses* to members of the Rucellai Circle made up almost exclusively of young *grandi*, and dedicated the *Discourses* to two of them, or that his two closest correspondents were both staunch Mediceans, Guicciardini and Vettore. How could he have possibly carried that off, do you think, without presenting a number of masks to different people, depending upon his audience? Or was he just hopping from one wheel to another to avoid *Fortuna's* grasp?

One thing I do know, Machiavelli's entire life was a drama of the highest order, and until the very end one was not quite sure whether it was to be a tragedy on the order of Oedipus or Antigone, or a farce like *La Mandragola*. But probably, without the uncertainties and stresses of that lifetime, Machiavelli would not have been what he eventually ended up being: the enigma to challenge all other enigmas. My favorite quote from Benedetto Croce is this: "*La questione di Machiavelli non si chiuderà mai*".

