The Review Of Politics
Founded in 1939
Read and Cited Throughout the World for Over Three Generations

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Machiavelli's Realism

Author(s): Grant B. Mindle

Source: *The Review of Politics*, Apr., 1985, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Apr., 1985), pp. 212-230

Published by: Cambridge University Press for the University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1406671

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/1406671?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

University of Notre Dame du lac on behalf of Review of Politics and *Cambridge University Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Review of Politics*

JSTOR

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Machiavelli's Realism

Grant B. Mindle

Declaring his departure from the modes and orders of his predecessors—especially the creators of imaginary republics and principalities (men like Plato, Aristotle and Augustine)—Machiavelli undertakes to show "whoever understands" a new and more promising road to political salvation and personal well-being. So compelling is Machiavelli's rhetoric that we seem to have forgotten just how "realistic" or "moderate" Machiavelli's predecessors were, and how "unrealistic" or "immoderate" Machiavelli's own teaching is. This essay attempts to bring to light the extremism which underlies Machiavelli's realism and raises doubts about his ability to provide his readers the security he promises.

The hallmark of Machiavelli's political science is its realism. What other expression could adequately describe the teaching of an author determined to write something useful even at the risk of appearing presumptuous, let alone that of a work *(The Prince)* whose express purpose is to set out "the effectual truth" heretofore hidden from mankind behind the idealism embodied in all previous political science? Indeed, Machiavelli seems almost ready to proclaim himself the first political scientist to behold the human condition without any illusions—to see the world as it is, men as they truly are—and having done so to discern and warn humanity about the danger of professing goodness in a world where so many are not good.[1] According to one interpreter, Machiavelli was the first to appreciate "the role of sheer force in the conduct of government," the first to understand that "the maintenance of a successful government depends on an unflinching willingness to supplement the arts of persuasion with the employment of effective military force."[2]

But were Machiavelli's predecessors as naive as he would have us believe? And is his own teaching as realistic as he seems to suggest? Contrary to what Machiavelli or those influenced by him would have us believe, his predecessors' political expectations were sober and moderate. Explicitly rejecting political intransigence, Aristotle calls upon the political scientist to investigate not only the nature of the best regime, but also those constitutions suitable for more ordinary civic bodies, "for it is perhaps impossible for many [cities] to obtain the best."[3] Similarly Aristotelian moral theory stands against moral rigidity as much as against any other er-

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ror. Natural right, we learn in the *Ethics,* is a part of political right, an awkward way of saying that "there is no rule or precept of natural right . . . which may not change with circumstances."[4] Nor can the originality of Machiavelli's realism be traced to his pessimistic view of human nature, his belief that men are wicked readily succumbing to present temptation. Consider, for example, Aristotle's assertion in the *Ethics* that "most men are swayed by compulsion rather than argument and by punishment rather than what is noble."[5]

Awareness of the limitations that beset all political endeavors, not confidence in the power of men to rid the world of evil, this is the essential lesson to be culled from the writings of those against whom Machiavelli rebels. Since no political order can last forever, it makes no sense to them to orient their political or private life around an *excessive* quest for security. Even the pursuit of glory is marred by the realization that glory cannot endure forever and that its pursuit renders one forever dependent upon those who must confer it. Whatever "idealism" is to be found in pre-Machiavellian political thought rests upon a bedrock of realism or moderation. Its "idealism"—for we do not wish to deny that this mode of thought contains elements which appear idealistic—is derived from its insistence on the best and the recognition that many will never be able to understand why political and private moderation is essential to human happiness, and hence the necessity for ruling authorities who will educate those receptive to education and restrain by force the attempt to transgress the bounds of moderation by those who are not.

The Destruction of Aristocratic Virtue

The key to Machiavellian realism is not his willingness to condone the effective use of military force or even his proclamation that fidelity to what men call virtue cannot always guarantee political success; rather, it lies in his determination to sever once and for all the connection, heretofore taken for granted, between realism and moderation, between political science and a method of analysis that begins with the world as we first perceive it, with what is ordinary and typical. That is why *The Prince* investigates at length the pitfalls that beset a new prince while the hereditary prince, the more common or ordinary variety, is barely discussed.

In *Politics and Vision,* Sheldon Wolin attributes Machiavelli's

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

procedure to his contempt for nobility generally, coupled with a particular animus toward all who obtain their thrones without effort, by inheritance alone. What, Sheldon Wolin forces us to ask, could Machiavelli have to say to such men?[6] Content to keep what they have, too dispassionate to be stirred by an uncertain quest for glory, such men can relax, confident that they need only preserve intact "the orders of their ancestors and then temporize with accidents" to ensure the perpetuation of their rule. The greater stability of their kingdoms and the ease with which they can maintain them ("But it is the new principality which presents difficulties"[7]) means hereditary princes neither need nor desire Machiavelli's counsel. And yet if we accept this explanation, Machiavelli's political science becomes nothing more than a supplement to the teaching of the classics, a sort of addendum containing advice about how that most uncommon of creatures, the new prince, ought to behave, and if not explicitly than at least by implication leaves the hereditary prince still subject to the teaching set out by the classics.

