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## Review

# Machiavelli's legacy: *The Prince* after 500 years

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As the title of the book indicates, this collection of essays pertains less to Machiavelli's intention when composing *The Prince* and more to the political and philosophical questions that have haunted modern thinkers for the past five centuries. It is precisely in terms of this legacy that scholars from a variety of approaches engage with Machiavelli's 'little book on principedoms' and consider the former Florentine secretary's political thought as infusing modern experience with a distinguishably *political* ethos. As the editor of the volume observes, Machiavelli is 'taken to instantiate the emergence of a distinctly modern understanding of the human condition and of politics, fostering a dramatic change in human self-understanding' (p. 2). In spite of their comprehensiveness, the eight essays included in this collection give prominence to a binary of themes: the alleged 'realism' relative to his theory of statecraft (the effectual truth of things), and Machiavelli's (1998) repudiation of moral and religious evaluative principles (the imagined republics and principalities) (p. 61).

Harvey Mansfield offers a thorough analysis of Machiavelli's (in)famous phrase *la verità effettuale della cosa*. For Mansfield, Machiavelli's 'notion of the effectual truth is an anticipation of, or a foundation for ... scientific reductionism', thereby replacing the Platonic reason – *thumos* hierarchical rendering of the soul with a 'necessity'–'animo' (spiritedness) duality in which 'the human whole is all there is' (pp. 20–23, 26). In that sense, Machiavelli's 'enterprise' is a political challenge to philosophy and religion by which the foundations of morality become 'ineffectual' (p. 26). Machiavelli's 'enterprise' thus supplies modernity with its *raison d'être*: a science of politics that exalts fact and calculation to the detriment of transcendence and contemplation.

In line with Mansfield's essay, Clifford Orwin's 'The Puzzle of Cesare Borgia' offers a compelling account of Machiavelli's 'Borgia case'. Orwin suggests that Borgia is simply the victim of his own 'sect', modern Christian religion (p. 163). Strauss' theologico-political problem thus resurfaces in Orwin's account of Cesare, where a proscription for worldly honor, glory and autonomy counters and challenges the appeal to the values of the divine (pp. 161–162). In that sense, Machiavelli's Cesare is less an 'ideal prince' and more a representative of the spiritual warfare

between conventional morality and Machiavelli's 're-evaluation of values'. I find both Mansfield's and Orwin's essays extremely thoughtful, but, perhaps, what is lacking in their treatment is any conclusive evidence that Machiavelli saw religion, specifically Christian religion, as the sole villain of the piece. By this I do not mean to suggest that religion is an unimportant subject; rather, it is their focus on a single theme that obscures the supposed message when applied to the larger Machiavelli's corpus.

Maurizio Viroli's 'The Redeeming Prince' paints a different portrait concerning the *verità effettuale*. Viroli conceives of freedom from domination and the representative of such an undertaking – the prince-redeemer – as the central (or rather last) argument of *The Prince*. Looking at Machiavelli's exhortation in Chapter 26, Viroli's essay sheds light on the virtues of the political man, political ethics and how *The Prince* was composed, from start to finish, 'following the rules of rhetoric' (pp. 34–35 and 40). For Viroli, Machiavelli is neither a realist nor a 'teacher of evil', but a political visionary whose grand project pertained to the liberation of Italy from foreign dominion.

In 'Machiavelli's Revolution in Thought', Catherine Zuckert focuses on Machiavelli's attitude toward conventional evaluative standards. Zuckert conceives of Machiavelli's 'revolution in thought' in terms of a 'combination of a democratic bias with skepticism about the effectiveness of moral virtue' (p. 57). For Zuckert, Machiavelli's art of government is thoroughly modern, lacking in the classical and civic humanist political values; but what is truly revolutionary in his political thought is an emphasis on democratic republicanism, or satisfying the people's desire not to be oppressed (p. 69). In that regard, modern political thought gleans from the teachings of Machiavelli that government should give the people a prominent place. Yet whether this political rationale, this alliance of interests is instrumental or otherwise is not fully explored by Zuckert (pp. 67–68). While Machiavelli is one of if not the first political theorists to depict the people's desire in rational and collective terms, it is not clear how Zuckert squares this 'revolution in thought' with Machiavelli's more conventional suggestions concerning, for instance, imperial expansionism and martial glory, or the problem of the 'unshackled multitude'.

