

# *The* OPEN COURT

Devoted to the Science of Religion,  
the Religion of Science, and the Extension  
of the Religious Parliament Idea

FOUNDED BY EDWARD C. HEGELER

JULY 1928

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VOLUME XLII    NUMBER 866

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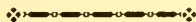
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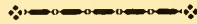
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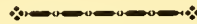


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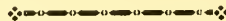
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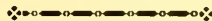
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## THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE MACHIAVELLIAN POLITICS

BY BIRGER R. HEADSTROM

ALTHOUGH Machiavelli's political theories were of little practical value and exercised no significant influence on the development of subsequent political thought, they are of interest partly because they serve as an admirable mirror of the political tendencies of his time, partly because they serve as the expression of a philosophy which Machiavelli was able to derive from the diplomatic life in which he had become involved, and partly because they served to indicate the main features on which modern scientific politics was to be founded.

A man of thought rather than one of action, Machiavelli's wide experiences as a diplomatist afforded him innumerable opportunities for the study of men and things, and especially of the methods by which politics were at that time practiced. His observations of the contemporary events, in which he played a part, revealed to him the utter disregard of any moral discipline, and the state of decadence into which human nature had fallen. This sort of affairs, for him, boded ill for the future Italian state, and being a patriot at heart he recognized only too clearly the need for such measures as would ultimately bring about the salvation of his beloved country. Inspired by this sublime purpose and influenced by the spirit of the times, he, like his contemporary thinkers, went back to the writers of antiquity for counsel and aid with which he could promote his end. In all of his writings on important points, he appears to be under the influence of the Greek historian Polybius, who, in his own turn, looked back to the elder Greek thinkers' conception of the course of the development of States. But unfortunately for the development of his views, Machiavelli's reaction to the stratagem and intrigue, malice and cruelty, by which means political decisions were deter-

mined at his time, resulted in a deep-rooted cynicism which made it impossible for him to promote the rebirth of the antique faith in human nature. In the introduction to the fifth book of his Florentine history, he says of the history of Italy in the fifteenth century "that the rule of the Italian Princes could be praised neither for grandeur nor courage, although their history in other respects may seem as considerable when we see how many noble and great people could be restrained by their arms, however weak and ill-managed." His experiences of life led Machiavelli to the inevitable conclusion that prudence and power are the only qualities necessary for a statesman. And when later he became a victim of the political vicissitudes which marked that period in Italian history, and he was forced to remain in comparative privacy, his cynicism, in continual conflict with his inner nature, found a bitter expression, which inconsistent with his purpose and aims served not only to reveal him in a strange light but equally as well to lead to so much confusion and speculation concerning his character and writings.

Had Machiavelli met his political misfortunes with greater dignity, his writings might perhaps have been conceived in a higher style. As it was, they are the expression of views partly the reflection of his experiences and partly the reflection of his own emotions, and as such are difficult to understand, let alone to estimate justly. Few subjects of literary discussion have caused more controversy than the purpose of his celebrated book *Il Principe*. It has been viewed as a manual for tyrants, like the memoirs of Tiberius, read so diligently by Domitian; it has been considered as a refined irony upon tyranny; while others have accepted it as having been constructed for the sole purpose of procuring the favor of the Medici. Whatever may have been Machiavelli's intent, its purpose is conveyed accurately by neither interpretation. Although he was led to attribute more importance to individual freedom and disregard of others in politics, he was no doubt influenced in entertaining this view by the principle of the Medicis, whose power he had not only witnessed but felt, and whose power had always been exercised in employing such means as would satisfy the desired ends. It is primarily because of this view that he has been upbraided for writing with the purpose of ingratiating himself with the Medicis,—an erroneous opinion, for besides there being actually a project of investing Guilianio de' Medici with the sovereignty

of the Romagna, he was extremely lax in pressing it upon their attentions. While on the other hand, had his object been satire, he would have been more poignant; in only one instance, in the short chapter on the Papal monarchy, is his contemptuous irony revealed.

Yet, it is certain that Machiavelli had a definite end at heart, and around which all his thoughts centered—this was the unity and greatness of Italy. He was too sincere a Republican (this is evident from his advice to the Medici on the subject of the Florentine constitution) to desire the prevalence of tyranny throughout Italy; rather his aim was to show how to construct a principality capable of expelling the foreigner and restoring the independence of Italy. And finally, there was constantly before him a vision,—an ideal of human health, power and wisdom, which was to raise men above the wretchedness with which he felt himself surrounded, and the blight which the medieval Church had inflicted upon human nature. Although he himself was a poet, and loved a life of pleasure, the aesthetic Renaissance failed to suffice him; it was a Renaissance of power and greatness that he demanded. “When I consider,” he says in the introduction to book I of the *Discorsi*, “what veneration is shown to antiquity, how often it happens (to say nothing of other instances) that an immense price is given by the curious for a fragment of an old statue either to adorn their cabinets, or to serve as a model for statuaries to copy after in works of that kind; and what pains those artists take to come up to their pattern; on the other hand, when I observe that the great and illustrious examples of several ancient kingdoms and republics which are recorded in history, that the noble deeds of former kings, generals, citizens, legislators, and others, who have consecrated their labours to the service and glory of their country, are now rather admired than imitated, and indeed, so far from being followed by any one, that almost everybody is indifferent about them to such a degree, that there seem to be hardly any traces left amongst us of the virtues of the ancients, I cannot help being both surprised and concerned about it.”

