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NOT ECONOMICAL WITH THE TRUTH: MACHIAVELLI AS SIMPLE, DIRECT AND STRAIGHTFORWARD

The Prince (*De principatibus*, 1532). By Niccolo Machiavelli, trans. and ed. by Peter Bondanella. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. 184 pp. £3.99 pb.

Discourses on Livy (*Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, 1531). By Niccolo Machiavelli, trans., ed. and intr. by Harvey C Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 420 pp. £11.50 pb.

Machiavelli: a Man Misunderstood. By Michael White. London: Abacus, 2005. 345 pp. £8.99 pb.

TS Eliot (1943) famously wrote that 'Human kind cannot bear very much reality.' As poetry it's a superb *aperçu* but as a psychological observation it needs a little amending. Some people flee from reality; some either cope or struggle with it with the aid of fantasy, semi-consciousness and game-playing in varying proportions; but some, admittedly few, do seem able to take very large amounts of reality indeed. Since, at one level, enabling our clients to face reality is our job as psychotherapists, it is worth noting that such people tend to be admired, feared, suspected and hated, often all at the same time; perhaps it also needs to be noted that it has been known for those reactions to be transferred to the enablers as well.

Niccolo Machiavelli was an acceptor and observer of human reality on a scale few people have ever equalled, and all those responses were shown in him in his life and have been continually since his death.

The negative strands of those reactions to him are a great misfortune and loss to all the rest of us, for they have ensured that there are not many people who have any true or accurate understanding of just how much Machiavelli has to offer the study both of politics and political psychology. He looked on both without flinching, and understood exactly what they meant.

Born in 1469, in Florence, near the Ponte Vecchio, to a fairly impoverished middle-class family, his exceptional gifts were evident early. Although his father, Bernado, was a plebeian and had little direct influence, he did have the good fortune to be a member of one of the prestigious and powerful confraternities that were a feature of Florentine life. In the confraternities, people of all social classes could mix and talk freely, and it may be contacts and networking in that milieu that led to Niccolo being given his chance, although the exact circumstances are very unclear. Bernado's actual career is

not known; although he was a Doctor of Laws there is no record of his ever practising law; his only known income came from a family farm, and at some stage of his life he was seriously in debt. Yet, despite an apparent lack of money, he still managed to acquire a significant library.

However, when, in 1498, Florence was reordered as a republic after the fall (temporary as it transpired) first of the Medici, and then (permanently – since he was burned at the stake) Savonarola, Niccolo was, at the remarkably young age of 29, appointed as Second Secretary. This was the junior of the two secretaryships that were the apex of the Florentine civil service. The first dealt with external (foreign) affairs, the second with internal (everything else). So, to use a modern illustration, even allowing for the differences in population and the range of governmental activity, Machiavelli had been given a post not unlike that of Permanent Secretary to the Home Office, and of every other ministry apart from the Foreign Office and most of the Ministry of Defence, except that he got to do quite a bit of the Home Secretary's job directly. It was an appointment of major importance.

Machiavelli showed that he was more than equal to the task from the outset; so much so that he made friends and admirers rather than enemies – they came later – and was able to draw round him a fiercely loyal small team of assistants. That was just as well for, within a year, Soderini, the Gonfalonier-for-Life (i.e. President/Prime-minister) and other political leaders had recognized that his skills made him the ideal man to represent Florence on diplomatic missions. At first it was on relatively minor but still significant tasks, but his success in those rapidly led to much bigger roles.

Here he really came into his own, for he was the consummate diplomat, able to play a limited hand with great skill, and to gain results that, for others, would have seemed barely possible. This set the pattern of the next 14 years, which saw him sent on one mission after another, often spending more time away from Florence than at home, dealing with the matters that needed his attention through a stream of correspondence that combines great astuteness with earthy, even scatological, observation and self-confidence.

Military affairs also took up his time; he was responsible for Florence achieving a long-desired conquest of Pisa, driving things on from the front line. He recognized that the use of mercenaries, then the standard way of providing oneself with an army, was never going to be satisfactory, and he cajoled the city into founding in 1506 a citizen's army, for which he drew up the rules and did much of the recruiting. It was soon highly regarded, despite much initial scepticism.

All of these things would have given him a very easy opportunity to line his pockets but he seems not to have taken it, for he never became a rich man. That, combined with his obvious and great loyalty to Florence and its interests, shows just how cruel and distorted the standard view of him is. He was, in fact, the least Machiavellian of men. Yes, he could manoeuvre on the grand scale and far better than most; but it was never done for its own sake or for the blind pursuit of power. To use an unfashionable word, he was a patriot: it was service to the republic that motivated (and, yes, he was convinced of and committed to the benefits of republics over kingdoms and principalities). Although he wrote a treatise on how to be a successful prince, it was, as we shall see, only a small part of a larger work, and on its own represents nothing like his full opinions.

