

Men and Ideas

Irving Kristol: NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

THE inscription on Machiavelli's memorial, in the church of Santa Croce in Florence, reads: *Tanto Nomini Nullum Par Elogium*—"Such a name is beyond all praise." But both memorial and inscription were erected in 1787, more than two hundred and fifty years after his death, and Machiavelli's bones do not rest beneath them. They had originally been laid in the family chapel in the same church; the chapel had then been taken over by a religious order; and it eventually fell into such decay that even its exact location was a matter for doubt. The imposing presence of the spirit, the obscurity that attends the body—these are appropriate signs of how Machiavelli stands with us: so intimate, so exasperatingly indefinite.

We have all learned from him, call him master. But what he had to teach is far from clear, and this despite the fact that his prose style is extolled by historians of Italian literature for its marvellous simplicity and limpidity, its ruthless abstinence—so rare in that language—from the pleasures of mere rhetoric. Jean Bodin, noting Machiavelli's affirmation (in the *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*) of a popular republic as the best form of government, and his call (in *The Prince*) for a new tyrant to liberate Italy from the "barbarians," complained that "*il ne sçait à quoi se tenir.*" Leibniz found him "a gordian knot," which he could not unravel and would not cut. And John Morley, at the end of the last century, was moved to cast a backward glance and exclaim: "In all the great countries all over the West, this singular shade is seen haunting men's minds, exciting, frightening, provoking, perplexing them, like some unholy necromancer,

bewildering reason and conscience by riddles and paradox."

The more closely one examines Machiavelli's posthumous career—"his real life," it has even been called—the more difficult does it become to get a precise notion of his doctrine, or even to be absolutely sure that he had anything which could be called a doctrine. The Elizabethan playwrights freely identified him with the Evil One; but his books, when first published, had the approval of the Church. The Jesuits later had him placed on the Index—but boldly plagiarised his writings. Richelieu praised his wisdom—as did the left-wing republicans during the English civil war. Napoleon admired him, and when he drew up a list of books to form his portable library the "republican" *Discourses* headed the field in political philosophy. Rousseau admired him too, and claimed the "tyrannical" *Prince* as "*le livre des républicains.*" Macaulay baptised him a liberal: ". . . We are acquainted with few writings which exhibit so much elevation of sentiment, so pure and warm a zeal for the public good, or so just a view of the duties and rights of citizens, as those of Machiavelli"—an opinion shared, for quite different reasons, by Treitschke. Mussolini esteemed him highly—as did the founder of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci, who ended his days in Mussolini's jails. And T. S. Eliot has gravely informed us that "such a view of life as Machiavelli's implied a state of the soul which might be called a state of innocence."

A book of seven seals, to which his contemporaries or near-contemporaries no more had the key than we do. The group of young men in the Orti Oricellari who listened to

Machiavelli read from the manuscript of his *Discourses* were so flushed with republican fervour that several of them proceeded to engage in a conspiracy against the Medici—an action from which Machiavelli most vigorously dissociated himself, and with a sincerity that cannot be questioned: if one earnestly intends a conspiracy, one does not commence with a series of public readings, and Machiavelli knew this as well as, if not better than, anyone else. The first edition of *The Prince*, five years after Machiavelli's death, had a preface by the printer in which he sought the protection of the Church from some persons who "do not know that those who instruct in the use of herbs and medicine, also instruct in poisons, in order to know how to guard against them"—an intriguingly cryptic remark which seems to indicate that *The Prince* was widely regarded as both a shameless defence of tyranny and as a kind of homeopathic medicine against the disease of tyranny. Presumably it was the first sense of the book which made it so dear to Thomas Cromwell, Henry III, Henry IV, Catherine de' Medici, and to all the apologists of the new "*raison d'état*" which developed along with the new absolute monarchies. On the other hand, when Cardinal Pole visited Florence a few years after Machiavelli's death, he encountered the rumour—supposedly based on Machiavelli's own utterances—that *The Prince* had been written with the intention of bringing ruin upon the Medici; and when, in a famous essay (1612), Trajano Boccalini had Machiavelli accused before a divine tribunal, not of being a *sceleratum satanae organum* as the Jesuits claimed, but of having been seen at night subversively inserting dogs' teeth into the mouths of sheep, he is giving expression to an interpretation that is as old as the Machiavelli legend itself.

"... For a long time now I do not say what I believe, nor believe what I say, and if I have nevertheless sometimes said the truth, I have hid it among so many lies that it is difficult to find."

So wrote Machiavelli in a letter to Francesco Guicciardini on May 17th, 1521. But this letter is, on the whole, frivolous in its temper, and it is impossible to know how seriously one should take the statement. Even when Machiavelli assures us he doesn't believe what he says, it is hard to know whether to believe him or not.

"I HAVE not sought to adorn my work with high-flown phrases or grandiose words, or with any other superficial enticements or ornaments, the way most others decorate their things; because I desire no honour for my work but such as its variety of matter and the gravity of its subject may justly deserve."

The secret of Machiavelli must be concealed somewhere in this style, which is at once incomparably forthright and impossibly ambiguous. This doubleness immediately suggests irony, but to say that the style is ironical is already a simplification, for it leads us to think that, having perceived the irony, we have consequently got the point. In fact, we can do little more than wonder whether it is his irony or our double vision. And if we conclude that the irony is there, we must go on to try to locate it exactly and estimate its direction, which soon leaves us with the sensation of merely having moved from one riddle to another.

Even where the irony seems broad and inescapable, so that we flatter ourselves on having no trouble in recognising it, we are soon plagued by second thoughts. "Frightfulness (*crudeltà*) may be said to be well used—if of evil it is permissible to speak well. . . ." That strikes us as an irony, face up. But is it really so clear? Is he asserting that *crudeltà* is not an evil at all, but is only sanctimoniously regarded as one? Or does he mean to say that it is indeed an evil, but that in the politics of princes it is accepted as good? The first irony is more obvious; but it would have to be, if he intended the second.

Or take the following, from the dedication of *The Prince*, addressed to Lorenzo de' Medici:

Nor will it, I trust, be deemed presumptuous if a man of low and obscure condition discusses and directs the government of princes; for as landscape painters go down to the plains to observe well the nature of mountains and other high places, and go up to the mountains to observe lowly things, so in order to understand the nature of the people one needs to be a prince, and to understand the nature of princes one has to be of the people.

If this be not presumption, what would presumption be? Yet we know from Machiavelli's letters how eager he was to enter the Medici's service, and how high his hopes were that the dedication would earn him some official favour.

Instances could be multiplied. Indeed, they could be multiplied so endlessly, and with such

facility, that one inevitably becomes uneasy. Ironies breed before our eyes, cancel each other out, are immediately reborn again, *ad infinitum*. Where a text is so fertile in ironies, is it not a case of artificial generation? This question finds additional justification in two quite remarkable aspects of Machiavelli's style. The first is its consistency throughout all of his writings—his private correspondence as well as his official legations, the “republican” *Discourses* as well as the “tyrannical” *Prince*, his trivial sketches as well as his solemn studies. The second is its permanence throughout all his life—there is no development: it exists fully grown when we first meet it, and remains stonily indifferent to time and circumstance thereafter. Historians and biographers of Machiavelli are fond of explaining him as “a man of his age.” In fact, all of the vicissitudes of his career—his success as diplomatist under the republic, his dismissal by the triumphant Medici, his exile from Florence, his slow and grudging return to favour of a sort—all these washed about him, foamed and bubbled, and then subsided, leaving some débris on the beaches but no observable mark on the general topography.

Irony usually exists by virtue of the *double entendre*, the saying one thing and meaning another; and if Machiavelli is an ironist in this way, then he has raised the art to such a degree as to be self-defeating, for we find it impossible to disentangle the two strands. However, it is conceivable that such an irony was not his intention, and that the ambiguities of his style arise not from any difference between what he said and what he meant, but mainly from the very effrontery with which he said what he meant.

WE TAKE it that Machiavelli was the founder of “political realism,” and echo Bacon, who was simple-minded in the fashion that only geniuses can be: “We are much beholden to Machiavel and others that wrote what men do and not what they ought to do.” Now, Machiavelli was highly intelligent and was a man of considerable experience in affairs of state; it is not, therefore, unexpected that his writings should contain many striking insights. In themselves, they would not have earned him his fame; there are as many such insights, as felicitously put, in more than a few other writers whose books are hardly known

to the public at large. (Machiavelli's contemporary, Francesco Guicciardini, was at least his match in this respect—even his superior, some would claim.) No, Machiavelli's fame was not due to his having had the bright idea of describing for the first time what men do, instead of what they ought to do. The princes and principalities of this world, in all the centuries before Machiavelli was born, had a fully competent knowledge of this distinction—one does not gain a kingdom, establish a dynasty without it. Nor were they particularly reticent about their knowledge: one has only to peruse such a book as Allan Gilbert's *Predecessors of Machiavelli* to see the extent to which “Machiavellianism” antedates Machiavelli. Statesmen were no more successful in their business for having read *The Prince* than Machiavelli was in his political career for having written it.

Furthermore, Machiavelli's treatises are not all wisdom. They are full of the most silly generalisations, simply because they are so wildly general. (E.g. “whoever pursues this method in a besieged city will find it easy to defend the place.”) He has his *idées fixes* (abjuring the use of firearms in war because the Romans did not use them), and he frequently gets so involved in his “lessons” from Roman history that he finds it impossible to draw any useful conclusion (as in Book II of *The Discourses*, where he finally ends up: “It does not matter much in what way a general behaves, provided his ability is so great that it quite makes up for how he behaves, this way or that.”) His fondness for rigid alternatives goes to such lengths that he seems almost at times to be parodying the medieval scholastics. Here is a fair summary of the argument of the *Discorso sopra la cosa di Pisa*, in which Machiavelli discovers the best way for Florence to suppress a rebellion in Pisa:

Pisa can be gained either by (i) love or (ii) force.

(i) If by love, Pisa must either (a) voluntarily surrender or (b) be delivered over by its ruler.

(a) Since the city is in rebellion, it will not voluntarily surrender.

(b) Whether its ruler delivers the city to Florence depends on whether (1) he became ruler through love or (2) by force.

- (1) If by love, he will not betray his city
- (2) If by force, then he is strong enough to hold it, having been strong enough to win it.

Therefore, there remains only:

- (ii) Force.

True, this is probably a very early work by Machiavelli, and is a somewhat extreme example. But it is in no way untypical of the man. One has only to think of his hero-worship, in *The Prince*, of Cæsar Borgia, a clever thug whose political career was based on little else than his being the son of Pope Alexander VI: he is remembered today only because Machiavelli admired him so extravagantly, and because he had a genuinely extraordinary sister and such a monster for a father.

AND yet—the fact remains that there is something which the modern mind experiences as “realistic” in Machiavelli, and which it does not find in any earlier political thinker. There is a sense in which, as the Italian historian Prezzolini has observed, the precursors of Machiavelli are really his successors. That is to say, until Machiavelli came along they could not be seen as *leading up to* anything—they were merely worldly-wisemen, who, like the poor, are always with us. They could not be understood (or misunderstood) as Machiavellians until after Machiavelli had demonstrated that there *could* be such a thing. What this “thing” is, one is hard put to to say. For, if Machiavelli inserted a new element into political thinking, it was one so powerful that it dissolved the previous, casually mixed ingredients and lost its identity among them. From his contemporaries we get only vague and tantalising hints of what he was up to. Jacopo Nardi referred to the *Discourses* only as “a work of a new kind, never before (so far as I know) attempted by anyone.” And Guicciardini, whom one would have thought to know everything worth knowing about the practice of politics, saw in Machiavelli an “inventor of new and unusual things”—but, though he wrote a long (and excellent) essay in criticism of Machiavelli, he never elaborated on that remark.

Searching for a clue to the meaning of Machiavelli, one returns to the original legend, born in the 16th century and dominant

until the Enlightenment, which identified him as a servant of Satan, and sometimes as the Devil himself. Of course, this legend was fostered by Catholic and Protestant propagandists for their own purposes; and very few of those who helped keep it alive ever so much as read a line by Machiavelli. Nevertheless, the very pertinacity of the legend, and the ease with which it took root and flourished, are suggestive. For the two qualities most generally associated with Satan were acuteness of intellect and presumption of spirit; which two, when conjointly operating, carried one beyond the world of good and evil to a realm where everything was permitted. And it was precisely this journey which Machiavelli accomplished: from the kingdom of good and evil to that transhuman kingdom before whose gates is inscribed Nietzsche’s motto for modern nihilism: *Alles ist erlaubt*—“all is permitted.”

The horror that Machiavelli inspired for so long, and which he even now can inspire on occasion, is the horror of the void—which presents itself, at one and the same time, as the Nothing and the Ultimately Real. It is the sensation we feel when we read one of his more notorious passages, such as the following from his *Arte della guerra*, in which he criticises Christianity for having debilitated the military instincts:

The present mode of life, thanks to the Christian religion, does not enforce the need for self-defence, as used to be done; for, of old, men defeated in war were either killed off or were left to spend their lives miserably in perpetual slavery; and, if a town was taken, it was either demolished or its inhabitants were hounded out, despoiled of their goods, and dispersed all over the world; with the result that those who were overcome in war, drank of misery to its dregs. This being so, out of sheer dread men kept up their military exercises. . . . But today this fear has to a large extent disappeared; for of the conquered but few are killed and no one is kept long in prison. . . . Even if a city has rebelled a thousand times, it is not demolished, and its people are left with their property, the greatest evil they have to fear being a tax, with the result that men are no longer keen on undergoing military training and putting up constantly with its hardships in order to escape dangers of which they have but little dread.

One is impelled to object; but, upon consideration, one finds nothing specific to object to. What he has said is not obviously incorrect; it is not even immoral; it simply deals in a

ruthlessly "objective" way with a matter of fact—and we realise that what was so shocking at first glance was nothing but his boldness in discussing, in a totally matter-of-fact way, what is usually regarded as a matter of morality. Moral imperatives, for Machiavelli, have the status of facts—as do immoral imperatives. Indeed, the distinction between the two kinds of imperatives can hardly be said to exist. He does not counsel evil, for that in itself would be a recognition of the good, and it is the very essence of Machiavelli that in politics there is neither good nor evil, of a moral kind. Politics is the exercise of the Will to Power, which deals not with moral truth but "effectual truth" (*verità effettuale*). Morality can, in certain circumstances, be such an "effectual truth," and Machiavelli is very much aware in his writings that conventional moral sanctions may be quite useful in politics. But he is also very much aware that, in different circumstances, they may not be.

SIR FREDERICK POLLACK claimed that in Machiavelli we meet, for the first time since Aristotle, "the pure passionless curiosity of the man of science." He would have done better to omit the reference to Aristotle, whose idea of "science," and perhaps even of "passionless curiosity," was worlds apart from Machiavelli's. But he had got the main point nevertheless, which is the close relation between the Machiavellian conception of politics and the modern scientific conception of reality.

Why should one not lie or murder in politics? In his *Ethics*, Aristotle gave the answer of classical political thought:

Not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g., shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions, adultery, theft, murder; for all these and such-like things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excess or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong.

Now, there is a metaphysic behind this, which few take seriously today, and which the very successes of modern science make it almost impossible to take seriously. In its political bearings, this metaphysic assumed that man is a "political animal" in the sense that, possessed of certain natural motions of the soul that urge him to the good, he finds this good is only

realisable when the individual is a member of a body politic. This body is like the human beings that comprise it in that it has a "spiritual" reason for existence, and does not aim merely at the longest possible life.

This point of view, in an infinite variety of shadings and with an equal variety of emphases, was basic to all Western political thought before Machiavelli came along to announce: "It is a sound maxim that reprehensible actions may be justified by their effects." Today, we frequently say the same thing, but not in exactly the same way—we would certainly avoid the term "reprehensible," as having no place in that sentence. If actions are to be judged by effects, as causes are judged by consequences, it is nonsensical to say that reprehensible actions are to be justified by their effects, for if they are so justified they are not "reprehensible." What often seems like irony in Machiavelli, or a desire to shock the reader, is nothing more than his effort to state the principles of politics as an objective science in a language that was still permeated by the assumption that politics could *not* be an objective science, since it was already a branch of ethics; and ethics could not in the very nature of the case be "objective," since its concern was with the good or bad intentions of the subject. And what often seems like ambiguity in Machiavelli is nothing more than a willed indifference to moral judgement. He could praise tyranny or censure it, applaud republicanism or scorn it—his attitude varied with circumstances, for he did not believe it possible to appeal to any other tribunal than brute circumstance.

When Napoleon said, "*J'aime le pouvoir comme artiste*," he was giving expression to an attitude towards politics which Machiavelli was the first to formulate. He preferred a more solemn analogy of himself as a *medico politico*; but it comes to the same thing. Art and medicine and all of natural science have it in common that, in medieval terminology, they do not require "rectitude of the appetite." They are judged only by results. An artist may be a lecher and a murderer, a surgeon may be a sadist—this is irrelevant to the judgement one passes on their work. But is it irrelevant to the work of the statesman? Since Machiavelli we have come to think so; which is why modern politics—all of modern politics—is managerial to the core.

DANTE put Brutus in hell, along with Satan and Judas; Machiavelli set the modern tone, extolled him as a defender of republic liberty; in Shakespeare we see the mixed feelings that attend the transition from the first perspective to the second—a transition which might be described, quite literally, as the “profanation” of politics: the removal of political authority, *qua* authority, from the shadows of sanctity that had always enveloped it, and its subjugation to the test of *la verità effettuale*. With this transition, there disappeared all of the crucial problems of the earlier political philosophy: under what conditions may a subject disobey a legitimate ruler? a tyrant? if disobedience is allowable, what form may it take? what is the relation between the temporal and the spiritual order? For Machiavelli, and for us, these questions do not exist—that is to say, they do exist of course, but we do not grant them *de jure* recognition.

As it happens, Machiavelli’s intervention was largely a matter of accident—it was much less

a case of his converting later generations than of their sanctifying him. Of science or scientific method, he knew nothing. What he did have was an intuition, not of scientific method, but of human reality as it would appear were it simply an object of scientific method. It is an intuitive vision which has never been surpassed for its clarity, not even by our “political science,” which does not have the courage of its principles and ceremoniously marks time whenever its method threatens to bring it close to that no-man’s-land in which there is no “ought,” except what “is.”

Since Machiavelli, a dimension has been amputated from man’s political existence. The operation was a success; but there are stitches and scars, inevitably. It is in Machiavelli we see them most clearly, for he does not hesitate to wave the stumps at us, in order to make a point. Those riddles one finds in Machiavelli, those ambiguities and ironies—they mark the points where, the soul having been cut away, we are troubled with the illusion that “something” is still there.

W. S. Merwin

Saint Sebastian

So many times I have felt them come, Lord,
The arrows, (a coward dies often), so many times,
And worse, oh worse often than this. Neither breeze nor bird
Stirring the hazed peace through which the day climbs.

And slower even than the arrows, the few sounds that come
Falling, as across water, from where farther off than the hills
The archers move in a different world in the same
Kingdom. Oh, can the noise of angels,

The beat and whirring between Thy kingdoms
Be even by such cropped feathers raised? Not though
With the wings of the morning may I fly from Thee; for it is

Thy kingdom where (and the wind so still now)
I stand in pain; and, entered with pain as always,
Thy kingdom that on these erring shafts comes.