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MACHIAVELLI AND ITALIAN FASCISM¹

Joseph Femia²

Abstract: The paper challenges the fashionable interpretation of Machiavelli as an idealistic champion of liberty and self-governance, and tries to demonstrate — through textual analysis — that the ideology of Italian fascism is permeated by Machiavellian themes and principles. Although this convergence is generally ignored in the scholarly literature on fascism and was rarely acknowledged by Mussolini or Gentile themselves, it is evident in their hostility to metaphysical abstractions, their contempt for the idea of moral progress, their indifference to conventional moral pieties, their reduction of politics to underlying power struggles, their view of the *patria* as the foundation of existence, and their desire to rescue Italy from its present enfeeblement by recreating the (real or imagined) glories of the Roman past. Machiavelli, often depicted as an essentially left-wing figure, can be seen as a precursor of fascism.

One might expect Machiavelli to enjoy a prominent place in the pantheon of Italian fascism. Here is a man who once famously claimed to value his *patria* more than his own soul, a man who thought that any method — ‘just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or ignominious’ — was legitimate when defending the vital interests of the ‘fatherland’.³ His advice to nations or cities that had ‘fallen into decline’ was to find a heroic saviour — a *Duce* if you like — and the *locus classicus* of Machiavellian wisdom, *The Prince*, detailed the techniques of manipulation and violence that would enable aspiring despots to consolidate their regimes and eliminate voices of dissent.⁴ The Machiavelli of popular imagination is certainly a proto-fascist, and anyone interested in denigrating the pieties of liberal democracy can find plenty of ammunition in his writings. Contempt for humanitarian sentimentality, the belief that the end justifies the means, the conception of politics as a pure struggle for power — these defining characteristics of fascism are normally deemed to be Machiavellian in origin.

It is therefore surprising to discover that eminent scholars of fascist thought consider it appropriate to ignore the great Florentine. For example, Ernst Nolte does not make a single reference to Machiavelli in his massive and

¹ This paper originated as a guest lecture at the European University Institute near Florence. I would like to thank members of my audience — especially Gisela Bock and Arfon Rees — for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to Janet Coleman for reading an earlier draft and offering valuable criticisms and suggestions.

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³ N. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. H.C. Mansfield and N. Tarcov (Chicago, 1996), Book III, ch. 41, p. 301.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, ch. 17, p. 48.

magisterial tome entitled *Three Faces of Fascism*.⁵ Likewise, in Zeev Sternhell's 332 page study called *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, the name Machiavelli is conspicuous by its total absence.⁶ Such omissions, while puzzling, are typical and merely reflect the reluctance of fascist spokesmen and theoreticians to acknowledge his influence. Mussolini, we know, admired him, describing *The Prince* as a *vade mecum* for statesmen. But neither he nor Giovanni Gentile, when explicitly setting out the doctrine of fascism, found it necessary to discuss or even mention Machiavelli, despite the obvious similarities between their ideas and his.⁷

Indifference to Machiavelli, or unwillingness to define fascism in terms of his principles, can be explained in a number of ways. First of all, the fascists insisted on the unity of thought and action and attached — as Gentile put it — 'no value whatsoever to any thought that has not already been translated or expressed in action'. Fascism, he continued, is 'not a philosophy of thinking but of doing, and it is therefore enunciated and affirmed not by formulas but by action'.⁸ Fascism, in consequence, had no wish to defer to any particular intellectual source or to any agreed prophets. Mussolini and his supporters conveyed the impression of a chameleon-like ideology, a magical synthesis of innumerable influences, changing form to suit the infinite variety of political circumstances. He made it an axiom that fascist thinking be adaptable to the necessities of real life, thus avoiding futile disputes over the finer points of doctrine. As an ex-Marxist, the *Duce* understood how his old comrades were compelled, by their worship of Marx, to elaborate rigmaroles and pretexts and a myriad of dubious explanations to justify the process of theoretical development, which for him was in the nature of things political. Faith in action was combined with anti-intellectualism, since intellectualism is theory divorced from practice, brain divorced from heart.⁹ The fascist 'style', heavily influenced by the romantic notion that reality, in all its dark complexity, could only be grasped intuitively, was impatient with rational debate and systematic argument. What did the ideal fascist man, so contemptuous of 'sterile' logic, make of Machiavelli's delight in the drastic application of intellectual rigour to political affairs, of his conviction that 'it is good to reason about everything'?¹⁰ Machiavelli's love of rationality, his insistence on judging everything logically, made it unlikely that he would win iconic status in the eyes of the fascists.

⁵ E. Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism* (New York, 1969).

⁶ Z. Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (Princeton, 1994).

⁷ B. Mussolini, 'The Doctrine of Fascism' (1932), in *Italian Fascisms: From Pareto to Gentile*, ed. A. Lyttelton (London, 1973), pp. 39–57; G. Gentile, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo* (Rome, 1934).

⁸ Gentile, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo*, pp. 39, 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39,

¹⁰ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I, ch. 18, p. 49.