Neither this tireless work nor his clear ethics mean that he was in any degree a prig. Although he married and raised a family, in

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which he took pride, grieving deeply when children died young, his wife needed to be long-suffering and patient, for he was a womanizer on the grand scale, both having affairs and using prostitutes, as well as being an inveterate gambler and drinker.

His many trips and negotiations gave him ample opportunity to observe both the stratagems that worked and those that were futile, the role of character and personality in politics, the issues of timing and preparation, the limitations of all policy, and, hanging over all this the unavoidable element of sheer good- and bad- luck, or as he called it 'Fortuna', an ever-present and all-powerful Fortune, which can make or undo any plans.

It was an education that was to serve him very well, when, in 1512, his good fortune came to a shuddering halt. The complexities of European and Italian politics meant regime change for Florence and the return of the Medici, and Machiavelli was soon out of a job. Over time, he had acquired enemies, and when in 1513 somehow his name was added to a list of conspirators against the new rulers, he was imprisoned and tortured.

His hands were tied behind his back and then to a chain and pulley. Hoisted high up, he was then allowed to drop, until a few inches from the ground, the chain jerked him to a sudden halt, putting severe strains on his joints, sinews and muscles, thus causing indescribable pain. This, the *strappado*, was held to be a very effective method, and was therefore much in use. He underwent this on six separate occasions. His torturers marvelled that not once did he come even close to naming or implicating anyone, or making any confession of personal guilt. Unable to break him, the Medici left him to rot in prison, ignoring or even finding amusing his pleas for release. Only a general amnesty occasioned by the election of a Medici Pope brought about his release; but for that it is almost certain he would have died.

He retired to the family farm with no employment and little money, yet, although he lamented what life had brought him, he did not give up and thought about what might bring him back to public service. This was the period of his life when he began to write in earnest.

Although he is best known for *The Prince*, this is unfortunate, for it only really makes sense as part (and the slightest part at that) of a trilogy. Some scholars have even argued that *The Prince* is written partly tongue-in-cheek, almost as a satire of the Medici. That particular view doesn't accord either with what he himself said about it to his friends, or with its place in the overall trilogy, but it does point up that it is not *echt* Machiavelli. The other two parts are his *Discourses on Ten Books of Livy* and *The Art of War*.

The Art of War, though a substantial work, with some interesting insights particularly on the nature of the soldier and soldiering, is the part least likely to be found relevant today, since much space is given up to forms of warfare now effectively redundant. In *The Prince* he discusses primarily the nature of principalities, how they rise and fall, and the qualities needed by a prince who wants to succeed. However, in his *Discourses on Livy*, he chiefly discusses republics, and does so in greater depth and length. *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy* really need to be considered as a single work to be understood properly.

Despite their importance, they were little known in his lifetime, and his rehabilitation was in part achieved by his writing two satirical but hysterically funny plays: *Mandragola* in 1518 and *Clizia* in 1525. Both are tales of cuckoldry (the name of the central character of *Clizia* is Nicomaco (geddit?) – a wry comment on his own amorous weaknesses). While both had barbs for those who wanted

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to find them, the humour was such that both were smash hits, and ironically in his own lifetime he was better known as a comic playwright than he ever was as a political theorist. Both *The Prince* and the *Discourses* were published posthumously; during his lifetime they were known only to a few.

The Medici forgave him so far as to commission him in 1520 to write a history of Florence, a work into which he threw himself, although it remained unfinished at his death. What he really wanted was a return to political office; this came in 1525 when he was put in charge of rebuilding Florence's defences and sent on campaign. It was almost too late, for he died of peritonitis while once more away from home on duty in 1527, just after he learned that another change of government – back to a republic – had once more put him out of favour because he was thought to have monarchist and Medici sympathies.

That end almost sums up his fate – to be misunderstood and thought to believe the very opposite of what he did believe. The *Discourses* make plain where his real sympathies were:

> . . .there are and have been very many princes, and the good and wise among them have been few.
>
> . . .the Roman people . . . never served humbly not dominated proudly while the republic lasted incorrupt.
>
> . . .a prince unshackled from the laws will be more ungrateful, varying and imprudent than a people.
>
> . . .as to prudence and stability, I say that a people is more prudent, more stable and of better judgement than a prince. Not without cause may the voice of a people be likened to that of a God.
>
> . . .if all the disorders of peoples are reviewed, all the disorders of princes, all the glories of peoples, and all those of princes, the people will be seen to be by far superior in goodness and in glory . . . (*Discourses* I.58)

Yet having said all that, the very next sentence qualifies it:

