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John P. McCormick, Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics

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In *Reading Machiavelli*, John McCormick continues the argument begun in his first book, *Machiavellian Democracy*, and in a host of journal articles, that Machiavelli is correctly understood as a proponent of populist government. Also continued here is the application of Machiavelli to democratic theory and contemporary political debates.

The two parts of *Reading Machiavelli* focus respectively on Machiavelli's writings and on Machiavelli scholarship. McCormick ably investigates one chapter from *The Prince*, one chapter from the *Discourses*, and three historical episodes from the *Florentine Histories*. In the second part he delivers stinging rebukes of Rousseau, Strauss, and the Cambridge school, represented by Pocock and Skinner. Each target is charged with underplaying, ignoring, or falsifying plain evidence of the populist commitments of Machiavelli and with misrepresenting him as an aristocratic/oligarchic republican in the mold of Aristotle, Cicero, and Bruni, later of Harrington, Montesquieu, and Madison. An added and interesting feature, giving rise to the title, is the claim that Machiavelli is properly read only when his evaluative statements are put against his descriptions of events. Machiavelli adopts an elusive style of writing meant to serve pedagogical and self-protective purposes. This style McCormick calls "literary-rhetorical" (8).

All the above is closely argued and elegantly rendered.

The first substantive chapter is on *Prince 7* and the career of Cesare Borgia. McCormick interprets the chapter as a Christian allegory. Thus, the Holy Father Alexander VI and his son Cesare are stand-ins for God and Jesus Christ. Pagolo Orsini, once called Paolo, is St. Paul. The dinner at Senigallia is the Last Supper. The piece of wood displayed next to the bifurcated body of Remirro de Orco is the cross and Crucifixion. The date of Remirro's execution, December 26, 1502, is St. Stephen's day, when nobles bestow gifts on the poor, making the execution a covenant with the "prince of peace." January 1, the date when the

newborn Jesus was circumcised, is the cutting of Remirro, Cesare's "political phallus." Finally, the disappearance of Cesare—meaning his removal to Spain—is the Ascension of Christ.

William Parsons, in his recent book *Machiavelli's Gospel* (University of Rochester Press, 2016) reads the whole of *The Prince* this way, as a Christian allegory aimed at subverting the faith. McCormick draws a somewhat different conclusion, that Machiavelli is proposing an armed populism as the true interpretation of Christianity, the union of Old Testament ferocity with New Testament charity. McCormick observes, "the parable of Cesare Borgia suggests that Christianity offers unprecedented possibilities for founding princely authority upon popular legitimacy—opportunities that Theseus, Cyrus, Romulus, or even Moses did not fully explore." McCormick then asks rhetorically, "what if one could in principle champion the weak, as does Christianity, but not in practice leave them weaponless, as did the most important unnamed, unarmed prophet in *The Prince*?" (42). At this juncture McCormick might well be on his way toward liberation theology, the harnessing of transcendental Christianity to secular, egalitarian ambitions. But he stops short and instead calls armed populism "political idealism" (43), of the sort that has an unarmed prophet conquering the future through the power of his books. Or perhaps not conquering at all, for political idealism is next dismissed as a "kingdom . . . made of 'air'" and an unreal grandiosity, like the project of unifying Italy (44). In any event, it's uncertain as to whether armed populism is still being offered as the true interpretation of Christianity.

There is, though, a bit of armed populism recommended, if not indeed executed, in the final act of Cesare, the favorite of the people and named by them Valentino. That famous mistake committed by Cesare, and that brings down Machiavelli's lone censure, namely, his agreeing to the installation of Giuliano della Rovere as Pope Julius II, could have been averted if Cesare had made the papacy hereditary and installed himself as pope, or if he had ended the papacy altogether, killing en masse the College of Cardinals. McCormick conjectures that as a "good Catholic boy" (38), Cesare, then desperately ill, was seeking salvation at his hour of death from the new Holy Father. Says McCormick, "A certain Christian frame of mind . . . presently inclines the duke to act, in Rome, in a manner diametrically opposed to how he previously behaved in Senigallia or Cesena" (39).

Two objections come to mind. First, if the Holy Father has special powers to forgive—a view at variance with Catholic doctrine, by the way—any Holy Father would do, and Cesare was in a position to block Giuliano’s ascension to the papacy. Second, Cesare expected not forgiveness per se (37-39), an act suggestive of sin and redemption, but forgetfulness, of his, or his father’s, injury to Giuliano. Here is the relevant passage from *The Prince*: “And whoever believes that among great personages new benefits will make old injuries be forgotten deceives himself” (*dimenticare*—though with “forgiveness” as a secondary meaning). The usual, and nonallegorical, explanation of Cesare’s mistake is that Valentino, a man of the people, knew the popular mind but not the mind of the great, specifically that the great are never grateful.

