



Notes to Literature

Weekly
reading
booklet

#5 :
Machiavelli's
The Prince
(1532)

NL

NOTES TO LITERATURE

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Gramsci, Antonio, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. New York: International Publishers, 2008.

Machiavelli, Niccoláo. *The Prince*, translate by Peter E. Bondanella. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Pocock, J. G. A. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975.

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Machiavelli

One should bear in mind that there is nothing more difficult to execute, nor more dubious of success, nor more dangerous to administer, than to introduce new political orders.

From *The Prince* (1532)

I say, therefore, that in completely new principalities, where there is a new prince, greater or lesser difficulty in maintaining them exists according to the greater or lesser virtue of the person who acquires them. Because for a private citizen to become a prince presupposes virtue or Fortune, it appears that either the one or the other of these two things should partially mitigate many of the problems. Nevertheless, he who relies less upon Fortune has maintained his position best. Matters are also facilitated when the prince, having no other dominions to govern, is constrained to come to live there in person.

However, to come to those who have become princes by means of their own virtue and not because of Fortune, I say that the most outstanding are Moses, Cyrus, Romulus, Theseus, and others of their kind.* Although we should not discuss Moses, since he was a mere executor of things he was ordered to do by God, nevertheless he must be admired at least for the grace that made him worthy of speaking with God. Let us then consider Cyrus and the others who have acquired or founded kingdoms. You will find them all admirable; and if their deeds and their particular methods are considered, they will not appear different from those of Moses, who had so great a teacher. In examining their deeds and their lives, one can see that they received nothing from Fortune except opportunity, which gave them the material they could mould into whatever form they liked. Without that

opportunity the strength of their spirit would have been exhausted, and without that strength, their opportunity would have come in vain.

It was therefore necessary for Moses to find the people of Israel slaves in Egypt and oppressed by the Egyptians, in order that they might be disposed to follow him to escape this servitude. It was necessary for Romulus not to stay in Alba, and that he be exposed at birth, so that he might become king of Rome and founder of that nation. It was necessary for Cyrus to find the Persians unhappy about the rule of the Medes, and the Medes rendered soft and effeminate after a lengthy peace. These could not have demonstrated his ability if he had not found the Athenians dispersed. These opportunities, therefore, made these men successful, and their outstanding virtue enabled them to recognize that opportunity,* whereby their nation was ennobled and became extremely happy.

Those who, like these men, become princes through their virtue acquire the principality with difficulty, but they hold on to it easily. The difficulties they encounter in acquiring the principality grow, in part, out of the new institutions and methods* they are forced to introduce in order to establish their state and their security. One should bear in mind that there is nothing more difficult to execute, nor more dubious of success, nor more dangerous to administer, than to introduce new political orders. For the one who introduces them has as his enemies all those who profit from the old order, and he has only lukewarm defenders in all those who might profit from the new order. This lukewarm-ness partly arises from fear of the adversaries who have the law on their side, and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not truly believe in new things unless they have actually had personal experience of them. Therefore, it happens that whenever those who are enemies have the chance to attack, they do so with partisan zeal, whereas those others defend hesitantly, so that they, together with the prince, run the risk of grave danger.

However, if we desire to examine this argument thoroughly, it is necessary to consider whether these innovators act on their own or are dependent on others: that is, if they are forced to beg for help or are able to employ force in conducting their affairs. In the first case, they always come to a bad end and never accomplish anything. But when they depend on their own resources and can use force, then only seldom do they run the risk of grave danger. From this comes the fact that all armed prophets were victorious and the unarmed came to ruin. For, besides what has been said, people are fickle by nature: it is easy to convince them of something, but difficult to hold them in

that conviction. Therefore, affairs should be managed in such a way that when they no longer believe, they can be made to believe by force. Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, and Romulus could not have made their institutions respected for long if they had been unarmed; as in our times happened to Brother Girolamo Savonarola,* who was ruined in his new institutions when the populace began to believe in them no longer, since he had no way of holding steady those who had believed, nor of making the unbelievers believe.