> If princes are superior to people in ordering laws, forming civil lives, and ordering new statutes and orders, peoples are so much superior in maintaining things ordered that without doubt they attain the glory of those who order them. (*Discourses* I.58)

That gives an important clue to how Machiavelli sees political theorizing: it is important to describe what actually works, and to see that that is as complex and contradictory as human life itself. Machiavelli wants an ordered, stable and peaceful society in which people can prosper, but he knows that human ambition and greed are present in everyone, and that law comes from precisely that source:

> . . .good examples arise from good education, good education from good laws, and good laws from those tumults that many inconsiderately damn. For whoever examines their end well will find that they have engendered not any exile or violence to the common good but laws and orders in benefit of public freedom . . . (*Discourses* I.47)

He goes on:

> . . .I say that every city ought to have modes with which the people can vent its ambition, and especially those cities that wish to avail themselves of the people in important things . . . (*Discourses* I.47)

Actually, Machiavelli knows only too well, since he elsewhere points it out at length, just how disabling conflict can become, but his point here is that conflict is part of the nature of communal life, and if that is recognized and channelled it can be a source of strength and good government. It is perhaps worth noting that he sees class as being the most basic source of civic conflict.

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Since conflict is there, and needs to be managed, and since that makes every political structure inherently unstable, it is inherent in his view of things that all systems of government at some time or another will need correctives that come from outside that particular model. So the republic will sometimes need to act as autocratically as a prince, or may actually need one individual to take a princely role, and the prince who wants his dynasty to survive needs to borrow from republican ideas, or even decide to found a republic. For anyone who is committed to just one political model, it's here that Machiavelli can seem to be advocating nothing more than expediency or *realpolitik*.

Yet Machiavelli is being entirely consistent, because his view is rooted in human psychology. Having praised the strength of the collective, he knows exactly how it can get it wrong from ambition:

> . . .one goes behind someone who either is judged to be good through a common deception or is put forward by men who wish for the favour rather than the good of the collectivity (*Discourses* II.22)

or ignorance:

> . . .accidents also arise about which men who have not had great experience of things are easily deceived.

or because the situation itself contains a dilemma:

> . . .of all unhappy states the unhappiest is . . . brought to the extreme where it cannot accept peace or sustain war. Those are brought there who are offended too much by the conditions of peace . . . [or] . . . if they wish to make war must . . . be left as prey for the enemy. (D II.23)

or bad counsel, intrigue, rumour, economic privation, and so forth.

So there are times when if something needs doing, it has to be done by a prince (i.e. dictatorially). However, princes have their own troubles to contend with:

> . . .a prince must be prudent enough to know how to escape the infamy of those vices that would take the state away from him. (*The Prince* XV)

> . . .he should proceed in such a manner . . . that too much trust may not render him incautious, nor too much suspicion render him insufferable . . . (*The Prince* XVII)

Indeed, the prince is always on his own:

> . . .men always turn out bad for you, unless some necessity makes them act well. Therefore, it is to be concluded that good advice, from whomever it may come, must arise from the prudence of the prince, and not the prince from good advice. (*The Prince* XXIII)

Throughout *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, there is consistent praise most for those princes who have behaved most in republican ways, or indeed have founded republics – most notably by his saying that the Roman republic is the model for the wise prince. So from republic to prince, from prince to republic. Machiavelli knows the strengths and weaknesses of both in practice, plainly prefers the republic, but knows there are times when only a prince will do.

Anyone who thinks that Machiavelli taught that the ends justify the means has badly misunderstood his message. He has a constant end in mind: a stable and successful polity. He knows, however, that one set of means is not enough, and that it is the nature of mankind itself that makes it so. What he wants is for us to observe the totality of psychology and politics and bring them into close relationship with each other. It's a startlingly modern message, and one that is entirely apposite for the readers of this journal.

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Because he sees that things are complex, following his thought is not always easy. He sets out a principle, and backs it up with example both from ancient time and from the contemporary world around him, citing his own involvement when appropriate. He moves on to the next idea and does likewise, but as the argument develops the later ideas subtly colour and alter our understanding of the earlier ones. It is only when one sees the thing as a whole that one realizes what a human, humane and humanistic writer he is – and what a realistic one.