McCormick’s study of the *Discourses* zeroes in on chapter 37 of book I. The subject of 37 is agrarian legislation; the argument is that the plebeians erred—caused scandals—when in the time of the Gracchi brothers a campaign was launched to revive long-lapsed agrarian laws. Although Machiavelli supports the intention of limiting and redistributing private wealth, timing is important, and the agrarian policy, when later resuscitated, began the civil wars that ended the republic. Plebeian motives are also impugned, because, having fought for the tribunate out of necessity, only out of ambition did the plebs fight to share wealth and honors with the nobles.

The chapter, like several others, has the effect of blurring the class divide. Both classes are ambitious; both covet money more than they covet offices. McCormick though is determined to defend the class divide, because he is determined to place the blame for disturbances all on the nobles. The people can be excused for favoring tyrants since economic desperation is always the cause (60-61). Likewise, inequality is the cause of societal corruption, thus agrarian laws are a good thing, no matter when they occur. This likely goes too far, misreads 37, notwithstanding Machiavelli’s insistence that corruption would have come sooner without agrarian agitation; for, as Machiavelli later says, “to try to take away a disorder that has grown in a republic, and because of this to make a law that looks very far back, is an ill-considered policy.” And not mentioned are various other sources of corruption, for example, servility (I.16), security (I.18), irreligion (I.55), and foreign influence (I.55).

Chapter 37 provides another instance of armed populism, albeit unspoken. For the problem facing the Gracchi, says McCormick, was not bad timing so much as the too-little power they held as tribunes. The senate stood in their way; accordingly, the senate needed to go. The hidden teaching of 37 is that the Gracchi and the plebs should have slaughtered the senators, just as Agathocles, Clearchus, and Cleomenes had done in times past. Of course, Machiavelli does not say destroy the senate; but the reason for his reticence, McCormick supposes, is that the two young aristocrats to whom the book is addressed would have been aghast to learn of Machiavelli's true intentions, and so Machiavelli needed to trim and conceal. The "literary-rhetorical" mode of writing, known by everyone else as esotericism, speaks through silences. That may be true, but would not the esoteric requirement apply to the whole of the *Discourses*, and not to chapter 37 alone? Where is trimming and concealing in I.3 where the nobles are called "malignant"?

McCormick has one objective in the chapter on the *Florentine Histories*, namely, to refute "conservative-turn" scholars, as he dubs them, who find in the *Histories* a reevaluation of the class preferences exhibited by Machiavelli in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. Overt criticisms of the people in the former text, the *Histories*, contradict words of praise in the latter two. McCormick examines three instances of civil discord in Florence: the 1343 expulsion of the duke of Athens; the 1295 expulsion of Giano della Bella; and the Ciompi revolt of 1378. He argues that in all cases the positive actions of the people, as described by Machiavelli, belie the negative judgments of the people, as offered by Machiavelli. The explanation is the same as before, that Machiavelli's patrons, the Medicis this time, needed to be tricked and wooed.

A pair of corollaries to the conservative-turn position are additionally dismissed: (1) that Machiavelli changes his support from the two-class social division in Rome (patricians and plebeians) to the three-class social division in Florence (*ottimati*, *popolo*, and *popolo minuto*); and (2) that Machiavelli indicates a partiality for Venetian constitutionalism by the reforms he proposes in his 1520 "Discursus on Florentine Affairs." In the first case, answers McCormick, Machiavelli is adjusting to current socioeconomic realities and to the fact that Florence was an ill-founded state in the beginning and evolved into a poorly functioning commercial republic in the present. To the second, McCormick responds that the

aristocratic-like institutions proposed in the “Discursus” are expected to succumb to democratizing forces once the Medici pope has died, just as Rome moved ineluctably from monarchy, to aristocratic republic, to democratic republic.

McCormick’s careful reading of the *Florentine Histories* may very well establish the point of an unaltered assessment of the people across all books, but is that assessment unvaryingly positive? For in *Prince* 18, the people are branded ends-justify-means rationalizers, as well as fools easily taken in by appearances; and in *Discourses* I.53 and III.11 the Roman plebs and their tribune defenders are each called “insolent.” Nor are the nobles consistently condemned, for Quintius Cincinnatus is put forward as a good and prudent patriot who saved the republic from early demise by refusing a prolongation of his command in imitation of the tribunes who had extended theirs (III.24).

Part II begins with an investigation of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*. According to McCormick, a great injustice has been done to democratic theory by democratic theorists, who credit Rousseau, and not Machiavelli, as the source of their inspiration. Rousseau is unworthy, says McCormick, because in book IV of the *Social Contract*, he commends the Roman practice of weighted voting in the centuriate assembly, scorns the exclusion of patricians from the tribal assembly, judges clientelism “admirable” and “humane,” and minimizes the importance of the tribunate. Rousseau’s Rome is an aristocratic republic where the rich govern and the poor are granted some few protections from the abuse of power. McCormick concludes that Rousseau is more disturbed by the poor in power than he is devoted to equality and the general will.

