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CHAPTER SEVEN

Machiavelli's Democratic Turn

Catherine H. Zuckert

Against the common opinion that says that peoples, when they are princes, are varying, mutable, and ungrateful, I affirm that . . . a prince unshackled from the laws will be more ungrateful, varying, and imprudent than a people. The variation in their proceeding arises not from a diverse nature – because it is in one mode in all – but from having more or less respect for the laws. . . . A people is more prudent, more stable, and of better judgment than a prince. . . . If a people hears two orators who incline to different sides, when they are of equal virtue, very few times does one see it not take up the better opinion. . . . If it errs in mighty things or those that appear useful, . . . often a prince errs too in his own passions, which are many more than those of peoples. It is also seen in its choices of magistrates to make a better choice by far than a prince; a people will never be persuaded that it is good to put up for dignities an infamous man of corrupt customs – of which a prince is persuaded easily. . . . Beyond this, one sees that cities in which peoples are princes make exceeding increases in a very brief time, and much greater than those that have always been made under a prince. . . . This cannot arise from anything other than that governments of peoples are better than those of princes. . . . If princes are superior to peoples in ordering laws, forming civil lives, and ordering new statutes and

*orders, peoples are so much superior in maintain things ordered that without doubt they attain the glory of those who order them.*¹

In this statement drawn from Book 1, Chapter 58 of his *Discourses on Livy* Machiavelli makes what I have called his ‘democratic turn’. He declares that popular or democratic governments are better than princely or aristocratic ones. He recognizes that he is making a revolutionary statement in maintaining that ‘the multitude is wiser and more constant than a prince’, because he is defending ‘a thing that . . . has been accused by all the writers’.² Writers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas had argued that the only means of securing good government was to educate a few virtuous men to control the unruly, tumultuous many. Machiavelli contends not merely that political leaders who always attempt to do what is right and good will necessarily fail, but also that popular governments last longer and are more glorious.³

Like his better known and shorter treatise entitled *The Prince* (composed between 1513 and 1516), Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* (composed between 1515 and 1519) were published posthumously in 1532 with papal permission, but were placed twenty-five years later on the Index, that is, the list of readings prohibited by the Roman Catholic Church. On the basis of the more widely read *Prince*, Machiavelli has often been castigated as a teacher of tyrants, if not of evil simply. In fact, however, in both his *Prince* and *Discourses* Machiavelli tries to convince those who have or aspire to possess political power that they will attain it best by trying to satisfy their people’s desires for the preservation of their lives, families and properties. Popular governments are better than princely governments because they preserve the liberties of the people as well.

The common view of Machiavelli as a proponent of ‘Machiavellian politics’ is based to a large extent on another even more famous statement of the way in which he understood himself to be differing from all previous writers. In Chapter 15 of *The Prince* he declares:

I fear that . . . I may be held presumptuous. . . . But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. Many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation.

To show a prince how he can maintain his state, Machiavelli thus proposes to teach him how ‘to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity’.⁴

To teach a political leader 'to be able not to be good' and to use that ability 'according to necessity' is not, however, simply to teach him to be bad. Who would need to learn 'to be able not to be good'? Not those who are already bad, but those who would like to do good. Machiavelli has thus often been cast as a 'realist' thinker who recognizes the weaknesses of human nature and advocates the necessity of using harsh measures, upon occasion, especially in foreign policy. But this 'realist' understanding can also be shown to be partial and thus flawed by the fact that Machiavelli's two major works, *The Prince* and *Discourses on Livy*, are as much about domestic policies and institutions as they are about the use of arms.

Machiavelli announces his great moral (or perhaps we should say immoral) revolution in politics in *The Prince* in order to make governments serve the interests of most ordinary people and not the aristocratic – or rich – few. The core of his teaching princes 'to be able not to be good' and to use that knowledge 'according to necessity' is to be found in his re-definition of the traditional virtues of liberality, mercy and faith in Chapters 15–19. Re-defining these traditional virtues in instrumental terms, Machiavelli advises a political leader that if he wants to preserve himself, he should do what is necessary to secure the lives, families and property of his many subjects or fellow citizens, not seek to reward or otherwise favour his relatively few aristocratic supporters or partisan cronies. Machiavelli is not simply a populist or democratic political thinker, however. In his *Discourses* he shows that this 'popular prince' poses the greatest threat to the preservation of republican or free government. In his *Discourses* Machiavelli thus tries to persuade other politically ambitious young men to compete with the 'prince' for popular favour and so prevent any one individual from gaining unchecked power.

The basis of Machiavelli's re-definition of the traditional virtues in *The Prince* and his advocacy of republican institutions in the *Discourses* is to be found in a general observation he makes – both in his discussion of 'civil principalities' in *The Prince* (Ch. 9) and in his praise of the Roman republic in his *Discourses* (1.4–5) – about the existence of two 'humours' in every city. There are 'the people [who] desire neither to be commanded nor oppressed by the great, and the great [who] desire to command and oppress the people' (39). These two 'humours' are obviously opposed, so that neither can be satisfied except at the expense of the other. Because they are divided into these two 'humours', all political associations are characterized by a fundamental conflict between those who want to rule and those who do not want to be ruled.

Depending on the relative strength of these two 'appetites', as Machiavelli also calls the 'humours', there are three possible results: principality, liberty or license. In a book purportedly devoted to the education of a prince, Machiavelli does not explain how 'liberty' can be achieved through a balancing of the two humours; that is the subject of Book 1 of his *Discourses*

on Livy. In *The Prince* Machiavelli confines himself to urging the prince, whether he comes to power with the aid of the great or of the people, once in power to seek the support of the people. The reasons he gives are telling.

First, Machiavelli points out, the great will always see themselves as the prince's equals and demand ever more offices and goods as the price of their support. Attempts to satisfy them will necessarily fail and, in failing, add to the prince's enemies. It is possible, however, for a prince to satisfy the people, because 'the end of the people is more decent (*onesto*) than that of the great, since the great want to oppress and the people want not to be oppressed' (P 9, 39).⁵

The second reason Machiavelli gives as to why it is better to seek the support of the people than of the great is even more fundamental. There is strength in numbers and the people are many whereas the great are few. As Machiavelli reminds his readers with the examples of 'lovely' fellows like Cesare Borgia, Agathocles and Oliverotto, the great in any particular city can be brought together under false pretences and slaughtered; but a prince will have no one to rule if he murders all or most of his people. To be sure, Machiavelli acknowledges, a prince needs subordinates to help him rule, but he observes that a prince can do perfectly well without any given set of 'great' persons, since the prince 'can make and unmake them every day' (P 9, 40). He makes some 'great' by giving them lands and offices or, conversely, 'unmakes' them by taking away their lands and offices along with their lives. Machiavelli thus shows his reader that the 'great' are not different from the many by nature. 'Greatness' is a product of a person's position. As he states in the *Discourses* (1.58), human nature is the same in all. Because those granted high offices have more power and goods, however, they no longer feel as liable to oppression as those subject to the government. Rather than desiring merely not to be oppressed, they come as a result of their 'great' positions to wish to acquire more by oppressing others.

In redefining traditional virtues such as liberality, mercy and faith in calculating, instrumental terms, Machiavelli shows that the best way for a political leader to satisfy his own desire to maintain his own dominion is to satisfy his people's desire to have their lives, families and properties protected. A political leader who depletes his own resources by generously granting offices, lands and titles to his aristocratic friends or partisans will lose their support and acquire their contempt, he observes, unless that leader acquires new funds by taxing his people and so arouses their hatred. Rather than squander his capital by rewarding an ungrateful few, a leader will prove himself truly liberal to the many he does not have to tax by conserving his own resources so that he will be able to defend them when needed. Likewise, Machiavelli argues, a political leader who pardons criminals may appear to be merciful to a few, but he is cruel to his many subjects or fellow citizens who fear for their lives and property when the law is not vigorously enforced. Leaders have to use both force and fraud in order to acquire and maintain power; but they must always strive to appear to be full of mercy,

faith, honesty, humility and religion. If a prince does what is necessary to 'win and maintain his state', Machiavelli assures his readers, 'the means will always be judged honourable, and will be praised by everyone' (*P* 18, 71). Why will everyone not merely believe, but praise a head of state when he claims to be waging war, rigorously enforcing the law or raising taxes for the sake of the true faith or humanity? It is difficult, if not impossible for observers to discover what a person's true motives are. In fact, political leaders act in order to acquire and maintain power for themselves. But if they act to maintain a state that protects the lives and property of their subjects or fellow citizens from external aggression and domestic crime, people will believe them when they declare that they are acting for the common good. In other words, people judge a leader's character and words by the effects of his deeds.

People gather together and form political communities to protect themselves from the aggression of others, Machiavelli points out in his *Discourses* (1.1). In order to do so effectively, however, they need a leader to organize or 'order' them. Unfortunately, having seized the opportunity to free his people from the oppression of others, that leader often uses the opportunity to command and oppress them himself. In order to preserve the liberty of all, it thus becomes necessary to devise 'modes and orders', i.e. laws and institutions, that enable the two 'humours' that grow up in all cities to check the excesses of the other. In urging his readers to imitate the Roman republic, but to avoid the excesses that led to its demise, Machiavelli argues that the best way to prevent the emergence of a new tyrant is to make the ambitious *grandi* compete with each other for popular favour in elections. Public offices should have specified powers and individuals elected to them for short terms. All citizens should be eligible to be elected to the highest public offices, and there should be what we call 'rotation in office', so that older and more experienced leaders will be able to counsel and restrain more impetuous and ambitious youths. Rather than castigating the ingratitude, if not the vanity and inconstancy of the multitude for their willingness to condemn individuals to death whom they previously glorified for deeds of extraordinary public service, Machiavelli suggests that people ought to be made more suspicious of 'merciful works of citizens' which conceal the beginning of tyranny. To deter and punish such tyrannical ambitions, public trials ought to be held in which individuals would be formally accused and able to defend themselves in front of large popular juries.

To justify granting such fundamental decisions with regard to who should rule and what constitutes treasonous activity to the multitude Machiavelli explicitly disagrees with all previous writers by maintaining that 'the multitude is wiser and more constant than a prince' (*D* 1.58, 11). Recognizing that all human beings are misled by their passions, Machiavelli qualifies that judgment by explaining that he is speaking about a people restrained by law. In other words, the characteristic excesses or weaknesses of the popular humour also need to be checked. 'A multitude without a

head is useless', he bluntly declares (*D* 1.44, 92). 'There is nothing more formidable than an unshackled multitude', but there is also 'nothing weaker. . . . For when the spirits of men are cooled a little and each sees he has to return to his home, they begin to doubt themselves and to think of their safety, either by taking flight or by coming to accord. Therefore a multitude so excited . . . has at once to make from among itself a head to correct it, to hold it united, and to think about its defence' (*D* 1.57, 115).⁶ In sum, peoples need leaders (princes). Nevertheless, Machiavelli concludes that 'if princes are superior to peoples 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' (*D* 1.58, 118).

In a properly structured republic where the people feel secure in their lives, families and property, individuals and the community as a whole both grow and prosper:

Larger peoples are seen there, because marriages are freer and more desirable to men since each willingly procreates those children he believes he can nourish. He does not fear that his patrimony will be taken away, and he knows not only that they are born free and not slaves, but that they can, through their own virtue, become princes. Riches are seen to multiply there in larger number, both those that come from agriculture and those that come from the arts. For each willingly . . . seeks to acquire those goods he believes he can enjoy once acquired. From which it arises that men in rivalry think of private and public advantages, and both . . . grow marvelously. (*D* 2.2, 132)

The criterion by which governments should be judged to be good or bad, Machiavelli contends, is not the moral character or intelligence of the person or persons who rule. It is the common good that results from a government that secures the lives, families, liberty and property of its citizens. Machiavelli thus advocates a thoroughly democratic end or purpose for government. But he does not think that purely democratic processes or means are always the best or even adequate ways of achieving that end. Leaders who understand that the best way to fulfil their own desire to rule is to satisfy the desires of their people for security, prosperity and advancement are also needed.

Notes

- 1 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 117–18, slightly modified on the basis of the Italian text.
- 2 Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, 116.

- 3 Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) has been widely criticized for his expressed sympathy for the simple and old-fashioned view of Machiavelli as a 'teacher of evil' (e.g. by Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Short Introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981], 99; Barbara Spackman, 'Machiavelli and Maxims', *Yale French Studies* no. 77, *Reading the Archive: Old Texts and Institutions* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990], 137.) However, Strauss explicitly finds that simple view inadequate and declares, 'Machiavelli was the first philosopher who questioned in the name of the multitude or of democracy the aristocratic prejudice or the aristocratic premise which informed classical philosophy' (127).
- 4 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 2nd edn, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 61.
- 5 Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), observes that 'by radically depreciating the pretensions to "virtue" of the nobility, and simultaneously making the people "honest", Machiavelli becomes the first *democratic* thinker' (16).
- 6 In emphasizing the democratic character of Machiavelli's politics, Miguel Vatter, *Between Form and Event: Machiavelli's Theory of Political Freedom* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000) overstates the importance of popular uprisings in destroying old orders and creating openings for the construction of new ones. Likewise, Joÿ McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) overstates Machiavelli's advocacy of 'ferocious populism' in countering the oppression of the 'great'. The conflict between the two humours that arise in every city threatens to become a civil war, which will in turn give rise to a tyrant, Machiavelli argues, unless the two humours are channelled by laws and institutions that enable them to check one another. As he shows repeatedly in his *Florentine Histories*, periodic rioting results in the destruction of property and deaths of citizens, but it does not produce beneficent institutional changes.