While the new prince may indeed be a special case, one cannot help but sense that Machiavelli's intention is far more radical. Wolin seems to share this impression inasmuch as he finds Machiavelli's new science a great equalizer wherein "the aristocratic principle in particular" is gradually undermined thereby permitting a more equal struggle between hereditary right on the one hand and raw natural ability on the other.[8] Since the equalization of the aristocratic principle is, as we shall see, tantamount to its destruction, even the hereditary prince will soon find himself in need of Machiavelli's counsel.

The Prince pays scant attention to hereditary principalities because Machiavelli believes the very idea of a hereditary principality is ultimately untenable. Every prince, however he acquires his throne, must—if he is to preserve himself in the world Machiavelli is determined to create—learn to think of himself as a new prince and be governed in his actions by the same rules set down elsewhere for that most extreme and exceptional of circumstances—the new prince in a new state. Realism becomes extremism; the ordinary is assimilated by the extraordinary. While the impression Machiavelli conveys in the second chapter of *The Prince* ("Of Hereditary Principalities") would seem to cast doubt upon this interpretation, we believe its argument tentative and misleading; all of the advantages Machiavelli attributes to hereditary principalities,

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

all of the rules he sets down for their prudent governance, are revised in the chapters that follow. A hereditary prince willing to eschew innovation, Machiavelli tells us in chapter two "will always maintain himself in his state unless an extraordinary and excessive force deprive him of it," a comforting thought, at least until Machiavelli's subsequent disclosure that "extraordinary and excessive force" is in fact a regular and common occurrence.[9] Similarly, his preliminary observation in chapter two that hereditary princes are likely to be "more loved" by their subjects loses some of its luster when read in light of chapter seventeen's declaration that "it is much safer to be feared than loved." Whatever advantages such love may procure its recipient, it clearly does not deter "men from voluntarily changing lords" in order "to better themselves" (chap. 3). Even the hope that deprived of his state, the hereditary prince "will reacquire it with the slightest mishap to the occupier" (chap. 2) is quickly dispelled; a wise prince will take care to extinguish the family line of the prince who formerly held sway (chap. 4). Again and again Machiavelli hammers out in *The Prince* and even more vigorously in the *Discourses* the weaknesses inherent in hereditary succession.[10] Were hereditary principalities as easy to secure and maintain as Machiavelli's opening argument suggests, *The Prince* would be absurd, as would any work which sought to teach men how to acquire and retain the states of their neighbors, let alone one that culminates in an exhortation to unify Italy and put an end once and for all to her internal dissensions. The teaching of *The Prince* is by its very nature unsettling and revolutionary; by showing men how to acquire, Machiavelli cannot help but compound the task of those who seek to retain and enjoy in peace the titles they inherit.

Nowhere is Machiavelli's attitude toward those who rest their claim to deference upon "antiquity of blood" expressed as pointedly as in his *Florentine Histories.* In a speech attributed to a nameless plebeian rabble-rouser, a new doctrine—the equality of all men—is brought to bear in Machiavelli's battle to expose once and for all the hypocrisy and rascality which underlie the gentlemanly virtues.

> Be not deceived about that antiquity of blood by which [the nobility] fling themselves above us; because all men having had the same beginning are equally ancient, and by nature were made in one way. Strip everyone naked, and you will see everyone alike, dress

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> us in their clothes and they in ours, and we will undoubtedly appear noble, they ignoble, because poverty and riches alone make the difference. . . . But if you will note the way men proceed you will see that those who attain great wealth and power were brought there either by fraud or force, and what they have usurped either by deceit or violence, in order to disguise the ugliness of their acquisition, they excuse under the false title of honest gains.[11]

Nobility whatever its form, Machiavelli's spokesman tells us, is sheer pretense, a dress we put on to conceal from ourselves and from all others the common origins of mankind. Not the moral superiority of our ancestors, but their villainy, their disdain for what Aristotle called "greatness of soul" is the foundation for the good name and the good fortune their descendants enjoy. The enemy of forgetfulness, especially of those eager to forget the origins of their present status, Machiavelli stands ready to remind both the haves and the have-nots of the rapacity which gave rise to the present aristocracy. The purpose of Machiavelli's "reminder" is not as one might expect to chastise the haves by arousing and indulging the moral indignation of the have-nots, but rather to impart to the haves the precariousness of their present status and to the have-nots the necessity of setting aside their moral inhibitions as they embark upon the "noble" art of acquisition. The equality of all men as Machiavelli interprets it does not and cannot lead either to the abolition of inequality or to the renunciation of villainous behavior; instead its *raison d'être* is to instill in noble and plebeian alike a kind of general restlessness, a pervasive and gnawing sense of insecurity along with the determination to do something about it:

> And those who as a result of little prudence or excessive foolishness flee these ways always drown in servitude and poverty; because the faithful are always servants and good men are always poor. Nor do any ever escape servitude except the unfaithful and audacious, or poverty except the rapacious and deceitful.[12]

To reduce nobility to wealth alone, to the quality of one's wardrobe, is to rob magnanimity of its splendor. Missing from Machiavelli's thought is an appreciation for those characteristics of soul once considered essential to true aristocracy. Courage in the face of adversity, generosity of spirit in the hour of one's greatest triumph, superiority to the lure of vulgar ambition, an unflagging devotion to virtue regardless of the personal consequences, these

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

are not the precepts of Machiavelli's political science. Were Machiavelli's intention merely to affirm that what passes for aristocracy (rule of the best) is all too frequently unworthy of so exalted a title, he would have found no quarrel with the classics. Nor would they quarrel with the assertion that fraud and force usually attend the genesis of civilization. But as it is, Machiavelli goes further. By dwelling upon the unsavory behavior of our forefathers, by spurning any attempt to transcend one's ancestral beginnings, Machiavelli brings everyone back to the same level, to the lowest possible level. None of us are permitted to renounce the "fraud or force," the "deceit or violence" required to fling ourselves above others. Each of us is compelled to look at ourselves as new men, as have-nots. The rich cannot rest upon their laurels now that their secret is out; the poor must learn that they cannot afford to scorn the only proven formula for fleeing servitude and poverty. Foremost in everyone's mind is the desire for self-preservation as men strive relentlessly and we might add always unsuccessfully to distance themselves from their common origins. Caught up in the fear and uncertainty Machiavelli's doctrine is meant to arouse, behavior once considered extreme will be thought so no longer as men regardless of their station renounce their moral inhibitions.[13]

In place of moderation stands the fruit of Machiavelli's realism, a doctrine of perpetual revolution. Lest this assertion seem strange, the reader should note how Machiavelli's realism denies legitimacy to every political order that exists or ever will exist. No longer will rulers be able to rely upon that ancient prejudice which disposes mankind to equate the good with the ancestral; no longer will they find shelter beneath the conservatism of their subjects. In a world where loyalty cannot be taken for granted, only those who know how to acquire and reacquire the devotion of others can hope to endure.[14] And when all are "equally ancient," there is no place for deference to the old and established. And when young and old are treated equally, it is the latter which usually founders, perhaps because the former are more prone to embrace the cruelty and audacity success in Machiavelli's world requires while the latter have difficulty saying good-by to the caution their moderation engenders.[15]

Too weak to denounce on his own the principles governing contemporary political behavior, Machiavelli begins the *Discourses* by aligning himself with the very prejudices he criticizes in the *Florentine Histories,* taking pains to remind his audience of the

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

honor in which antiquity is still held.[16] In art, in law, and in medicine no one questions the authority of ancient practice. Only in politics are Machiavelli's contemporaries reluctant to imitate the "highly virtuous behavior" recounted by the ancient historians. The practices men ought to observe Machiavelli argues in the chapters that follow are best exemplified by the Roman Republic, especially as recorded in the *History* of Titus Livius. But how can Rome, the most innovative and tumultuous of the ancient republics, be the darling of those who cherish custom and tradition? This is the question Machiavelli takes up in *Discourses* (1: 5 and 6) where Rome, a state organized for expansion and empire, is compared with Sparta and Venice, two states content to maintain the status quo. In the analysis that follows Machiavelli weighs the advantages and disadvantages associated with each of these alternatives: as significant as the weighing itself is the reasoning he employs.

Whatever value one attributes to the stability and the longevity states like Sparta and Venice enjoy, the price of their conservatism was a polity which could not expand should the necessity to do so arise. Just how grave this deficiency was may be deduced from the following observation: "Since all human things are in flux and cannot remain still . . . necessity will lead you to many things reason does not" *(Discourses,* 1: 6). Frightened by the chaos nature decrees, many believed the solace and security they craved could be guaranteed by a strict adherence to custom, by revering the ancestral and railing against anything new or divisive. To such men the example of Rome with "all its enmities and tumults" evoked both fear and disgust. This attempt to create islands of stability amidst a sea of chaos, to shield oneself and one's country from the fear, the enmity, and the discord that the emancipation of acquisitiveness breeds Machiavelli labels utopian. When necessity calls, such states will find themselves obliged to expand, but unable to do so. Should "heaven be so kind" as to relieve them of the necessity to make war, their very leisure will generate effeminacy or factions.[17] Either way they will at last appreciate the full price of their conservatism, the destruction of everything they hold dear. The true conservative is the radical who deliberately turns his back upon the past knowing full well that he cannot conserve what he has without seeking to acquire more, that "the middle way," the way of moderation, does not exist. Like the plebeian rabble-rouser of the *Florentine Histories,* the choice Machiavelli

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

leaves us is no choice at all. It makes no difference whether we honor moderation or acquisitiveness, conservatism or revolution; all roads lead to Rome.