I have mentioned elsewhere in this journal (McGuire, 2006) the idea of Optative Fallacy: deriving an 'is' from an 'ought', a view of how the world is because that is how one wants it to be or thinks it ought to be. Machiavelli is utterly free of that fallacy: he looks on the world unflinchingly, describes what he sees of both the goodness and evil of human beings in their political life, and sets out a way of managing politics that can cope with both, and foster the best. He does so because that is the way to achieve the best:

> . . .since my intention is to write something for anyone who understands it, it seemed more suitable for me to search after the effectual truth of the matter rather than its imagined one. Many writers have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen nor known to exist in reality. For there is such a distance between how one lives and how one ought to live, that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done achieves his downfall rather than his preservation. A man who wishes to profess goodness at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good. Therefore, it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain himself to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge or not to use it according to necessity. (*The Prince* XV)

Too many readers have seen the phrase about learning how not to be good and condemned Machiavelli as utterly unprincipled. They could hardly be more wrong. It is because humanity has its unprincipled side, says Machiavelli, that we should learn about it, discover how to handle it, and realize that this may not always be pleasant knowledge. Which rather brings one back to the opening reference to what TS Eliot said. Machiavelli saw 'not being good' rather differently:

> . . .a prince, so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal, ought not to mind the reproach of cruelty; because with a few examples he will be more merciful than those who, through too much mercy, allow disorders to arise, from which follow murders or robberies; for these are wont to injure the whole people . . . (*The Prince* XXII)

For the modern reader, once one gets through the way in which Machiavelli's thought process is set out, then his insight can be startling. Talking about how to invade a country where customs and lifestyle are different from your own, he is clear that you need to make it plain that you are there to stay – preferably by colonization – and certainly not to indicate you won't be around for long. However, if you won't do that, then do the initial job properly:

> . . .the injury that is to be done to a man ought to be of such a kind that one does not stand in fear of revenge. (Machiavelli, 1953, Ch. 3)

Apart from avoiding immediate retaliation, this makes it cheaper and easier to stay. In avoiding costs, however, do not rely on locally recruited forces:

> But in maintaining armed men there in place of colonies one spends much more, having to consume on the garrison all income from the state, so that the acquisition turns into a loss, and many more are exasperated, because the whole state is injured; through the shifting of the garrison up and down all become acquainted with

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> hardship, and all become hostile, and they are enemies who, whilst beaten on their own ground, are yet able to do hurt. For every reason, therefore, such guards are as useless as a colony is useful. (Machiavelli, 1953, Ch. 3)

It is important either to make allies of the surrounding states, or see to it that they won't interfere:

> Again, the prince who holds a country differing in the above respects ought to make himself the head and defender of his powerful neighbours, and to weaken the more powerful amongst them, taking care that no foreigner as powerful as himself shall, by any accident, get a footing there; for it will always happen that such a one will be introduced by those who are discontented, either through excess of ambition or through fear, as one has seen already . . . And the usual course of affairs is that, as soon as a powerful foreigner enters a country, all the subject states are drawn to him, moved by the hatred which they feel against the ruling power. So that in respect to these subject states he has not to take any trouble to gain them over to himself, for the whole of them quickly rally to the state which he has acquired there. He has only to take care that they do not get hold of too much power and too much authority, and then with his own forces, and with their goodwill, he can easily keep down the more powerful of them, so as to remain entirely master in the country. (Machiavelli, 1953, Ch. 3)

Should you fail to follow these basic precepts, then:

> . . .he who does not properly manage this business will soon lose what he has acquired, and whilst he does hold it he will have endless difficulties and troubles. (Machiavelli, 1953, Ch. 3)

One can't help wondering whether George Dubya and Tony B (is it too bizarre or naughty to think of them as the political world's Gilbert and George?) might have been wise to take note of these rules – for they've broken every single one of them and reaped the consequences that Machiavelli predicted.

Or to take just one more modern example, which female leader of recent times might usefully have heeded the following?

> . . .For one can generally say this about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, simulators and deceivers, avoiders of danger, and greedy for gain. While you work for their benefit they are completely yours, offering you their blood, their property, their lives . . . when the need to do so is far away. But when it draws nearer to you, they turn away. The prince who relies entirely upon their words comes to ruin, finding himself stripped naked of other preparations. (*The Prince* XVII)

She rather thought she was loved, and when she realized she wasn't, only then discovered that they'd stopped being afraid of her. It will be interesting in due course, unless *Fortuna* intervenes, to watch Gordon B, who certainly knows he's not loved, has well set out to be feared, but perhaps thinks too much that he's esteemed.

Mansfield and Tarcov's edition of the *Discourses* and Bondanella and Viroli's of the *The Prince* are both eminently readable, and both contain introductions setting out the structure of Machiavelli's thought in more depth than is possible here. Michael White has produced a popular biography of Machiavelli, highly accessible to the general reader. While the more pedantic academic reader may bridle that White simplifies the background history of Italian politics, he has succeeded well in bringing to life the extraordinary man that Niccolo Machiavelli was. In different but complementary ways, the two introductions and White's biography serve him and us well.

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Alec McGuire
34 Gledhow Wood Road
Leeds
LS8 4BZ

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