Unfortunately for Machiavelli it was the tragedy of his fate that great ends so often had to yield to multiplicity of means, for he was possessed to such a degree by the thought that it was useless to have an end, however noble, without the means to attain it that he finally forgot the end in the means, or omitted altogether to inquire whether the means which he admired could promote the

great ends which he regarded as the highest. So disheartened by the power of the means, he finally ended by attributing value to them, and apart from the ends which were to consecrate them. A true child of the Renaissance, he admired the development of power, regardless of the direction in which this power might manifest itself. And though there are utterances of his against a purely aesthetic Renaissance, he, strangely enough, introduced it within a sphere where everything depended on the determination of power by ends. His contradiction on this point—which constantly appears in his writings and more especially in his *Il Principe*—was the fate of his life, and the fault of his entire system,—a fault which has often caused him to be misjudged. For when the Medici were defeated, after the taking of Rome by the Imperial troops in 1527, he was regarded as a renegade by his own countrymen who refused to accept his services in the restoration of the free constitution. This embittered his last days to such a degree that a contemporary was moved to say of him after his death: "I believe his own position pained him; for at heart he loved freedom more than most men. But it tormented him to think that he had compromised himself with Pope Clement."

Machiavelli's profound study of the antique writers continually led him to compare the old with the new, ancient with modern events, and to discover, in the differences which this comparison brought to light, the causes of these multiple differences which he felt explained, to some extent, the thoughts of men and their actions. The basis of all these differences he found lay in the great contrast between the ancient and medieval conceptions of life, and through all his works this central theme is evident in the form of a comparison between ancient and Christian morals. On this point, Machiavelli can be regarded as the most conscious representative of the opposition to medievalism.

It was regarded during the Middle Ages as the duty of the State to assist men in the attainment of their highest goal—blessedness in the world to come. And in this, the Prince, upon whom devolved the charge of maintaining peace, was supposed to assist. This was the view considered in Thomas Aquinas' conception of life, while Machiavelli, on the contrary, regarded the national State as possessing its end in itself. In its internal stability and external extension, is everything summarized. And in this view, he thought not of an



ideal state, but of definite, actually given States. "But since it is my object to write what shall be useful to whoever understands it; it seems to me better to follow the real truth of things than an imaginary view of them. For many Republics and Princedoms have been imagined which were never seen or known to exist in reality. And the manner in which we live, and that in which we ought to live, are things so wide asunder, that he who quits the one to betake himself to the other is more likely to destroy than to save himself; since he who proposes to himself to act up to a perfect standard of goodness among all men alike must be ruined among so many who are not good. It is necessary, therefore, for a Prince who desires to maintain his position to use or not to use his goodness as occasion may require." (*Il Principe*, chap. xv). And in further agreement with the above: "When the entire safety of our country is at stake, no consideration of what is just or unjust, merciful or cruel, praiseworthy or shameful, must intervene. On the contrary, every other consideration being set aside, that course alone must be taken which preserves the existence of the country and maintains its liberty (*Discorsi* 1,26)." In other words, he who cannot turn a deaf ear to the notions of morality should not aspire to become a ruler.

Whether Machiavelli considered justice and love of honour, which sometimes serve to hinder the requisite political actions, to be real or imaginary virtues has never been made clear, although in isolated passages he mentions attributes which appear to be virtues even though they may cause the destruction of princes. But he did not pursue this point further, unfortunately, for the problem as to the relation between the ethics of the private citizen and the statesman was of the greatest importance. Is there a difference in principle between two kinds of virtues? Here Machiavelli was guilty of an ambiguity; but it appears as though he would transcend the opposition between good and evil, even though in reality he was only aiming at a new determination of worth, that is, at a new application of the concepts of good and evil. This new determination of worth was vague and uncertain since the relation of the power to the end which it is to subserve remained indefinite. Machiavelli's aesthetic admiration of the development of power was so pronounced that it failed to take into account the thought of the end which consecrated it. He blamed men because they displayed no

energy, either for good or evil; they do not fear small sins, but they shrink back before crimes on a grand scale "whose magnitudes would have blotted out the shame." When Pope Julius, the Second, entered Perugia in the year 1505, accompanied by his cardinals but without an army, for the purpose of disposing Baglioni, it was assuredly no moral consideration that deterred Baglioni from seizing and overpowering the rash Pope and thereby not only freeing himself of his deadly enemy but also winning great riches and teaching the Princes of the Church a lesson for the future, for Baglioni was a man who had no scruples and to whom crime and murder were incidental to the attainment of ambition. "The inference to be drawn was that men know not how to be splendidly wicked or wholly good, and shrink in consequence from such crimes as are stamped with an inherit greatness or disclose a nobility of nature." (*Discorsi* 1,27).