The world Machiavelli describes is not the world observation shows us, but the world he intends to create. Neither Livy nor the Rome he describes was as extreme as Machiavelli's realism requires. In a world tutored by Machiavelli, moderation will soon give way to a realism that brooks no limits.[18] Had Lycurgus understood this, he would have anticipated the threat to Sparta's freedom a state organized like Machiavelli's Rome might pose some seven hundred years later. Preoccupied by extraordinary threats to their security, even those states who heed Machiavelli's counsel will find themselves contestants in a struggle they cannot win as they seek to master the future no matter how remote.

Since domestic politics is subject to the same reasoning (the individual cannot retain what he has without acquiring more), the struggle at home is analogous to the one abroad. Just as Rome needs to conquer the world, so the individual must conquer Rome. But even success in this endeavor cannot bring men the security they crave. So long as the necessity to acquire remains in effect, subjects have no choice but to treat their prince as he treated his predecessor, *sanza alcuno respetto* ("without any respect"). Thus the quest for security becomes a quest without end as men spend their lives either acquiring what belongs to others or repelling their assaults. Those who expect Machiavelli's realism to enhance their security are apt to be disappointed.

Machiavelli goes on to observe that "he who does otherwise, if he be a man known for his quality, will live in continual danger. Nor is it enough to say 'I do not care about such things, I desire neither honors nor advantages, I wish to live quietly and without trouble,' because these excuses are heard but not accepted" (*Discourses,* 3:2). No matter how hollow the security Machiavelli promises, joining in the fray will always be safer than sitting it out.

The Morality of Private Advantage

The second half of *The Prince* (chaps. 15-26) is introduced by a chapter entitled "Of Those Things for Which Men and Especially Princes Are Praised or Blamed" (chap. 15). Having completed his discussion of foreign policy (the kinds of principalities and how they are acquired, the kinds of militia and what a prince should

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

do about them), Machiavelli is finally ready to consider how a prince should govern his subjects and friends. While the order of discussion, first foreign and then domestic affairs, is a sign of their relative importance, it should be noted that in foreign affairs Machiavelli was content to "give himself over altogether" to the orders of others whereas in domestic affairs he boldly announces his departure from the teachings of his predecessors.[19] Only at home does the full measure of Machiavelli's realism become apparent, for men "Are not ashamed to train [to do] in relation to others what they deny is just or advantageous for themselves."[20] Classical political philosophy did try to persuade men to moderate the viciousness which often attended the conduct of foreign affairs, but even here the classics were not blind to the possibility that the exigencies of foreign affairs might impinge upon the practice of virtue both at home and abroad, for these "idealists" knew there were occasions when nations must alter their behavior to avoid subjugation.[21]

But even in the face of necessity, classical political philosophy found room to reaffirm the supremacy of virtue to vice. Behind the compromises, behind the concessions necessity requires, stood the idea of the best regime. While not always directly applicable—the conjunction of circumstances permitting the undiluted application of its principles was always reckoned most improbable—it remained nonetheless the guide for human behavior, for the statesman must know "what is absolutely best . . . in order to know what the best adaptation is under the various limitations imposed by circumstances." Nor were these dilutions considered unjust since even justice varies according to "what is fitting here and now."[22] By insisting upon the changeability of both natural and political right while still affirming the preeminence of the best regime Aristotle sought to allow the statesman the flexibility that is required for the conduct of political life without depriving men of the guidance and the restraint so essential to human happiness.

Because the conditions necessary for the perfection of the individual are more probable than those necessary for an entire political community classical political philosophy was led to conclude that happiness would always be more accessible to the former than to the latter. While the happiness of the individual requires good fortune as well—no one would call a man who suffers great misfortune happy—the possession of virtue was thought to give man some immunity from the malignity of fortune by allowing the cre-

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ation within him of a kind of inner fortress wherein he might find refuge from the storm without, for even in the worst of circumstances nobility would still shine through.[23]

It is this interpretation of virtue, this assertion of independence that Machiavelli finds misguided; whatever solace knowledge of one's own nobility provides, it is, Machiavelli assures us, poor compensation for the evils that are generated by the desire "to make a profession of good in all things" (*Prince,* chap. 15). Moreover the independence classical political philosophy promises its disciples is, Machiavelli argues in the chapters that follow, more illusory than real. Not only does the perfection the classics prescribe jeopardize man's self-preservation, but in time it robs the prince of the respect and admiration of his subjects. Thus liberality gives rise to rapaciousness (*Prince,* chap. 16) and compassion to cruelty (*Prince,* chap. 17).[24]

Unlike the political scientists of the past, Machiavelli intends "to write something useful for *whoever understands* it" (emphasis added). Not everyone, it seems, will benefit from the truths he reveals (we have already seen the effect of Machiavelli's teaching upon those who might wish to enjoy their inheritance in peace). Nor, it seems, will everyone understand them. Were Machiavelli's argument reducible to the proposition that wickedness can bring prosperity and goodness ruin, the proviso "useful for whoever understands" would be unnecessary. What is tragedy if not an implicit acknowledgment of this insight? Had Machiavelli used this observation to conclude that virtue without force is ineffectual, that the virtuous should unite and subdue the wicked, and that success in this endeavor may not only require the virtuous to align themselves with men less excellent than themselves, but may also lead them to take up a mode of behavior gentlemen usually consider improper, Machiavelli's claim to originality would have been unwarranted.