Therefore, such men encounter serious problems in conducting their affairs, and meet all their dangers as they proceed, and must overcome them with their virtue. However, once they have overcome them and have begun to be venerated, having wiped out all those who were envious of their accomplishments, they remain powerful, secure, honoured, and successful.

To such lofty examples I should like to add a lesser one; but it will have some relation to the others, and I should like it to suffice for all similar cases: and this is Hiero of Syracuse. From a private citizen, this man became the ruler of Syracuse. He received nothing from Fortune but the opportunity, for as the citizens of Syracuse were oppressed, they elected him as their captain, and from that rank he proved himself worthy of becoming their prince. He had so much virtue while still a private citizen that someone who wrote about him said: 'quod nihil illi deerat ad regnandum praeter regnum' ['that he lacked nothing to reign but a kingdom']. He did away with the old army and established a new one; he abandoned old alliances and forged new ones; since he possessed allies and soldiers of his own, he was able to construct whatever he desired on such a foundation; so that it cost him great effort to acquire, but little to maintain.

From J.G.A Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (1975/2003)

A SUSTAINED INTENTION throughout this book will be that of depicting early modern republican theory in the context of an emerging historicism, the product of the ideas and conceptual vocabularies which were available to medieval and Renaissance minds—such as C. S. Lewis called "Old Western"—for the purpose of dealing with particular and contingent events and with time as the dimension of contingent happenings.

The republic or Aristotelian polis, as that concept reemerged in the civic humanist thought of the fifteenth century, was at once universal, in the sense that it existed to realize for its citizens all the values which men were capable of realizing in this life, and particular, in the sense that it was finite and located in space and time. It had had a beginning and would consequently have an end; and this rendered crucial both the problem of showing how it had come into being and might maintain its existence, and that of reconciling its end of realizing universal values with the instability and circumstantial disorder of its temporal life. Consequently, ***a vital component of republican theory—and, once this had come upon the scene, if no earlier, of all political theory—consisted of ideas about time, about the occurrence of contingent events of which time was the dimension, and about the intelligibility of the sequences (it is as yet too soon to say processes) of particular happenings that made up what we should call history.***

It is this which makes it possible to call republican theory an early form of historicism, though we shall find that many of the connotations of our word "history" were at that time borne by other words and their equivalents in various languages—the words "usage," "providence," and "fortune" among them.

By "history" we normally mean successions of events taking place in time, social and public rather than private and subjective in character, which we try to organize, first into narratives and second into processes; but this was not an

objective which the scholastic intellect greatly valued. Narrative, the mere telling of a tale, it followed Aristotle in considering inferior to poetry, as poetry was inferior to philosophy, because it was inferior in bringing to light the universal significances of events; and these were best arrived at by thinking which abandoned the particular event altogether and rose above it to contemplation of universal categories.

As for processes and time as the dimension of process, the process of change which the Aristotelian intellect singled out was that by which a thing came to be and then not to be: *physis*, the process by which it fulfilled its end, perfected its form, realized its potential, and then ceased—all of which are extensions of the idea of coming to be and then not to be. All things come to an end in time, but the intelligibility of time was closer to being in the things, since the essential systole and diastole were in the being and not-being of the things, and it was this of which time was the measure. But the being and not-being of a thing is not identical with the replacement of that thing by another thing; it is a closed process whereas the latter is open-ended; and to the extent to which the Aristotelian intellect identified change with *physis*, it tended to adopt a circular concept of process and therefore of time. This had the advantage of rendering time entirely intelligible.