In 'Machiavelli's Women', Arlene Saxonhouse looks at what she labels Machiavelli's 'ambiguity of form' and the 'shattering of the chain of being' (p. 72) in the Florentine's rendering of the female. Looking at personal letters, plays and political texts, Saxonhouse sees in the *virtù-fortuna* sexual opposition characteristic of Chapter 25 a rather complex metamorphosis between the male and the female, whereby feminine flexibility of character downplays the violent and rather static ethos of masculinity (pp. 81–82). Machiavelli's female characters are true representatives of the radical quality of his thought. They display sound political agency and 'an unlimited imagination unbound by any natural hierarchy' (pp. 83, 86). Missing from Saxonhouse's account is the incomplete poem *The Golden Ass* (*L'asino*), one of Machiavelli's most famous accounts of human metamorphosis as self-fashioning. *L'asino* provides a variety of antinomies – what von Vacano (2007) labeled 'the man-boy, the man-animal, and man-divinity' (p. 13) – that



expand Saxonhouse's thesis concerning Machiavelli's almost existential examination of political masculinity.

Two other essays, David Hendrickson's 'Machiavelli and Machiavellianism' and Thomas Cronin's 'Machiavelli's Prince: An Americanist Perspective', bring *The Prince* into conversation with modern political thought and contemporary issues in leadership studies. Both Hendrickson and Cronin suggest that Machiavelli's most outstanding contribution to political theory pertains to 'the discovery of the gap between profession and practice' (pp. 107, 137). In that regard, while Hendrickson finds Machiavelli's thought to be disconnected from Machiavellianism and modern theories of statecraft, Cronin contends that Machiavelli's advice to his readership counsels political flexibility and an 'economy of violence' (pp. 122–124; Wolin, 1960, pp. 220–224). Modern criticisms of Machiavelli's appeal to brute force, such as those ventured by Smith and Hume, relate less to the Florentine's immorality and more to political experience and human relations tout court (pp. 109–111). Both authors thus agree that Machiavelli's legacy is closer to an abnormal application of force than to an exercise of violence *juste pour le plaisir*.

David Wootton looks at the relationship between Machiavelli's theorizing and concepts of state, interest and reason of state and their respective objectives. Wootton asks whether these are Machiavelli's own creations or rather Machiavellian concepts developed at later historical stages with the advent of a soon-to-be constitutional state (p. 87). Wootton underscores the historical ambiguity of Machiavelli's political imagination and the extent to which his ideas may be cataloged as modern. 'Machiavelli's true legacy', Wootton claims, 'was to combine two seemingly irreconcilable ways of thinking about politics, to be both the supreme realist and always, even when writing a handbook for princes, an idealist' (p. 104). It is precisely for this reason that Wootton labels Machiavelli 'both the last of the ancients and the first of the moderns' (p. 104).

The tension between Machiavelli's realism and idealism remains a fundamental and unexplored issue in an otherwise laudable volume. Consider for instance, the words of Machiavelli's *compare*, Francesco Guicciardini, the Renaissance realist par excellence. 'How wrong it is to cite the Romans at every turn', Guicciardini lambasts Machiavelli. 'For any comparison to be valid, it would be necessary to have a city with conditions like theirs, and then to govern it according to their example. In the case of a city with different qualities, the comparison is as much out of order as it would be to expect a jackass to race like a horse' (Guicciardini, 1965, p. 69). Guicciardini criticizes Machiavelli for overly relying on ancient history, especially Roman, as the storehouse of exemplary political principles – with Machiavelli allowing himself to reconcile the ancient and the modern worlds as a suitable mode of political analysis. Certainly, Guicciardini's words pertain to republican Rome in the context of the *Discourses on Livy*, but they also represent the ideological distance between Guicciardini's own realism and what appears to be Machiavelli's 'philosophical idealism' (Beiner, 2011, p. 304). The theories of force, authority and statecraft



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– as well as the instrumentalities relative with their exercise – are indeed part of his legacy, but Machiavelli was also committed to a theoretical exercise (an almost sentimental moralism), which brings him closer to building ‘imagined republics and principalities’.

This volume is representative of outstanding Machiavelli scholarship – itself an unusual achievement; for that reason, this edited volume is likely to make an impact on the study of ‘Machiavelli’s Legacy’.

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