It is undeniable that book IV poses a problem and comes as a surprise. Rousseau’s single-chambered assembly, operating by consensus and expressing the general will, is overlain onto a Roman assembly that bears no resemblance and serves a different purpose. The standard explanation is that Rousseau is trying to prove the applicability of the general will to communities larger than city-states, composed of populations more diverse than peasants under a tree. But that explanation cannot account for the laudatory language used to describe institutions manifestly inegalitarian and contrary to the prescriptions of the theoretical books that precede.

Three quick comments are in order. One, a point-by-point comparison of each author's Rome is hardly possible, because Machiavelli shows little interest in legislative power and speaks but rarely and vaguely about Rome's several assemblies. Two, Rousseau, drawing on Cicero, probably provides the more accurate account. And three, even if Rousseau's Rome makes for a clumsy case study of the general will, why choose to interpret the early books of the *Social Contract* in light of last book and so recast Rousseau as an aristocratic republican? The opposite choice, it so happens, is made respecting Machiavelli, that the last book, the *Florentine Histories*, be read in light of the early books, *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.

Leo Strauss comes in for heavy criticism, and here the attack seems personal: "Strauss's fundamental moral outlook [called "nonobjective" and "prerational" (145)] . . . is the belief that no genuine philosopher could actually favor in any serious way the judgment of peoples over [that] of elites"; further, "a powerful prejudice' . . . in favor of the few over the many seems to have decisively impacted his interpretation of Machiavelli's political thought" (174). Very carefully does McCormick review Strauss's many antipopulist reflections, touching on such subjects as the scope of popular participation—whether active or reactive; the quality of popular judgment—whether confined to particulars or extending to generalities; the number of recorded mistakes committed by the people vs. the elite; the "iron law of oligarchy," so called, whereby any plebeian leader becomes a patrician by the mere fact of office-holding; the contrast between superhuman founder princes and all-too-human senatorial princes; and the philosophical young, noticed and cultivated, as opposed to the "sons of Brutus," ignored and forgotten, with the result that their recommended destruction through popular tribunals disappears from Machiavelli's counsel.

Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli* is much too complex a book to allow for quick confirmation or rejection of these claims (but compare McCormick 8 with Strauss 127). Even so, Strauss is likely not the opponent McCormick thinks him to be. Strauss describes Machiavelli and his enlightenment project as radically egalitarian, reflecting the belief that human beings are merely animals. They may divide into lions, foxes, wolves, or sheep, but that sortition is less consequential than the fact that all are mortal and needy, and that all are the intended audience for Machiavelli's liberationist message. The political question of who

rules, so important to McCormick, is secondary to the philosophical question of rule for what purpose. That purpose is acquisition, a populist ambition.

Pocock and Skinner are criticized for folding Machiavelli into the civic-humanist tradition, with its goal of balance, harmony, and ordered liberty under the wise governance of aristocratic elites. Largely read out of Machiavelli, therefore, is his devotion to faction, tumult, and the active, ongoing involvement of the plebs. Somehow Pocock and Skinner missed the early chapters of the *Discourses* where Machiavelli chooses the democratic republic of Rome over the aristocratic republics of Sparta and Venice.

If I may speak now for myself, I agree that Machiavelli is a populist, provided that populism is contained inside a mixed regime. Machiavelli's sympathies are with the people—that I do not doubt—but less because the people are good than because the people are inert, credulous, and deferential to a fault, and so require constant prodding if they are to do their part in protecting liberty. But they can overreach, threaten liberty instead of guard it, at which point Machiavelli switches sides, lending assistance to the nobles, whose astuteness is as much needed by the state as the people's goodness. This he does in *Discourses* I.37, I think, and in many other chapters, giving advice on how to slow down the march toward simple-regime democracy, or admiring Roman practices that accomplished the same (e.g., temporizing, anticipation, cooptation). Democratic Athens, a simple regime with a single-chambered assembly, is rated much inferior to Rome's mixed regime (D. I.2). While full democracy is inevitable once the plebs are armed (D. I.60), the constitutional challenge is to delay indefinitely the moment of its arrival, because full democracy descends into the tyranny of one-man rule, completing the transit of the cycle of regimes. Does McCormick agree? I'm not sure. He once acknowledges that Machiavelli is "an advocate of mixed constitutions" (198). But on other occasions, McCormick's enthusiasm for the popular cause seems to glide into enthusiasm for pure democracy (e.g., 47-48, 115, 121, 129), cyclical history seems to straighten into linear progressive history (e.g., 138-40), and Machiavelli, the apologist for cruelty well-used, seems to morph into Cicero or Erasmus, asserting the unproblematic utility of (plebeian) virtue and promising peace on earth from virtue's empowerment (e.g., 78-82, 95-96). Despite reveling unashamedly in the rough and tumble of Machiavellian

politics, McCormick, from time to time, does seem to harbor a secret longing for proletarians in place of plebeians, living amicably and alone in a classless, post-political, Marxist utopia.