But this is precisely what Machiavelli does not do. Instead of affirming a standard of excellence toward which men might aim and from which men might derive guidance whenever necessity forces them to choose among imperfect alternatives, Machiavelli dismisses as irrelevant those who would speak of a best regime or a good prince. Even in its most prudent form, such talk only serves to nourish the naive belief that man's devotion to private advantage can and should be sporadic and half-hearted. What many do not realize is that Machiavelli cannot permit man the

This content downloaded from 149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

luxury of choosing among imperfect alternatives on grounds other than private advantage without reaffirming the propriety of those imaginary republics and principalities he so eloquently denounces. The difficulty of a political science that encourages men to desire the establishment of the best regime is not its attitude toward political compromise—for intrinsic to this way of thinking is the disposition to distinguish the "morally best" from the "politically necessary"—but rather its failure to affirm the full extent of necessity's kingdom. Contrary to what Machiavelli's predecessors believe, the necessity that governs the human condition is not episodic, but absolute and continuous. The choice necessity leaves us is not between virtue and vice, or even between morality and success, but between the successful and unsuccessful pursuit of private advantage. Machiavellianism does not demand that we surrender our political principles for the sake of political efficacy; there are no principles left to surrender.

> Because, if someone will consider everything well, he will find that something that appears to be a virtue, if he follows it, will be his ruin; and something else that appears to be a vice, if he follows it, will bring about his security and well-being.[25]

The sacrifice Machiavellianism exacts is minuscule, the renunciation of what "appears to be a virtue," but presumably is not, in order to enjoy the benefits that come from what "appears to be a vice," but presumably is not. Thus Machiavelli may proceed to offer the reader instruction in the art of self-preservation. To render the "vices" he counsels more palatable, Machiavelli teaches us to replace the dichotomy of virtue or vice with that of self-preservation or ruin, because in the name of necessity behavior once considered illegitimate suddenly acquires an aura of respectability.[26]

What contemporary princes are lacking is not the disposition to be not good (men are already so disposed) as knowledge of "how to be not good," how to color the selfishness necessity requires of us so as to escape the infamy such behavior is said to procure. In the pages that follow Machiavelli teaches "whoever understands" how to manipulate appearance and reality, how to promote one's advantage without forfeiting the favor and esteem of subjects and friends.

A prince must know how to acquire the esteem of others, and

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

since he cannot do so by preferring their advantage to his own, his salvation will depend on his ability to give men—men whom Machiavelli will later describe as "ungrateful, fickle . . . [and] greedy for profit" (chap. 17)—a reason not only to excuse but to rejoice in the selfishness of their prince. Not force ("Those who rely simply on the lion do not understand this" [chap. 18]) but fraud is the most effective technique for securing oneself against the selfishness of others.

Contrary to what one might expect, the realism Machiavelli propounds cannot be learned by examining with care the behavior of those republics and principalities which have been seen or known to exist since those who judge with their eyes are easily deceived.

> And men, in general, judge more with their eyes than with their hands; because it is given to everyone to see, but to few to touch. Everyone sees what you appear to be, but few touch what you are . . . the vulgar are always taken with appearances and with the outcome of the thing; and in the world there is nothing but vulgar.[27]

The world observation shows us leads away from Machiavelli's realism, because the world a man sees is largely determined by the opinions he holds, and his opinions in turn by the doctrines he has heard. According to Machiavelli men cannot speak about other men without noting at least some of those qualities (Machiavelli refrains from calling them virtues) they consider worthy of praise or blame. "And thus it is that some are held liberal, some *misero* . . . some cruel, others compassionate, one treacherous, another faithful." But the human condition does not allow anyone, not even those naive enough to imagine themselves so moved, "to have or entirely observe" all of the qualities men consider good. Thus the tragic dilemma many are wont to attribute to Machiavelli, that a moral man "must fall to ruin in a world where so many are not good" is out of place, for such a dilemma presupposes the possibility of moral perfection, an achievement Machiavelli now calls impossible. Perhaps this explains why Machiavelli spoke earlier of the destruction that awaits not the one who is good, but rather the one "who wishes to *profess* goodness in all regards" (emphasis added).[28]

Although Machiavelli himself places no stock in the things men say, the fact that so many succumb to the temptation to distinguish virtue from vice cannot safely be ignored. A prince must

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

be "prudent enough to know how to flee the *infamy* of those vices that will lose him his state" (chap. 15, emphasis added). The project Machiavelli describes—a reputation for virtue built upon the judicious employment of vice—is neither as extraordinary nor as marvelous as many believe. If the categories created by human speech are indeed illusory, then the deception Machiavelli advocates is already an everyday occurrence, discernible whenever men resort to words of praise or blame. Thus the question, at least as Machiavelli forces us to state it, is not whether there will be justice or exploitation, but who will benefit from man's naiveté—the virtuous or the fortunate, the new prince or the hereditary prince? What Machiavelli asks is that those who understand treat men as they already treat themselves, that they consciously exploit man's capacity for self-deception in order to further their own advantage.