Machiavelli's comparison of his own time with that of antiquity revealed to him an apparent decadence in the integrity of mankind; and led him to attack his own contemporaries, blaming them for their meanness, feebleness and fearfulness, and for the condition of things, which was in such an ugly contrast to the glory of the ancients. This declination he attributed to their education, the effects of which are debilitation and despondency; while to education religion is closely associated. Among the ancients, honour, greatness of mind, physical strength and health were so highly estimated that their religions invested mortals, who had earned renown as great generals, heroes, or lawgivers, with divine authority. Furthermore, their religious ceremonies were not only splendid, but often combined with bloody sacrifices which were calculated to foster in men's hearts a disposition to fierceness. To Machiavelli, his own religion destined the opposite: Instead, it transferred the highest good to another world, while insinuating that the honour of this world is to be despised. It glorified humility and self-denial; and placed the quiet life of contemplation on a higher scale than the practical life which concerns itself with external matters. And should it demand strength in men, it was the strength to suffer, rather than to accomplish. Such morality, according to Machiavelli, made men weak and offered the explanation why the world had fallen into the hands of reckless and violent men who had discovered that most men are rather inclined, in the hope of future blessedness, to endure offenses than to resist them. (*Discorsi* 2.2).

For him, religion was essentially an instrument by which the lawgiver was able to uphold the law and thereby preserve the stability and security of the state. The wise man, able to foresee much that the multitude could not anticipate, and consequently would not believe, by invoking the gods to sanction his necessary laws would be able to effect his ends by deluding his people into believing him the agent of divine authority. The history of Lycurgus and Solon attested the truth of this; while to Machiavelli a classical example is the case of Savonarola, who gained his great influence over his countrymen because, rightly or wrongly, they believed that he held immediate intercourse with God. And to cite another instance, did not Rome owe her power and greatness to the religious institutions of Numa? The national religion is a firm foundation for the preservation of a state, and every wise prince must protect it, even though he might personally regard it as a delusion. (*Discorsi* 1;11,12).

It was a principle of Machiavelli's—and one on which he laid great stress—that institutions and forms of government—religious as well as political—should at periodic intervals be regenerated by a “return to first principles.” The passing of time brings of necessity additions and modifications which might exercise an evil effect on the true source of their power; and it is then that it must be remembered the manner in which they began and in what they originated. Such an occasion may be afforded by external misfortunes, as at the time when Rome was reborn after the Gallic war; or by fixed institutions such as the Roman tribunes and censors; or again by leaders whose personalities serve as examples to others, as when St. Francis and St. Dominic saved the Church from the destruction by which it was threatened by holding up to men's eyes the original Christian exemplar. (*Discorsi* 3;1).

This idea, a renewal to original principles, and which he extended within the sphere of religion, was the expression of the most important of all the events which he experienced, and though a brilliant one it exhibited the limitations of the wisdom he believed himself able to systematize. The Reformation had turned the course of spiritual development into new channels, and no politician who regarded spiritual power as a means, without having any deeper understanding of its value, was in no position to exercise any lasting influence on the course of events. Machiavelli would not under-

stand that by means of the "renewal" entirely new forces could be brought into play, principally because he lacked in the discernment of hidden causes. Dominated and blinded by his formal conception of politics as a game of intrigue and a struggle for power, he could not recognize the development of practical interests—trade and commerce, mechanics, agriculture—and the manner in which these interests, and the new social stratification which they represented, served to determine the politics of modern times. His politics failed primarily because they were not associated with the great ideas by means of which the creative forces continually at work find expression. He lost reality because he looked for it only upon the surface.

Yet this fault can be partly explained by his efforts to understand history. To him, it seemed that the progress of human development is merely a repetition of events; and that what applied at a former time will equally as well apply at a later. He failed to appreciate the fact that the new circumstances could give rise to new and different conditions for which history made no allowance. In dwelling on the causes which he discerned or believed himself to discern, he overlooked those which are constantly promoting the evolution of progress and which find expression in innumerable ways. Yet, he entertained a suspicion of them and gave intimation to his thoughts in asserting, like his contemporary Pomponazzi, the principle of natural causes. It was also a cardinal error of his to deny a capacity of improvement in human nature and to assume that mankind would be essentially the same in all ages. It is only too true that the standards of righteousness have been considerably raised since his time; and though the conditions of modern society are adverse to the Machiavellian policy this should import no criticism of his morality. Equally as well, his doctrine that the end justifies the means, as illustrated by Mohammed Ali's massacre of the Mamelukes, cannot be fairly judged, nor can he be severally criticised for this view, because subsequent history offers innumerable instances of the permissibility of a reprehensible act where the safety of the state lay in the balance. In spite of the many criticisms that can be addressed to him, he deserves the credit and glory of being the founder not only of modern scientific politics but of comparative ethics as well. He indicated the main features and made it possible for his successors to follow the path he had shown them.