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Classic Book Notes #21

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What Were Machiavelli's True Motives?

"...verita effetuale della cosa..." [1]

Editor's note: As the Pennsylvania primary election approaches on April 23, following is the first in a series of Classic Book Notes on politics by JES Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth. It first appeared as Book Notes #21 in August 2020.

Dr. Roth is also at work on a written tribute to the late Rev. Charles Brock and will lead a special program celebrating Rev. Brock's life and work on Wednesday, May 22 at the JES.

For more information about that event, including how to register, click here

To revisit Rev. Brock's 2022 Global Summit lecture, "John Milton, Abigail Adams, and Thomas Jefferson: Revolution Yesterday and Tyranny Today?" when he received the Thomas B. Hagen Dignitas Award, click here

He invented political science, for which he has never been forgiven. Whether as a noun or an adjective, his very name has become synonymous with the ruthless exercise of power.

"*Machiavel:* noun; archaic – a person compared to Machiavelli for favoring expediency over morality." [2]

"*Machiavellian:* adjective. of, like, or befitting Machiavelli … characterized by subtle or unscrupulous cunning, deception, expediency, or dishonesty: He resorted to **Machiavellian** tactics in order to get ahead." [3]

As Patrick Boucheron notes, "A figurative sense is immediately tacked on (to any use of his name): 'Any statesman lacking principles.'" [4]

This is not new.

Elizabeth I was called a *machiavel*. "Within fifty years of (Machiavelli's) death, ***The Prince*** had taken its place on the Catholic Church's Index of Forbidden Books as a work of the devil" and "a few years later…a brilliant Jesuit … Giovanni Botero … invented the concept of 'reason of state,' a concept immediately ascribed to Machiavelli, since it suggests that the state knows no law or requirement other than self-preservation." [5]

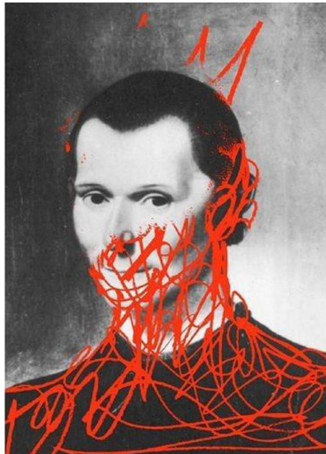
Nor is it old.

In 2009 through 2010, I hosted a discussion series on the theme "Leadership: The Moral Challenge." Participants read works ranging from ***Antigone*** to ***Things Fall Apart*** to ***The Big Sleep***, which, by the way, is no simple detective story, but a moral tale that asks of any professional, "What ***wouldn't*** you do for a client?" The series concluded with Machiavelli's ***The Prince***, perhaps both an obvious and a bad choice. Obvious for all the obvious reasons, primarily its legendary but erroneous reputation as the tyrant's handbook, a veritable checklist of how to dominate.

Bad because it short-circuited conversation. There was a nun in the group, who was, or is, herself a bit of a *Machiavellian*, the explaining of which would require another essay. Regardless, in need of an irony infusion, she adamantly argued that Machiavelli was an immoral espouser of evil who advocated that the ends justify the means and, that, in general, if he is not ***the***, then he is one of the primary causes of the great malignancy that is the modern world.

So, having been continuously read for almost half a millennium, having inspired both high praise and bitter invective, who was Machiavelli?

And, what did he say that knotted so many shorts?