There is still another reason why fascist writers did not choose to appropriate Machiavelli. Curious though it may seem, their liberal and democratic enemies had already laid claim to his legacy. Initially, his advocacy of blatant *realpolitik*, his cheerful acceptance of cruelty and deception as necessary tools of governance, earned him condemnation as an agent of the Evil One. In 1559, the Catholic Church placed all works by Machiavelli on its first Index of Forbidden Books. Indeed, it was once assumed that Machiavelli's given name was no coincidence, that here was a manifestation of 'Old Nick' himself, urging unscrupulous rulers to undermine the Christian order in the name of a Godless state. Readers of *The Prince* could not help but notice that its author did not even seem to care whether the tyrant in question was inspired by noble aims or pure malevolence.

By the seventeenth century, however, the dominant perspective on Machiavelli began to shift, as scholars and activists attempted to rescue his name from its popular connotations of immorality and deceit. English republicans, such as James Harrington, developed a fondness for quoting passages in the *Discourses* which expressed a theoretical preference for popular and republican government.¹¹ During the following century, even *The Prince* was rehabilitated. Rousseau interpreted the notorious little book as a deliberate warning to the common people. By introducing them to the secrets of despotic rule — the occult frauds and unimaginably wicked tricks — Machiavelli gives them the weapons to resist that rule, to see through its deceptions and counter its stratagems.¹² Herder, the prophet of romantic nationalism, adopted a slightly different tack, describing Machiavelli as a good-hearted patriot whose advocacy of harsh methods was justified by the desperate situation of his native Italy, oppressed as it was by foreign occupiers who could be expelled only by a unifying force as ferocious and ruthless as they. Soon Italian patriots began to read into Machiavelli all their own political and national idealism. He became a hero of the Risorgimento and was routinely portrayed as a passionate lover of freedom, of magnanimity and truth, an enlightened champion of all political virtues.

Such was Machiavelli's reputation as a progressive thinker that even Marxists expressed their approval. Antonio Gramsci, writing from a fascist prison cell, commended Machiavelli for wanting to mobilize the Italian 'nation' against the feudal aristocracy and Papacy and their mercenaries. His 'prince' is therefore an anthropomorphic 'symbol' of a new and dynamic 'collective will'. Machiavelli, in Gramsci's opinion, intended to educate the people, though not in the way Rousseau imagined: 'not a negative political education of hatred for tyrants . . . but a positive education of those who must recognise

¹¹ See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975), Part 3, chs. X–XI.

¹² J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole (London, 1966), p. 59.

certain necessary means, even if those of tyrants, because they want certain ends'. The Machiavellian principle of the end justifying the means was just as attractive to fascism's sworn enemies as it was to fascism itself.¹³

The interpretation of Machiavelli as basically a left-wing figure continues to this day. For J.G.A. Pocock, he was an exemplar of the Florentine tradition of 'civic humanism', which assumed, in Aristotelian fashion, that man fulfilled his essential nature through political participation and sharing things in common with his fellow citizens.¹⁴ Maurizio Viroli also defends the idea of Machiavelli as a freedom-loving republican, who saw politics not as a game of power and self-interest, but as 'the preservation of a community of men grounded upon justice and the common good'.¹⁵ Apart from his 'overarching commitment to . . . the rule of law', Viroli's Machiavelli insisted on 'the equal liberty to participate in public deliberations and to be called to sit in office and even to attain the highest honours'.¹⁶ This view of Machiavelli as a defender of liberty and self-governance is given a Marxist tinge by Benedetto Fontana's depiction of him as the prototype of Gramsci's 'democratic philosopher', who 'teaches citizens to love one another' and seeks to overcome 'domination/subordination structures'. Machiavelli's goal, we are told, was a 'citizen democracy' where 'force and authority are no longer the ground of social and political life'.¹⁷

Fontana's transformation of Machiavelli into a precocious Marxist humanist may strain credulity, but it is consistent with an exegetical tradition that goes back a long way. Much as they admired him, Italian fascists must have wondered whether Machiavelli was friend or foe. My own view is that he was essentially 'friend' and that the interpretation of Machiavelli as an idealistic pioneer of freedom and democracy is seriously misleading. While it would be anachronistic to label him a 'fascist', the conceptual similarities between his ideas and those of the fascists are too striking to be coincidental. Consciously or not, fascist writers and thinkers drew upon a framework of Machiavellian assumptions and beliefs which permeated the political and philosophical culture of Italy. The basic elements of this framework predate Machiavelli. As everyone knows, he admired the ancient Romans and consciously adopted, and adapted, their heroic ideals, their single-minded devotion to the *patria*, and their pragmatic contempt for abstract theorizing. Given that all of these ideas and attitudes had fallen out of favour with the rise of Christianity and

¹³ A Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Vol. III, ed. V. Gerratana (Turin, 1975), pp. 1555, 1572, 1600–1.

¹⁴ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 40, 184.

¹⁵ M. Viroli, 'Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics', in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. G. Bock, Q. Skinner and M. Viroli (Cambridge, 1990), p. 144.

¹⁶ M. Viroli, *Machiavelli* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 5, 129.