Liberality and Justice

In chapter 16 Machiavelli continues his assault upon the principles that underlie classical political philosophy; beginning with liberality, Machiavelli takes aim not only against the quality itself but also, and more importantly, against the view of the human condition it presupposes. Liberality, Aristotle had told us in his *Ethics,* "seems to be a mean in the sphere of material goods." Unlike the stingy man, the liberal man enjoys giving, and unlike the extravagant he gives to "the right people, the right amount, at the right time." Although such men "are perhaps more loved than any other," they give not to win the praise and gratitude of others, but because it is noble to do so. Holding wealth in little esteem, they welcome the opportunity to help others, thereby demonstrating their own freedom and independence.[29] To call liberality a virtue, as Aristotle does, is to suggest that man's needs are not unlimited, that independence need not give way to the fear of deprivation, that even those who eschew political authority can achieve the self-sufficiency real happiness requires.

Machiavelli also justifies the liberality of private men, but not as an end in itself, not as a way of asserting one's freedom and independence, but rather as a strategy ambitious men employ in order to achieve greatness and authority over others. "Thus Caesar by his liberality came to imperium, and many others by being held liberal, have achieved a very great rank" (chap. 16). When

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the wise give, they give not because they wish to help others, not as a sign of their contentment and self-sufficiency, but in order to advance in rank. Their liberality is proof not of their happiness, but of their misery, of their need to acquire still more. Not even those who attain the pinnacles of authority and greatness can afford to indulge this "virtue." Even Caesar, had he lived and taken no steps to reduce his expenditures, would have destroyed his empire.

While a prince cannot afford to practice true liberality—to give something to someone for nothing—he need not despair about establishing a reputation for liberality provided he has wisdom enough to overlook that quality men call justice. By taking his subjects to war, by inviting them to share in the fruits of victory, a prince can establish a reputation for liberality as he enlarges his estate.

Liberality as described by Machiavelli is indistinguishable from rapacity. Machiavelli's prince practices liberality not out of a desire to share his good fortune with others, but in order to enlist support for his military enterprises. Without a share of the booty, "he would not be followed by his soldiers." He earns their praise and gratitude only because he appears to prefer their advantage to his own, a deception made possible by the fact that most men are too naive to discern the stinginess that lies behind his seeming indifference to personal gain. As long as men are subject to the necessity to acquire, liberality will be reasonable only when it is practiced for an ulterior motive.

The "liberality" or rapacity war occasions, while perhaps more favorable to the prince and his subjects, is no more favorable to that quality conspicuously missing from Machiavelli's prior enumeration of those qualities that bring men praise or blame—justice. Indeed one might say that the real purpose of Machiavelli's analysis of liberality is to demonstrate once and for all the irrelevance of justice.

It is passing strange that chapter 16 of *The Prince* should have been entitled "Of Liberality and Parsimony," for strictly speaking Machiavelli's subject is neither liberality nor parsimony. A liberal man is one "who spends relative to his property and on the right objects." Thus a man who gives less "may still be more generous if his gift comes from smaller resources."[30] Similarly the money he spends must be his; we do not call a man liberal because of the generosity he displays when handling the fortunes of others. But

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

when the fortunes in question are, as they are here, the belongings of one's subjects or the subjects of another prince, the appropriate theme is not liberality or parsimony, but justice and injustice.[31]

Taxation and military service—these are the twin foundations for the "liberality" Machiavelli discusses. But if Machiavelli is correct, if government must take in order to give, then the fundamental political question would seem to be that of distributive justice. From whom should government take? To whom should it give? And how much? Although Machiavelli observes that liberality "harms the many and rewards the few," it is significant that his formal objections to liberality have absolutely nothing to do with justice. It is not the inequity of the distribution that rouses Machiavelli's ire, but the complacency that belief in liberality and justice presumes.