In a marvelous little book of less than 150 pages, a series of poignant vignettes adapted from a series of talks for French public radio, ***Machiavelli: The Art of Teaching People What to Fear***, Patrick Boucheron attempts to answer both of those questions. Author of 12 books and editor of a number of others, Boucheron is a professor of history at the College de France, having previously taught at the *Ecole normale de superieure* and the University of Paris. Internationalist in perspective, Boucheron is interested in "the use of words to wound others." [6]

The subtitle is sometimes translated as *"The Man Who Taught the People What They Have to Fear."* The slight variance in the two translations, however, hints at the book's dual purposes. First, Boucheron provides a pithy, mini-biography of Machiavelli's personality. Although he follows the chronology of Machiavelli's life, he is not interested in a Chernowian-compendium detailing Machiavelli's every twitch. Rather, Boucheron seeks to cast light on the tonalities of incident and thought that shaped Machiavelli's world view, from his Tuscan youth to his early success as a Florentine official, then as a diplomat to the Papacy in Rome, to the courts of France's Louis XII, and then the Spanish monarch. Upon the Medici's successful return to power, Boucheron *"visits"* Machiavelli in his banishment from politics and his retirement to his farm and library.

Boucheron's greater task, however, is to rescue Machiavelli from *Machiavellianism*, that after the fact recasting – reductionism perhaps more precise – of Machiavelli's observations on principalities and republics and those who would govern them into a sort of ***"Despotism for Dummies"*** handbook. As Jenifer Szalai writes in ***The New York Times***, Machiavelli has suffered the same fate as George Orwell. Attempting to expose tyranny and its methods, Orwell instead has become a synonym for tyranny, i.e. "Orwellian."

So, too, Machiavelli. [7]

Like Orwell, was Machiavelli sending an alert? Occupying that indeterminate, malleable, shifting ground upon which politics competes, politics being the competition for control of that very ground, Machiavelli does not prescribe. Unlike some management books alleging to be in his spirit, [8] Machiavelli is not some esoteric executive coach laying down rules for how to dominate. He simply describes what he believes effective and ineffective leaders do or fail to do, pointing out that the effective (read those who survived) did this and not that.

Machiavelli's relationship to his subject is not normative. He does not speak in nouns. He modifies, draws attention to, describes, and analyzes the actions – tactics – dictated by *politics*. It is *politics* and the ground upon which they are disputed – the culture within which they are contested – that interests Machiavelli.

He is neither moral nor immoral. He may be amoral. As Boucheron notes, "To Machiavelli, the question of good and evil is essentially adverbial: the prince is not called upon to do good or evil; he does well or ill what he has to do." [9] In a famous passage in ***The Prince***, Machiavelli says "...there are two ways of contesting, the one by the law, the other by force; the first method is proper to men, the second to beasts; but because the first is frequently not sufficient, it is necessary to have recourse to the second." [10]

Because people are not angels, but base creatures, or, more exactly, creatures capable of baseness, a leader must "know how to make use of both natures." [11] Forced to adopt the ways of the beast, a leader "ought to choose the fox and the lion; because the lion cannot defend himself against the snares and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, it is necessary to be a fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves." [12]

Regarding the morality of which, one might fairly reply, "Isn't that splitting a very fine hair?"

To which, smiling that thin smile in the most famous of his portraits, Machiavelli would reply, "No and Yes." *No*, because one can choose not to seek to govern, not to be a prince, not to be a leader. If, however, one seeks to enter into the contest, if one seeks to be involved in politics, then Yes, for this is how politics are contested. As Boucheron says, "Machiavelli defined the intellectual's task as a kind of resoluteness toward truth – being unmoved by the dazzle of words to 'go straight toward the actual truth of the matter' (*andare drieto alla verita effetuale della corsi*)." [13]

As the epigraph with which this ***Book Notes*** begins, Machiavelli sought to tell it, in that old 1960s phrase, "like it is." He sought to describe politics, the pursuit, and exercise of power, not as one might wish it to be, not as one might fantasize it to be, but as it is actually contested – ***"the actual truth of the matter."*** One has three choices (perhaps they have variations): 1) one can choose not to contest and to be dominated; 2) one can choose to contest by

another set of principles, e.g. passive resistance, but if one does, do not be surprised if martyrdom is your fate; or, 3) one can choose to contest as politics is actually conducted. If one chooses the latter, then Machiavelli simply describes the conduct of those who have unsuccessfully contested and lost and those who have successfully contested and prevailed.

Regardless of the poetry of Machiavelli's language – he is an eloquent stylist – his bluntness unsettles. When discussing Machiavelli, it is ***The Prince*** most often mentioned, most often quoted, particularly by those who have never read it. But as citizens of a republic, it is his ***Discourses on the First Ten of Titus Livy***, most often cited as ***Discourses on Livy*** or simply ***Discourses,*** that should interest us most. Although he also discusses contemporary politics, i.e. Florentine politics of the 15th and 16th century, Machiavelli comments on Rome's abandoning monarchy and establishing a republic.

It was cited frequently by America's founders, particularly John Adams. In his ***Defense of the Constitutions of the Governments of the United States***, Adams thought the world much in Machiavelli's debt "for the revival of reason in matters of government." [14] Commenting on Machiavelli's ***Florentine Histories***, "Adams quotes Machiavelli to the effect that 'the most useful erudition for republicans is that which exposes the causes of discord; by which they may learn wisdom and unanimity from the examples of others.'" [15]

If Locke is right – Machiavelli predates Locke – still, if Locke is right and a republic is a government whose legitimacy rests upon the consent of the governed, then all citizens are in some sense governors. They need to know how to exercise the power of citizenship in republican politics, which, of course, means they need to know how to exercise power.

And the aim of that exercise is to balance competing interests, for, in a republic, no one power can be permitted to predominate over all others, or the republic perishes.

As a result, Machiavelli ruminates at length about the requirements of citizenship in a republic, about the "causes of discord in a republic" resulting from competing interests between and among those who contest to govern, about what it is they seek, and, most importantly, what it is they fear. For a republic survives, Machiavelli suggests, by balancing fears so that no group fears that its interests will be completely abandoned which requires that no other group's interests be permitted to completely predominate.

Republics must, almost by definition, exist in the center, at the point of equilibrium of its members competing interests. It was that center that Yeats feared would not hold. In our time, in an America divided by competing interests about what it means to be an American, it is that center that has been

shriven. And how is that center approached? Through language describing and defining its values. When language breaks down, Machiavelli teaches, and can no longer articulate the common values binding competing interests, then republics totter and devolve into a competition between competing interests.

It becomes a contest not of values, but of wills.

Boucheron quotes J.G.A. Pocock defining such a moment in the life of a republic as the "***Machiavellian moment*** when there is daylight between a republic and its values" because "the available political language is no longer able to make sense of current developments." [16] Why? Because it has lost contact with "the actual truth of the matter," succumbed to accusations of "fake news" and an Orwellian inability either to think or to speak clearly about its condition.

It has succumbed to image over reality.

Or more precisely, as in "reality television," it has succumbed to image masquerading as reality. Having come untethered from both reality and its foundational values, a republic's citizens are caught between having to discover (rediscover?) "the art of coming to terms over our (their) disagreements or look instead for that skill the dominated have of recognizing the science of their domination." [17]

In short, they must learn the tactics employed by those who would dominate in order to counter their domination.

Enter Machiavelli, for as Boucheron notes "That's why, all through history, he's been a trusted ally in evil times." Why? Because "he was always a scout, always in the forefront, we must read him not in the present but in the future tense." [18]

Why? Because he understood despotism and those who would be despots, which is why "interest in Machiavelli always revives in the course of history when the storm clouds are gathering … if we're reading him today, it means we should be worried. He's back: wake up." [19]

If "woke," you might want to revisit last week's ***Book Notes, How Democracies Die and On Tyranny.*** They provide practical insights into how to navigate a *Machiavellian moment*.

But, as Boucheron reveals, Machiavelli was even more than that – he was more than an early warning system. He was a brilliant seeker of truth. In a wonderful mini-chapter of three and one-half pages, Boucheron explores Machiavelli's adaptation to understanding politics Lucretius's ***De rerum naturae*** (*On the Nature of Things*) in which there is no creator, where nature constantly reinvents itself, and freedom is possible. For if things always produce an image

obscuring their true nature, then to govern, or “to learn how not to be governed” requires seeing past the veil of appearances to the realities acting behind the veil in order to create a politics “based on the art of managing our dissensions without too much violence, on coming to an agreement over our disagreements.” [20] Which is to say that maintaining the centrist equilibrium in a world in constant flux is a continuous adaptation to changing circumstances.

In the vignette “The Political Art of Taking a Position,” Boucheron explores Machiavelli’s use of the archer metaphor from classical rhetoric. Like an archer, to hit a moving target, aim at a spot above or before it “not to shoot beyond it, but to hit it.” Aim high, emulate those who occupy the high ground, for they know the exercise of power, but do not lose sight of the people. The people upon whom power is exercised can teach you the nature and techniques of that power so that it can be turned back upon itself. [21]

For, “As Hannah Arendt has rightly noted,” Machiavelli is “the spiritual father of revolution in the modern sense,” because great modern revolutions originated as “restorations or renewals,” in the Machiavellian meaning of “renovations,” movements that return the body politic to its origins and thus save it from corruption and death.”[22]

How? By attending to the people and “allowing them to draw close to the reality of power, so that they can see things close up and not be fooled by general ideas.” [23]

There is so much in Patrick Boucheron’s short book ***Machiavelli: The Art of Teaching People What to Fear*** I fear in sharing it with you I might write a review longer than the book itself.

Read it.

See Machiavelli for what he was – a poet of history forcing us to open our eyes “to the actual truth of the thing.” But also discover Machiavelli the teller of ribald jokes, Machiavelli the playwright in ***Mandragola,*** and Machiavelli the champion of the liberal arts.

Perhaps my favorite Machiavellian passage is his description of how he studies. After working on his farm during the day, he returns home to converse with his “friends from antiquity”:

> “When evening comes, I return home and go into my study. At the door I take off my everyday clothes, covered with mud and dirt, and don garments of court and palace. Now garbed fittingly I step into the ancient courts of men of antiquity, where, received kindly, I partake of food that is for me alone and for which I was born, where I am not ashamed to converse with them and ask them the reasons for their

actions. And they in their full humanity answer me. For four hours I
feel no tedium and forget every anguish, not afraid of poverty,
not terrified of death." [24]

Anyone who has ever lost themselves in a library will understand the sentiment.

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End Notes

1. *(...the actual truth of the thing...)* Boucheron, Patrick. ***Machiavelli: The Art of Teaching People What to Fear***. Trans. Willard Wood. (New York: Other Press, 2018), p. 52
2. *"Machiavel"*, in **Lexico Oxford English and Spanish Dictionary...** available at https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/machiavel accessed August 11, 2020.
3. *"Machiavellian",* in **dictionary.com** available here accessed August 11, 2020.
4. Boucheron, p. 19.
5. Ibid., p. 20.
6. "Patrick Boucheron", in **wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at here accessed August 11, 2020.
7. *"A New Book Asks: Just How Machiavellian Was Machiavelli?"*, **The New York Times** (February 11, 2020) available here accessed August 11, 2020.
8. For example, see Gerald R. Griffin, **Machiavelli On Management: Playing and Winning the Corporate Power Game** (London: Praeger, 1991) or former BBC executive Anthony Jay, **Management and Machiavelli: A Prescription for Success in Your Business** (New York: Prentice Hall, 1996).
9. Boucheron, p. 74.
10. Machiavelli, Niccolo. **The Prince**. Trans. W.K. Marriott. (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992), p. 79
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., pp. 79-80.
13. Boucheron, p. 5.
14. Viroli, Maurizio, *"Introduction",* **How to Choose a Leader: Machiavelli's Advice to Citizens.** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. ix-x available here accessed August 12, 2020.
15. Ibid., p. x.
16. Boucheron, pp. 4-5.
17. Ibid., p. 10.
18. Ibid., p 17.
19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., pp. 32-33.
21. Ibid., p. 99.
22. Viroli, p. xi.
23. Boucheron, p. 107.
24. Ibid., pp. 62-63.
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