¹⁷ B. Fontana, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation Between Gramsci and Machiavelli* (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 72, 75, 106, 114, 125, 161, 162.

its alternative value-system, his nostalgia for the past does not diminish his credentials as an intellectual revolutionary. Even his humanist predecessors, who despised medieval 'darkness' and embraced the secular heritage of Rome, never succeeded in freeing themselves from Christian dogma. Although he was not without pedigree, Machiavelli is generally (and rightly) reckoned to have created something new. Paradoxically, his unabashed pagan revivalism gave birth to a distinctively modern approach to political reality — one that is indelibly associated with his name. The influence of this approach can be discussed under three headings: hostility to metaphysics; political realism; and a quest for spiritual renewal — a desire, that is, to end present corruption and recreate the (real or imagined) glories of the past.

Hostility to Metaphysics

The fascists shared with Machiavelli a rejection of all 'empty' 'metaphysical' notions of morality, whether apprehended by reason or identified by divine revelation. For him, as for them, practice was central to the determination of goodness or rightness. Nowhere does Machiavelli even mention, let alone endorse, natural justice or natural law — concepts commonly found in the writings of his contemporaries. He seems to have no time for standards outside history; and history, as he treats it, is merely a series of physical events, with no transcendent meaning. What we call absolute values are, in his view, relics of traditional metaphysics — an invention of man masquerading as an invention of God. Our moral rules are purely conventional, reflecting the existential needs of human beings living in communities. In content, if not in form, such rules may differ from one civilization to another. They are the result of natural *necessity*, not natural *law*; they exist because they are necessary for human survival, not because they are an inheritance from God (as the Bible says) or inscribed in human nature (as the Aristotelians say).¹⁸ The fashionable maxim that Machiavelli understood politics in terms of Aristotelian teleology is distinctly odd, as he barely mentioned Aristotle and never defined politics as a transformative or 'expressive' activity. Commentators such as Pocock are so anxious to fit Machiavelli into a tradition of Aristotelian republicanism that they give priority to *what they think he meant* over *what he actually said*. The perceived context, not the tangible texts, determines the interpretation.¹⁹ Nor is there any sign of Christian teleology in Machiavelli's

¹⁸ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I, ch. 2.

¹⁹ For a criticism along these lines, see V.B. Sullivan, 'Machiavelli's Momentary "Machiavellian Moment": a Reconsideration of Pocock's Treatment of the *Discourses*', *Political Theory*, 20 (1992), pp. 309–18. Neither I nor — if I understand her correctly — Sullivan would deny that words on a page can be ambiguous in their meaning and that some kind of contextual analysis may be helpful in adjudicating between possible meanings. But this is very far from allowing the text to disappear, so to speak, into some vaguely defined context or 'paradigm' of political language and discourse.

philosophy. As Isaiah Berlin points out, ‘an atheist can read Machiavelli with perfect intellectual comfort’.²⁰ The Christian psychology of sin and redemption is nowhere to be found in his major works. When he uses the word ‘sin’, he means a ‘political mistake’ or a political shortcoming rather than breaking a commandment of God.²¹ It is true that he did not wish to separate politics from religion. Thus he advised rulers ‘to maintain the ceremonies of their religion uncorrupt and hold them always in veneration’, since states are ‘secure and happy’ only when they are ‘maintained . . . by religious institutions’.²² Piety and fear of divine retribution are, to him, irreplaceable sources of social discipline. But what such sentiments express is an *instrumental* approach to religion; the truth-value of *any particular* religion was a matter of indifference to Machiavelli. He duly attacked Christian doctrine because of its *practical* deficiencies. Whereas the ancients worshipped worldly success and glory, Christianity values ‘humble and contemplative more than active men’. In its other-worldliness, it attributes the highest good to ‘humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human’. Christian men, seeing themselves as ‘citizens of heaven’, become indifferent to earthly reality and are more likely to endure than to avenge outrages committed against themselves or their neighbours. Social cohesion and civic responsibility are thereby undermined, and villains of all kinds are free to prey on a society rendered weak and effeminate by Christian forbearance.²³ This is a Nietzschean analysis — before Nietzsche. Machiavelli held the pagan religion of the ancient Romans in great esteem because it deliberately fostered community spirit. Focusing on the here and now rather than the eternal life beyond the grave, it gave a religious sanction to the heroic and civic values that make for practical success.

One of the deepest assumptions of Western political thought, according to Isaiah Berlin, is the doctrine that we are endowed by nature or God with certain purposes which are directly revealed to reason or intuition.²⁴ Armed with this assumption, we can measure the gap between ideal and reality. But if Machiavelli is right, such thinking is fallacious. The world exhibits no rational monistic pattern, no autonomous realm of *a priori* truth. In Platonic terms, all is appearance and opinion. This rejection of metaphysics, in both its secular and religious varieties, forms the dominant strand in modern Italian thought.²⁵ It is evident in the writings of the Hegelians (e.g. Croce), the Marxists (e.g.

²⁰ I. Berlin, ‘The Originality of Machiavelli’, in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London, 1979), p. 37.