In classical political philosophy virtue is allowed to triumph over fortune despite the limited protection virtue provides against the malevolence of fortune. Since virtue alone cannot guarantee happiness, the freedom and security virtue confers cannot give man the kind of protection Machiavelli's realism seems to require.[32] But neither can Machiavelli. To demand more of virtue, to try to conquer fortune by pursuing one acquisition after another is to exchange the freedom, security and contentment available to man for a world of endless toil in which even and perhaps especially the greatest of men will find themselves forever and completely subservient to the necessity to acquire. The price of Machiavellian *virtú,* of a view of virtue whose war with fortune is unremitting, is subjection to Machiavellian necessity.[33]

This is not to suggest that Machiavelli thought men were ready to acknowledge their subjection. One can hardly expect men to obey a necessity they do not see, and most men do not see why moderation is unreasonable. In particular the many do not understand why the great cannot be satisfied with the advantages fortune has left them. Nor can Machiavelli expect the gentleman to embrace a view of the human condition that transforms his opulence into poverty, his confident assertion of self-sufficiency into bombast, and his leisure into idleness. If men are to swear allegiance to Machiavelli's new modes and orders, they must be forced to do so.

But where is the force Machiavelli needs to be found? And how and to whom is it to be administered? As long as men believe

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

in moderation, and the self-sufficiency it presumes, not only will mankind resist the course of action Machiavelli's realism requires, but the virtuous may even hope to gain the favor of the multitude by cultivating the very qualities Machiavelli cautions us against. Only by taking men to war, by stirring up discontent both at home and abroad, can Machiavelli obtain the force he needs. Since Machiavelli cannot hope to persuade the many to abandon their belief in morality, he labors instead to sever the connection classical political philosophy had sought to establish between political authority and moral virtue.

In Aristotle, morality and politics are coextensive; politics itself never becomes the enemy of morality, the arena in which men are forced to set aside their scruples in order to survive. The consummation of moral virtue is to be found not by withdrawing from political life, but by demonstrating to oneself and to the community at large one's mastery of those moral and intellectual virtues which together constitute the essence of statesmanship. But with Machiavelli the nature and the locus of morality is radically altered. Where Aristotelian moral virtue required knowledge, habituation, and self-discipline, the goodness Machiavelli attributes to the multitude seems to require no cultivation at all. If morality exists, it exists not among the ruling class, nor among those ambitious plebeians who seek political office, but among those whose desire to be left alone causes them to shun the more exalted forms of political participation. In Machiavelli—unlike classical political philosophy which attempted to focus attention upon *how* a man rules—the desire to rule is in itself morally suspect.

Concealed within Machiavelli's realism are two messages, one to the few and one to the many. To the few—to those who rule and to those who aspire to rule—Machiavelli offers a view of necessity designed to liberate their minds from the moral conventions his predecessors had promulgated in order to limit their acquisitiveness. To the multitude Machiavelli offers a view of the ruling class which justifies their animosity toward aristocracy by debunking those who rest their claim to rule upon an assertion of moral superiority. Machiavelli's realism gives rulers the flexibility they desire only to rob them of the moral authority they need; relieved of one limitation, they soon find themselves subject to another.

Only by persuading the multitude that politics is a dirty business, that all who exercise political authority are stained with im-

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

morality, that the gentleman—who by definition prefers leisure to labor, whose contentment leads him to restrict both the means and the extent of his acquisitiveness—is pernicious, can Machiavelli obtain the "force" his enterprise requires.[34] Adopting the same strategy he recommends to others (*Prince,* chap. 9), Machiavelli proselytizes among the multitude to secure the authority he needs to compel the few to acknowledge the absurdity of leisure and the necessity of universal labor. Henceforth, the prince will have to justify the authority he exercises not by pointing to his mastery of the virtues or by appealing to some version of natural right but by putting together again and again the kind of enterprise necessary to keep the "minds of his subjects in suspense and admiration" (chap. 21). Once the suspicions the multitude harbor toward the few and the few toward everyone—patrician and plebeian alike—have been reinforced, the prince's survival will depend upon his ability to raise the specter of war to divert attention from the oppression that accompanies his reign. By playing upon man's fears Machiavelli is able to create the necessity he urges man to subdue.

The "Beneficence" of Niccolò Machiavelli

Classical political philosophy never encouraged mankind to pursue self-preservation, not as Machiavelli would have us believe because of its indifference to worldly things, but because of its belief that men do not need to be told to consider their own advantage. What frightened Machiavelli's predecessors was the possibility that mankind might never find the time to look beyond private advantage, that men might never discover that freedom from necessity depends upon their willingness to recognize and obey the limits virtue decrees.

In the *Discourses* Machiavelli observes how easily people are moved by "great hopes and rash promises" (1: 53). Perhaps this explains why Machiavelli's realism is so appealing. When reading Machiavelli one is immediately struck by his liberality of spirit, his eagerness to show men less gifted than himself how to satisfy their ambitions. Only later, if at all, do men notice the price Machiavelli demands in return for his advice.