The Hellenic intellect wrote history, but it did not make history philosophically intelligible. As for the Christian intellect on these matters, it of course repudiated all ideas of cosmic recurrence; "the wicked dance in circles"; such a vision of things would make the world uncreated and endless. But Christian insistence on a God who had created the world and men at a point in time past and would redeem men and end the world at a point in time future, though of incalculable importance for the development of historical thought, did not of itself render intelligible the succession of particular events and phenomena in time, or ascribe any special importance to time considered as the dimension of that succession.

Movement in fallen man, if effected by his own depraved will and intelligence, was movement away from God and toward further damnation, away from meaning and toward deepening meaninglessness (this movement may be detected in the *Inferno*). Given the promise of an ultimate redemption, historical time could indeed be seen as equally the movement back toward

God; but this was effected by a separate sequence of acts of redemptive grace, sharply distinguished from and only mysteriously related to the happenings of history in the secular sense. The footsteps of God might be in history, but history as a whole did not consist of such footsteps; eternity might be in love with the products of time, but time was a passive and inert beloved.

Christian thought concerning a succession of particulars therefore tended to consist of a succession of efforts to relate the particulars to universals, carried out by means that might be philosophical or poetical, typological, anagogical, or analogical—there was an impressive, even majestic, array of devices existing to this end—but operated so as to view each particular in its relation to eternity and to pass by the succession of particulars itself as revealing nothing of importance. The eternal order to which particulars were related was not a temporal or a historical order, even when it made history by manifesting itself in time; and history was often—though not always—seen as little more than a series of symbolizations, in which sequential narrative was of little more than expository significance.

It is a useful simplification to say that the Christian world-view—while of course containing the seeds of what was to supersede it—was based upon the exclusion from consideration of temporal and secular history, and that the emergence of historical modes of explanation had much to do with the supersession of that world-view by one more temporal and secular.

This book is concerned with some aspects of that process, and it is going to be argued that an important role in generating it was played by consideration of politics. There is a historically resonant vocabulary in which politics is presented as "the art of the possible" and therefore contingent, "the endless adventure" of governing men, the "ship" sailing "a bottomless and boundless sea"; and if we think of the domain of contingency as history, "the play of the contingent, the unexpected and the unforeseen," it will appear that a powerful stimulus to the growth of secular historiography may arise from this view of politics (so that political man may prove to have had his own quarrel with the Christian world-view).

But it is not from political philosophy, in the premodern sense of that term, that we shall see ideas of secular contingency arising. In what some still like to call "the great tradition" of that philosophy, the political community was seen as a universal phenomenon, something natural to man. Efforts were made to state

its idea or form, to relate its principles to those of the universal order of which it formed part, and these tended for obvious reasons to remove it from the domain of particularity and contingency. Yet even within the philosophical tradition it was recognized that political society was, when viewed in the concrete, a secular and consequently a time-bound phenomenon. The province of philosophy was not perhaps extended to include the provision of wholly temporal modes of intelligibility, ways of understanding the time-bound from within secular time; but somewhat outside the philosophical tradition, modes of thought can be detected which were explicitly concerned with problems of political particularity, with what was intellectually possible when the particular political society was viewed as existing in time, when the particular contingency or event was viewed as arising in time, and when the particular society was viewed as a structure for absorbing and responding to the challenges posed by such events and as consisting, institutionally and historically, of the traces of such responses made in past time.

From Antonio Gramsci, "The Modern Prince" in The Prison Notebooks (1936)

The basic thing about *The Prince* is that it is not a systematic treatment, but a "live" work, in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a "myth". Before Machiavelli, political science had taken the form either of the Utopia or of the scholarly treatise. Machiavelli, combining the two, gave imaginative and artistic form to his conception by embodying the doctrinal, rational element in the person of a *condottiere*, who represents plastically and "anthropomorphically" the symbol of the "collective will". In order to represent the process whereby a given collective will, directed towards a given political objective, is formed, Machiavelli did not have recourse to long-winded arguments, or pedantic classifications of principles and criteria for a method of action. Instead he represented this process in terms of the qualities, characteristics, duties and requirements of a concrete individual. Such a procedure stimulates the artistic imagination of those who have to be convinced, and gives political passions a more concrete form.*

Machiavelli's *Prince* could be studied as an historical exemplification of the Sorelian myth¹ – i.e. of a political ideology expressed neither in the form of a cold utopia nor as learned theorising, but rather by a creation of concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organise its collective will. The utopian character of *The Prince* lies in the fact that the Prince had no real historical existence ; he did not present himself immediately and objectively to the Italian people, but was a pure theoretical abstraction—a symbol of the leader and ideal condottiere. However, in a dramatic movement of great effect, the elements of passion and of myth which occur throughout the book are drawn together and brought to life in the conclusion, in the invocation of a prince who "really exists". Throughout the book, Machiavelli discusses what the Prince must be like if he is to lead a people to found a new State; the argument is developed with rigorous logic, and with scientific detachment. In the conclusion, Machiavelli merges with the people, becomes the people ; not, however, some "generic" people, but the people whom he, Machiavelli, has convinced by the preceding argument—the people whose consciousness and whose expression he becomes and feels himself to be, with whom he feels identified. The entire "logical" argument now

¹ Georges Sorel (1847-1922) was the principal theorist of revolutionary syndicalism, and the author notably of *Reflections on Violence* (1906). Influenced above all by Bergson and Marx, he in his turn had an immense influence in France and Italy—e.g. on Mussolini. His work was an amalgam of extremely disparate elements, reflecting the metamorphoses through which he passed—anti-Jacobin moralist, socialist, revolutionary syndicalist, far-right (indeed near-monarchist) preacher of an anti-bourgeois authoritarian moral regeneration, sympathiser with the Bolshevik revolution. In *Reflections on Violence*, Sorel develops the idea of the General Strike as a myth indeed "the myth in which Socialism is wholly comprised, i.e. a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of the war undertaken by Socialism against modern society". Myths "enclose within them all the strongest inclinations of a people, of a party, or of a class". He contrasts myth in this sense with utopias "which present a deceptive mirage of the future to the people". (Another example of myth was Mazzini's "mad chimera", which "did more for Italian unity than Cavour and all the politicians of his school"). The idea of the General Strike "destroys all the theoretical consequences of every possible social policy; its partisans look upon even the most popular reforms as having a middle-class character; so far as they are concerned, nothing can weaken the fundamental opposition of the class war." The General Strike thus focuses the "cleavage" between the antagonistic classes, by making every individual outburst of violence into an act in the class war. "Cleavage", for Sorel, is the equivalent of class consciousness, of the class for-itself; e.g. "When the governing classes, no longer daring to govern, are ashamed of their privileged situation, are eager to make advances to their enemies, and proclaim their horror of all cleavage in society, it becomes much more difficult to maintain in the minds of the proletariat this idea of cleavage without which Socialism cannot fulfill its historical role?" *Reflections on Violence*, Collier Books, 1950, pp. 124-26, 133-35, 186.

appears as nothing other than auto-reflection on the part of the people-an inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness, whose conclusion is a cry of passionate urgency. The passion, from discussion of itself, becomes once again "emotion", fever, fanatical desire for action. This is why the epilogue of *The Prince* is not something extrinsic, tacked on, rhetorical, but has to be understood as a necessary element of the work-indeed as the element which gives the entire work its true colour, and makes it a kind of "political manifesto" .

Here one comes up against the problem of Machiavelli's significance in his own time, and of the objectives he set himself in writing his books, particularly *The Prince*. Machiavelli's ideas were not, in his own day, purely "bookish", the monopoly of isolated thinkers, a secret memorandum circulating among the initiated. Machiavelli's style is not that of a systematic compiler of treatises, such as abounded during the Middle Ages and Humanism, quite the contrary; it is the style of a man of action, of a man urging action, the style of a party manifesto. The moralistic interpretation offered by Foscolo is certainly mistaken. It is quite true that Machiavelli revealed something, and did not merely theorise reality ; but what was the aim of his revelation ? A moralistic aim or a political one ? It is commonly asserted that Machiavelli's standards of political behaviour are practised, but not admitted. Great politicians – it is said – start off by denouncing Machiavelli, by declaring themselves to be anti-Machiavellian, precisely in order to be able to put his standards "piously" into practice. Was not Machiavelli himself a poor Machiavellian, one of those who "are in the know" and foolishly give the game away, whereas vulgar Machiavellianism teaches one to do just the opposite? Croce asserted that Machiavellianism was a science, serving reactionaries and democrats alike, just as skilful swordplay serves both honest men and brigands, for self-defence and for murder; and that this was the sense in which Foscolo's opinion should be taken. This is true in the abstract. Machiavelli himself remarks that what he is writing about is in fact practised, and has always been practised, by the greatest men throughout history. So it does not seem that he was writing for those who are already in the know; nor is his style that of disinterested scientific activity; nor is it possible to think that he arrived at his theses in the field of political science by way of philosophical speculation – which would have been something of a miracle in that field at the time, when even today he meets with such hostility and opposition.

One may therefore suppose that Machiavelli had in mind "those who are not in the know", and that it was they whom he intended to educate politically. This was no negative political education – of tyrant-haters – as Foscolo seems to have understood it ; but a positive education-of those who have to recognise certain means as necessary, even if they are the means of tyrants, because they desire certain ends. Anyone born into the traditional governing stratum acquires almost automatically the characteristics of the political realist, as a result of the entire educational complex which he absorbs from his family milieu, in which dynastic or patrimonial interests predominate. Who therefore is "not in the know" ? The revolutionary class of the time, the Italian "people" or "nation," the citizen democracy which gave birth to men like Savonarola and Pier Soderini, rather than to a Castruccio or a Valentino.

Further Reading Suggestions

Recommended Secondary Literature:

- * Gramsci, A. "The Prince" in *Prison Notebooks* (1935)
- * Norbrook, D. *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (2009)
- * Pocock, J.G.A. *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (2016)
- * Skinner, Q. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978)
- * Waley, D. *The Italian City Republics* (1960)

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<https://www.notestoliterature.com/twelve-books-to-have>

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If you would like more information about Notes to Literature, please do get in touch with me at jonathan@notestoliterature.com or visit the website: notestoliterature.com.

If you are a school, or a company, and would like to inquire about arranging courses for your students or employees, please reach out. I can provide further details on the different kinds of approaches and services I offer depending on the particular learning contexts.

If you would like to pursue further independent reading on any of the authors in the booklet, or if you are setting up a reading group, I'm always happy to send on reading lists and guided reading questions that might be helpful for your discussions.

And of course, if you are interested in taking a course with Notes, I'd be delighted to hear from you. I offer free no-obligation meetings to discuss your goals, talk about some aspects of my approach, and think about how the courses could be tailored for you.

Happy reading.



About Me : Jonathan Gallagher

I received my doctorate in 2019 from the University of Edinburgh, where I taught several undergraduate courses, ranging from medieval and early modern literature, to Romantic, Modernist and Late-Modernist poetry and drama. My doctoral research examined the relationship between processes of state-formation in early modern England and the spectacular flourishing of religious poetry witnessed during the same period. This work has been published by leading academic journals in my field, and tries to show that religious poetry was vitally and critically responsive to broad changes in social relations and practices of rule in 17C England.

In my teaching, as in my research, I'm drawn to examining intellectual history and literary art in the context of given social and political conditions. With that in mind, in 2022, I founded Notes to Literature. My hope is that Notes will grow into a distinguished provider of personalised adult education in the humanities. The plan is to go about this one client at a time.

You can learn more about Notes and me here: <https://www.notestoliterature.com/my-work>

<https://edinburgh.academia.edu/JonathanGallagher>