²¹ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I, ch. 58, p. 117; N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. G. Bull (Harmondsworth, 1975), ch. XII, p. 78.

²² Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I, ch. 12, p. 36; Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. XI, p. 74.

²³ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, ch. 2, pp. 131–2.

²⁴ Berlin, ‘The Originality of Machiavelli’, pp. 67–8.

²⁵ A point made by Edmund Jacobitti in his masterful study of Italian idealism: ‘hostility to abstract Enlightenment natural laws as well as to the transcendent Christian religion, marks the uniqueness and prescience of modern Italian thought’. Jacobitti identi-

Gramsci) and the elitists (e.g. Pareto). Small wonder, then, that it was embraced by the fascists, who made a virtue of eclecticism. Mussolini frequently declared that fascism opposed all teleological theories according to which mankind would reach a definitive ideal or achieve predestined goals. For such abstractions exist 'outside history and life, which is a continual change and coming to be'.²⁶ The reality of eternal flux nullifies the search for eternal truth. Gentile, for his part, developed a philosophy of absolute immanence, which posited no reality beyond the activity of the thinking human subject. He spoke of the 'absolute concreteness of the real', which entailed the unity of theory and practice, since for Gentile there was no distinction between knowing the world and making it. Philosophy, on his conception, did not discover supra historical verities; it was simply the critical self-consciousness of politics.²⁷

This Machiavellian hostility to abstract universals underpins the fascist idea of an all-powerful state. If there is no overarching criterion in terms of which different national groups can order their lives, if there is no universal truth about how we should arrange our existence, then all values and standards must of necessity be inherent in a given social organism, a particular national society, with its unique history and traditions. Mussolini tells us that the state is 'the guardian and the transmitter of the spirit of the people as it has been elaborated through the centuries in language, custom, faith'. The state 'represents the immanent conscience of the nation'.²⁸ As there are no transcendent standards to limit this 'conscience', then, in Mussolini's immortal words, 'nothing human or spiritual exists, much less has value, outside the State'.²⁹ Liberty, for example, is not a natural right, 'an abstraction, an entity descended from heaven'. The authority of the state and the liberty of the citizen form, as Gentile phrases it, 'an unbreakable circle in which authority

ties Machiavelli as a pivotal figure because of his reversal of the Christian ideas of 'sin' and 'virtue'. The medieval era had as its theological basis the notion that sin lay in attaching oneself to this life, whereas virtue lay in the negation of the worldly life. Reality for the Christian was 'what ought to be', not 'what is', and therefore its true content was the afterlife — the 'heavenly city' of Truth and Justice. Machiavelli, on the other hand, saw virtue in man's active spirit, creating and appropriating his own world here on earth. Edmund Jacobitti, *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy* (New Haven and London, 1981), pp. 6, 52. I have myself tried to extend Jacobitti's thesis by demonstrating how Machiavelli's rejection of transcendence has influenced Italian thinkers on both the left and right of the political spectrum. See J.V. Femia, *The Machiavellian Legacy: Essays in Italian Political Thought* (Basingstoke, 1998), ch. 1.

²⁶ Mussolini, 'The Doctrine of Fascism', p. 41.

²⁷ G. Gentile, 'Il metodo dell' immanenza' (1912), in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana* (Florence, 1975), p. 232. For an interesting discussion of Gentile's unification of theory and practice, philosophy and politics, see M. Cicalese, *La formazione del pensiero politico di Giovanni Gentile (1896–1919)* (Milan, 1972), especially pp. 215–34.

²⁸ Mussolini, 'The Doctrine of Fascism', p. 54.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

presupposes freedom and vice versa'.³⁰ Freedom comes through participating in a greater whole; it has nothing to do with limiting the state's autonomy. Not surprisingly, fascism tried to syncretize the Catholic religion with its own system of values, using religious imagery and themes (faith, disciples, sacrifice) largely for propaganda purposes. Mussolini, despite being an atheist, made a pact with the Church in the hope that he could turn it — in accordance with Machiavelli's advice — into an instrument of rule. Gentile, echoing his master's voice, described this accommodation as a 'political necessity', though he did recognize the difficulty of reconciling the transcendental basis of the Catholic Church with 'the immanent political conception of fascism'.³¹ He and Mussolini adopted the Machiavellian view that the *patria* was the foundation of existence, the true God. Man was not — as the Christian and liberal metaphysicians would have it — an end-in-himself, a creature of infinite value; rather, he was — as in ancient Rome — a tool of the state.

Political Realism

Machiavelli's determination to study man from the perspective of the real rather than the ideal flows naturally from his refusal to appeal to something eternal or constant outside man and history. Where there are no transhistorical moral rules whose 'truth' is independent of context, one analyses human actions or political programmes by relating them to real life. What practical or psychological needs do they express? What will be the balance of advantages and disadvantages? And for whom? What ought-to-be must be defined in terms of what is practicable, not imaginary. When we observe the world with a cold eye, Machiavelli maintains, we see that men are not as they are described by those who idealize them. To the contrary, 'they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit'.³² One could, I suppose, describe this view of human beings as itself an abstract universal, but no doubt Machiavelli would call it an empirical truth, validated by historical observation. At any rate, what he refers to as the 'malignity of their spirit'³³ brings certain consequences. The first is that conflict and competition are natural components of political life.³⁴ Politics is essentially a struggle for power, not a pursuit of ideals — though the struggle will usually be concealed by pious sentiments and expressions of idealism. The laws of political life cannot be discovered by an analysis that takes men's words and beliefs at their face value. Utterances, lofty declarations, constitutions, laws, theories — all must be related to the whole complex of social facts in order to understand their real historical and political meanings. If we are to predict the behaviour

³⁰ Gentile, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo*, p. 52.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. XVII, p. 96.

³³ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I. ch. 3, p. 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, I, ch. 37, p. 78.

of political actors, we must not so much listen to the words they speak as examine the necessities they face. We will find that they normally adjust their words to their deeds rather than the other way round.³⁵

A second consequence of human 'malignity' is that states will always be struggling against the tendencies of dissolution. The natural selfishness of men will regularly subvert the state, reduce it to chaos. The perpetual flux of human affairs rules out the possibility of a perfect state as timeless as a geometric theorem. Neither does Machiavelli believe in the evolutionary progress of mankind. For him, change is not a genuine historical evolution but an eternally uniform and perpetually recurring circle. Human history, that is to say, is an endless pattern of deterioration and renewal. While human nature remains the same, circumstances change. A powerful republic, through the complacency brought on by good fortune, will eventually degenerate into vice and corruption.³⁶ When that occurs, a *spontaneous* regeneration is impossible. This is where a dictator is needed, according to Machiavelli. Reading some of the commentators, one might get the impression that he was unwavering in his commitment to popular sovereignty and the rule of law. In fact, however, he did not posit an antithesis between republicanism and dictatorship but saw them as compatible and mutually beneficial. In his *Discourses*, he praised the way the ancient Romans would suspend their republic and appoint a dictator in times of 'urgent danger'. Any republic that dogmatically clings to its standard procedures, no matter what the circumstances, will, he warns, 'come to ruin'.³⁷ In Machiavelli's mind, there was no contradiction between his preference for republicanism and his role as a counsellor of despots. His republicanism owed nothing to abstract idealism, to visions of human excellence or of a united community in pursuit of the 'good life'. It was simply a matter of practicality. Where conditions are appropriate (and *only* there), republics can produce the optimal combination of security and prosperity — the main goals, to Machiavelli, of any political system. The common people may not be very bright, but they are generally less capricious than princes. Moreover, popular institutions, as a rule, promote patriotism and habits of civility. Republics can also adapt better to changing times, since hidebound or idiotic rulers face the prospect of dismissal at regular intervals.³⁸ Nevertheless, Machiavelli was no egalitarian — and Fontana's assertion that the Florentine aspired to eliminate 'domination/subordination structures' can only be based on deductive inference from imaginary premises; it cannot be supported by the textual evidence. Like his influential elitist disciples — Mosca, Pareto, Michels — he saw 'domination/subordination structures' as an inescapable fact of life. Even in a well-ordered republic, Machiavelli

³⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. XV, pp. 90–1.

³⁶ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, ch. 25, p. 190.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, I, ch. 34, p. 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I, ch. 20, p. 54; II, ch. 2, pp. 130–3; III, ch. 9, p. 240.

writes in the *Discourses*, supposedly his most 'democratic' work, 'never do even forty or fifty citizens reach the ranks of command'.³⁹ There have always been, and there will always be, those who obey and those who give the orders. Recognition of this fact, in his opinion, would forestall fatuous egalitarian experiments. He favoured a mixed constitution, where popular participation would be mediated by leaders of superior intellect and courage. Given his pessimistic view of human nature, he never doubted 'the uselessness of a multitude without a head'.⁴⁰ His acceptance of hierarchy, and his willingness to support a prince with absolute authority, where necessary, demonstrate his deference to — in his words — 'things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined'.⁴¹ For in 'real truth', corruption and decay are ever-present dangers to every state.

A third consequence of men being 'more prone to evil than to good',⁴² according to Machiavelli, is the irrelevance of traditional Biblical morality to political life. The idea of political necessity and public utility overriding conventional morality did not originate with him; it was already enshrined in canon law. However, such departures from the Christian path were meant to be exceptional, and they were permissible only when necessitated by some religiously laudable goal. In Machiavelli, actions once deemed exceptional or regrettable were now declared commonplace and even admirable. Defenders of Machiavelli see him as a humanist grappling with the problem of 'dirty hands', the dilemma caused by the necessity of doing evil for the sake of a greater good. This is more or less the interpretation put forward by Croce, who argued that Machiavelli suffered 'anguish' over his discovery of a contradiction between politics and ethics.⁴³ I wonder if this description is accurate. A case could be made for saying that Machiavelli (unwittingly perhaps) pioneered a *new* type of morality, a consequentialist morality. In other words, the 'dirty hands' that worry the commentators are, in Machiavelli's eyes, actually clean.

In the *Discourses*, for instance, he defended Romulus over the killing of his brother Remus. This act was justified since it 'rarely happens that any republic or kingdom is ordered well from the beginning . . . unless it is ordered by one individual'. On this analysis, the glory of Rome depended on an act of fratricide. No wise person, Machiavelli insisted, would ever condemn a ruler for such extraordinary actions where they were beneficial to the public. Quite the reverse, for 'when the deed accuses him, the effect excuses him; and when the effect is good . . . it will always excuse the deed; for he who is violent to spoil, not he who is violent to mend, should be reproved'.⁴⁴ Machiavelli

³⁹ *Ibid.*, I, ch. 16, p. 46.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I, ch. 44, p. 92.

⁴¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. XV, p. 90.

⁴² Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I, ch. 9, p. 29.

⁴³ B. Croce, *Elementi di politica* (Bari, 1925), pp. 59–67.

⁴⁴ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I, ch. 9, p. 29.

wanted to highlight the irony of the political condition. Where the well-being of society is at stake, conventional vice might become political virtue, and conventional virtue might result in political ruin. In politics, it follows, we cannot draw a sharp line between moral virtue and moral vice: the two things often change place. Fair is foul and foul is fair. As an example, he invites us to consider Cesare Borgia, whose cruelty brought unity and order to the Romagna, previously plagued by local warlords. He must therefore be judged kinder than the more fastidious Florentines, who, to avoid resorting to violent and oppressive measures, allowed the warring factions in Pistoia to destroy the city's peace and prosperity. Tough-minded princes, prepared to take harsh action to keep their people loyal and united, are infinitely more merciful (and, by implication, moral) than princes who, 'being too compassionate, allow disorders which lead to murder and rapine'.⁴⁵

Rather than analysing Machiavelli's disturbing contribution to our understanding of political morality, certain commentators seek to minimize it, almost to the point of denying its existence. Viroli, for example, tells us that a republic following Machiavellian principles 'must respect with the utmost intransigence the principles of legal order . . . legal rights must be protected', even for culprits who have 'perpetrated the most nefarious crimes against the republic'.⁴⁶ Why, then, does Machiavelli say that, in defence of the fatherland against its enemies, foreign and domestic, 'there ought not to enter any consideration of just or unjust'?⁴⁷ Viroli's case for a kinder, gentler Machiavelli is often more baffling than convincing. We learn that, for the wily Florentine, 'territorial aggrandizement does not mean conquest and predatory expansionism'.⁴⁸ Really? Is this the same Machiavelli who — in the *Discourses* — praised the Roman republic because it 'demolished the towns' that had the temerity to resist its advance?⁴⁹ If he thought that expansion should require the consent of the annexed territories, why would he write that 'the cause of the disunion of republics is usually idleness and peace; the cause of union is fear and war'?⁵⁰ Why would he claim that a republic must either 'molest others' or else 'be molested', since tranquillity can never be found within stable borders?⁵¹ Why would he laud the relentless aggression of his beloved Romans, reminding us that 'they made almost all their wars taking the offensive against others and not defending against them'?⁵² For Machiavelli, political life was always in danger of lapsing into a Hobbesian 'war of all against

⁴⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. XVII, p. 95.

⁴⁶ Viroli, *Machiavelli*, p. 135.

⁴⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III, ch. 41, p. 301.

⁴⁸ Viroli, *Machiavelli*, p. 139.

⁴⁹ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II, ch. 23, p. 182.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, II, ch. 25, p. 190.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, II, ch. 19, p. 173.

⁵² *Ibid.*, II, ch. 17, p. 165.

all' — and any state that tried to align its policies with conventional morality would be destroyed, by either the enemy within or the enemy without.⁵³

Such existential pessimism is a prominent feature of modern Italian political thought. Consider Pareto, a man much admired by Mussolini and perhaps the greatest Machiavellian of all, who maintained that a morally scrupulous ruler would be a 'perfect gentleman' but 'a no less perfect idiot'.⁵⁴ It almost goes without saying that the Italian fascists accepted Machiavellian realism without reservation. In this case, we have explicit testimony of Mussolini's high regard for Machiavelli, about whom he wrote a brief essay in 1924. *Il Duce* warmly endorses the great man's pessimistic view of human nature as well as its consequences. He agrees that men are naturally bad, and that their intrinsic egoism induces them to evade civic responsibility and disobey the laws. Only a few — 'heroes or saints' — are willing to sacrifice themselves 'on the altar of the state'. The others exist in a condition of 'potential revolt against the state'. As for the liberal idea that 'power should emanate from the will of the people', it is a 'tragic hoax'. The 'people' eulogized in democratic theory are nothing but an 'abstract entity'. The *real* people are just an atomized mass of individuals, incapable of exercising sovereignty.⁵⁵

Even when Machiavelli is not acknowledged, the basic themes of Machiavellian realism permeate fascist texts. Like him, the fascists rejected utopianism and the idea of moral or political progress as movement towards an ideal norm. They, too, saw politics as an infinite struggle for scarce resources; they, too, denigrated peace and glorified war.⁵⁶ According to Gentile, for example, mankind develops 'only through division, and progress is achieved through conflict and the victory of one side over another'.⁵⁷ Politics is about winners and losers, and the losers are those who are insufficiently aggressive. Given human failings, order and security are the primary goals of politics — and all actions must be subordinated to these goals, as they are interpreted by the state. Those who try to introduce external moral criteria are, says Gentile, behaving 'stupidly'.⁵⁸

⁵³ Note Machiavelli's belief that the best way to unite a divided city is 'to kill the heads of the tumults' — a practice followed by the Romans. While 'such executions have in them something of the great and the generous', according to Machiavelli, 'men at present', because of their 'weak' Christian upbringing, find them 'inhuman' or even 'impossible' (Machiavelli, *Discourses*, III, ch. 27, pp. 274–5).

⁵⁴ V. Pareto, *The Mind and Society*, trans. A. Bongiorno and A. Livingstone (London, 1935), para. 2459. Originally published in 1916 under the title *Trattato di sociologia generale*.

⁵⁵ B. Mussolini, 'Preludio al Machiavelli', *Gerarchia*, April 1924.

⁵⁶ Mussolini, 'The Doctrine of Fascism', pp. 40, 47.

⁵⁷ Gentile, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo*, p. 40.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54. Although he did not explicitly associate Machiavelli with fascism, Gentile acknowledged, in an article on Gioberti (a leading Italian liberal during the Risorgimento), that the tradition of political realism was inaugurated by Machiavelli; he

It could be argued that Machiavelli's partiality towards republicanism and popular participation distinguishes him from the fascists, who assumed that the dictatorship of a single man was the only solution to the poor quality of human material. Yet Machiavelli never denied the need for elites and would not have disagreed with Mussolini's assertion that 'the masses cannot be protagonists but only tools of history'.⁵⁹ Also, like Machiavelli before him, *Il Duce* understood that the common people could make or break regimes by giving or withholding their support, and therefore felt no compunction about wooing them with populist rhetoric. He was even willing to define fascism as 'authoritarian democracy'. This apparent oxymoron was perfectly coherent to Mussolini, who maintained that 'if the nation is conceived, as it should be, qualitatively and not quantitatively', then fascism is 'the purest form of democracy', because the unified values and feelings of the people are expressed by one man.⁶⁰ He and Gentile contended that, contrary to traditional forms of authoritarianism, the fascist state was a 'popular state', rooted in mass consciousness.⁶¹ It is possible to detect echoes of Machiavelli's ambivalent attitude to the masses — a curious mixture of contempt and respect — in fascism's ambition to create a dictatorship 'founded in millions of individuals who recognise it, feel it, are ready to serve it'.⁶²

Quest for Spiritual Renewal

Roger Griffin has argued that fascism, in all its different forms, has a 'mythic core': the image of a decaying national community in urgent need of regeneration. This 'mythic core', he believes, can be captured by an obscure and obsolescent English word: 'palingenesis' (meaning 'rebirth').⁶³ The 'palingenetic' theme, though rarely discussed before Griffin drew our attention to it, is a recurrent feature of Italian fascist rhetoric, which was obsessed by bourgeois decadence and the need for spiritual revival. Hating the crass materialism and arid individualism of liberal society, the fascists wanted to give new meaning to life, by creating a sense of collective purpose and solidarity. In his essay on the doctrine of fascism, Mussolini asserts that the key to regeneration is the creation of a 'new man', motivated not by bourgeois values but by the heroic code of ancient Rome. Life finds its highest expression in the even drew a distinction between 'false Machiavellianism', or crude empiricism, and proper political realism, which pays heed to the moral and spiritual needs of the people. But, he hastened to add, while morality cannot be ignored, neither should it take the form of an abstract design, disconnected from the necessities of actual life. G. Gentile, 'Il realismo politico di Gioberti', *Politica*, I (24 April 1919), pp. 20–36.

⁵⁹ B. Mussolini, 'Which Way is the World Going' (article published in the review *Gerarchia* in February 1922), in *Italian Fascisms*, ed. Lyttelton, p. 66.

⁶⁰ Mussolini, 'The Doctrine of Fascism', p. 42.

⁶¹ Gentile, *Origini e dottrina del fascismo*, pp. 44–9.

⁶² Mussolini, 'The Doctrine of Fascism', p. 56.

⁶³ *Fascism*, ed. R. Griffin (Oxford, 1995), pp. 3–4 of General Introduction.

active, decisive individual who ‘through the denial of himself, through the sacrifice of his own private interests, through death itself, realises that completely spiritual existence in which his value as a man lies’. For Mussolini, the assumption that society exists only for the prosperity and the liberty of the individuals who compose it has had the effect of turning us into a ‘degenerate mass’, with ‘no other care than to enjoy the ignoble pleasures of vulgar men’. The discipline and authority of the fascist regime therefore have as their ultimate purpose nothing less than the remoulding of the human character. Only fascism, he concludes, can make the Italian people capable of ‘rising again after many centuries of abandonment or slavery to foreigners’.⁶⁴

The idea of ‘palingenesis’ has long been an important strand in Italian thought in general, explicable by the pervasive sense of national decline in relation to past glories. ‘Risorgimento’ means ‘resurrection’ and involved a process of cultural retrieval, with the aim of forging a national consciousness out of disparate local and regional identities. ‘Renaissance’, needless to say, means ‘rebirth’ — a revival of culture through the inspiration and guidance of ancient Roman models and texts. But while they regarded medieval culture as barbarous and in need of transcendence, the Renaissance humanists were essentially medieval in their preoccupation with universal law and order and the idea of harmony. They did not, on the whole, challenge fundamental Christian values or idealize the warrior spirit — at least not explicitly. It was Machiavelli who set up the stark contrast between a glorious pagan past and a decadent Christian present. Of all the Renaissance thinkers, he was the one who provided the paradigm for the fascist image of ‘rebirth’, who believed that contemporary Italy could be regenerated through a revival of the political wisdom and military principles of ancient Rome. Mussolini’s diatribes against bourgeois individualism and materialism could have been scripted by Machiavelli. He considered his native Florence, in particular, to be corrupted by excessive love of money and misguided moral scruples. Christianity was the chief culprit, since it rejected heroic ideals and blamed pride for the downfall of mankind. By scorning wars fought for glory, and promulgating a universal moral code of self-denial, the Christian religion restricted the free exercise of state power and elevated the value of privacy. As talent no longer found an outlet in public grandeur, it turned to personal enrichment. Like the fascists, Machiavelli wanted to recreate the Roman sense of communal solidarity, where private good enjoyed less esteem than public good.⁶⁵ Rome had been a glorious success, Florence was an abject failure. Rome had been noble, Florence was ignoble. Rome had been

⁶⁴ Mussolini, ‘The Doctrine of Fascism’, pp. 48, 40, 50, 44, 57.

⁶⁵ Machiavelli was clear that the Florentine emphasis on private good had led to social and political strife: ‘. . . there are two ways for Citizens to advance themselves to Reputation among their Neighbours, and they are, either publicly or privately. The publick way is, by gaining some Battle, surprising and distressing some Town, performing some Embassy carefully and prudently, or counselling their State wisely and with success; the private way is, by being kind to their Fellow-Citizens, by defending them

united and powerful, Florence was divided and weak. Comparative analysis, as conducted by Machiavelli, was an exercise in deflation. He did not despair, however. From the apparent pessimism of a cyclical view of history arises the optimistic assumption that decadence is never terminal. After winter comes spring, after corruption virtue. By imitating the past, we can redeem the present.

Concluding Remarks

It is not my intention to suggest a perfect congruence between Machiavelli's thought and that of the Italian fascists. He, after all, wanted to *extend* popular participation in government, taking as his exemplar the Roman *republic*, where a certain degree of political equality prevailed.⁶⁶ Mussolini, of course, wanted to *restrict* popular participation, confining it to the execution and celebration of decisions made by the fascist elite. In his context, Machiavelli was a progressive thinker, and his moral scepticism, along with his political realism, can be used to justify tolerance and pluralism as much as fascist totalitarianism. But we shall never gain a purchase on Machiavelli's legacy if we delete all that is striking and shocking in his thought — or turn him into a prophet of fashionable nostrums. The dark, authoritarian and militaristic element in Machiavelli's writings is too often submerged by commentators with a political agenda. While the temptation to interpret past thinkers in our own image is understandable, it should be resisted. Whether or not the creators of fascism were *directly* influenced by Machiavelli, their path to power was eased by their adherence to certain Machiavellian themes and attitudes that resonated within Italian culture: contempt for abstract universals such as 'rights' or 'justice', a corresponding readiness to defend the brutal logic of political necessity, scepticism about 'the people' and their powers of self-determination, and an image of Italy as a phoenix rising from the ashes of its glorious past.

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from the Magistrates, supplying them with Money, promoting them to Honours, and with Plays and publick Exhibitions to ingratiate with the People. This last way produces Parties and Factions, and as the Reputation acquired that way is dangerous and fatal, so the other way it is beneficial (if it sides with no Party) as extending to the Publick. And although among Citizens of such qualification there must needs be Emulations and Jealousies . . . they are rather a convenience than otherwise to a Government; for to make themselves more eminent and conspicuous than their Competitors they employ all their Faculties for its Advancement . . . The Emulations in Florence were always with Faction, and for that reason always were dangerous'. N. Machiavelli, *The History of Florence*, ed. H. Morley (London, 1891), pp. 326–7.

⁶⁶ See the Introduction to Book III of *The History of Florence*, where Machiavelli attributes Roman unity to the right of the people 'to share and communicate with the Nobility in the great Offices of the City' (by 'people' he meant citizens, not all residents, many of whom were slaves). The Florentine people, instead of settling for this 'primitive equality' of access, sought to exclude the nobility, thus causing the kind of conflict that could only be resolved 'in banishment and blood'. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–9.