When the senate announced that from now on the plebeians would be paid for their military service, "Rome went upside-down with joy" (*Discourses,* 1: 51). Try as they might the tribunes could

This content downloaded from 149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

do nothing to awaken their constituency to the taxes that would be necessary to defray this act of public generosity. Had the plebeians considered more carefully the gift they were offered they might have noticed how this new arrangement would enable the senate to extend the duration of their military service. They might even have considered the lives they would be called upon to sacrifice so that Rome might extend its dominion, constantly advancing from one conquest to the next. But Machiavelli's realism was meant to abolish the leisure such reflections require. The best conspiracies, Machiavelli tells us in the longest of the chapters of the *Discourses* (3: 6), are those which do not allow the conspirator's coconspirators the time to reflect upon the enterprise they are about to undertake.

For better or worse extremism has become the foundation of our politics and of our morality. The wise men of our age, tutored by Machiavelli without realizing it, frequently proclaim the incompatibility of morality and realism. But perhaps the time has come to ask in earnest: "How realistic is Machiavelli's realism?"

Notes

I wish to thank Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., for his patient and generous assistance in the preparation of this article.

[1] *Prince,* chap. 15. Cf. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 441.

[2] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: University Press, 1978), 1:129.

[3] Aristotle *Politics* 1288b 25-27, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 118. See also 1288b 35-36.

[4] Harry V. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 184; Aristotle *Ethics* 1104a 1-10; 1134b 18-1135a 14.

[5] Aristotle *Ethics* 1180a 4-5, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis, 1980), p. 296.

[6] Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), pp. 200-202.

[7] *Prince,* chap. 3, beginning; cf. chap. 2.

[8] Wolin, *Politics and Vision,* p. 202.

[9] *Prince,* chaps. 24, 25; cf. Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), pp. 56-57.

[10] Consider *Prince,* chaps. 14, 19; *Discourses,* 1: 2, 10, 11, 19, 20.

[11] *Florentine Histories,* 3:13.

[12] *Ibid.* But how can one be sure that the speech delivered by Machiavelli's nameless plebeian is the truth and his assertion in *Prince,* chap. 2, is merely tentative? Besides the citations in note 10, the reader should consider Machiavelli's celebration of Roman wisdom in *Prince,* chap. 3, especially their rejection of "what is in the mouth of the wise men of our times, 'to enjoy the advantages of time,' " as well as his insistence in *Discourses,* 3: 1, that no order can long endure without returning periodically to its beginnings.

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

[13] Cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan,* chaps. 11, 15.

[14] *Prince,* chap. 21; *Discourses,* 3: 1. Consider also the *Mandragola* where the only trust that remains inviolate is that between the fellow conspirators. All other trusts, between master and servant, doctor and patient, husband and wife, mother and daughter, priest and confessor, are violated. I owe this observation to Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.

[15] *Prince,* chap. 25. Consider also *Discourses,* 2: 13, where the examples of have-nots turn out to be the prince's nephews.

[16] To appreciate just how provisional this alliance is see *Discourses* 1: 60 (especially the final word); 2, preface.

[17] *Discourses,* 1: 6.

[18] Consider the *Mandragola,* Act 3, 10 and 11 where the necessity Machiavelli unveils governs ordinary as well as extraordinary times. If Lot's daughters were allowed to lie down with their father, believing him the last man in the world, then surely Lucrezia may commit adultery and endanger the life of a stranger in order to provide her husband with an heir. But Lucrezia is not the last woman nor Nicia the last man.

[19] *Prince,* chaps. 14 end, 15 beginning.

[20] Aristotle *Politics* 1324b 32-35, trans. Lord, p. 201.

[21] Plato *Republic* 375a-e; 469b-c; Aristotle *Politics* 1265a 19-28; 1268b 22ff; 1331a 1-18.

[22] Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism,* p. 183.

[23] Plato *Republic* 519c-520b; 540d 1-3; 545c-d; Aristotle *Ethics* 1100a 10-1101a 20.

[24] Clifford Orwin, "Machiavelli's Unchristian Charity," *American Political Science Review,* 72 (1978), 1217-27.

[25] *Prince,* chap. 15.

[26] *Discourses,* 1: 9; 3: 41.

[27] *Prince,* chap. 18.

[28] *Ibid.,* chap. 15. Machiavelli never speaks of virtue in chap. 15, only of "apparent virtue."

[29] Aristotle *Ethics* 1119b 20-1122a 17, trans. Ostwald, pp. 83-89.

[30] *Ibid.,* p. 85.

[31] Observe how Machiavelli's realism dissolves the distinction between public and private, reducing the state to the private and temporary preserve of the prince. On Machiavelli's use of *stato,* see Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., "On the Impersonality of the Modern State," *American Political Science Review,* 77 (1983), 849-857. On the connection between liberality and justice, see Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli,* pp. 238-39.

[32] Aristotle *Ethics* 1100b 28-30.

[33] As if to indicate the irrelevance of the traditional moral dichotomy (virtue and vice), Machiavelli prefers pairing *virtú* with *fortuna.* Consider, for example, the titles of *Prince,* chaps. 6-7.

[34] *Discourses,* 1:55.

This content downloaded from
149.31.21.88 on Thu, 12 Sep 2024 17:10:55 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms