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John Patrick Coby

Smith College, pcoby@smith.edu

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MACHIAVELLI ON LIBERTY

John Patrick Coby
Professor of Government
Smith College
Northampton, MA

pcoby@smith.edu

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“Machiavelli on Liberty”

As an attribute of the people, liberty is self-protection from the abuse of power. It further is republican government, the rule of law, and civic independence, or it is the result of the same. Meanwhile, intelligence is an attribute of the great, and oppression is the goal of their ambitions. Machiavelli designates the people as the guardian of liberty. He appears to be their champion and the champion of republican constitutionalism. But Machiavelli is also an inveterate admirer of expansionist Rome, designating it the republic most worthy for imitation by moderns. He takes this position despite admitting that Rome destroyed every republic in the ancient world; he even boasts that Rome’s glory was all the more remarkable because the love of liberty made Rome’s adversaries incomparably obstinate. Does liberty then merely serve the end of glory, or has Machiavelli other relationships and valuations in mind?

KEYWORDS: Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Rome, republic, mixed regime, liberty, greatness, plebeians, patricians

1. LIBERTY DEFINED

No great mystery enshrouds Machiavelli’s conception of liberty.¹ Liberty, in the first instance, is self-protection from the abuse of power. Self-protection requires association by class, of which typically there are two, called humors: the people (*il popolo*) and the great (*i grandi*). The former want not to be oppressed; the latter want to oppress (*Prince* 9; *Discourses on Livy* I.4.1).² Liberty then is the byproduct of the institutional empowerment of the humors, which in Rome took the form of the tribunate for the people, the plebeians, or plebs, and the senate for the great, the patricians, or nobles. The contest between the humors, resulting in tumults and factional stalemate, was the hidden cause of all laws favoring freedom, argues Machiavelli. Military training was one such law (D.I.1.4).

Liberty, it seems, depends on a human race divided by class; or liberty remains a possibility, notwithstanding this division, if each class, and the people especially, is up to the task of self-defense. By disposition, a free people are, or must be, aggressive, envious, distrusting, and ungrateful. In other words,

¹ Scholars who give extended attention to the liberty theme in Machiavelli include Colish 1971, Danél 1997, Vatter 2000, Skinner 2002, Tarcov 2007, Benner 2009, Stacey 2013, and Levy 2014. Not all would agree, however, that Machiavelli’s treatment of the subject is unmysterious, nor do they necessarily confine themselves, as does this paper, to political meanings of liberty.

² Citations of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (hereafter “P”) are from the Mansfield translation (1998), and of the *Discourses on Livy* (hereafter “D”) from the Mansfield and Tarcov translation (1996). The latter includes paragraph numbering, which, when supplied, shows as the last number in the sequence. In some cases, where book and chapter have just been cited, the paragraph symbol (§) is used alone to avoid repetition. “Pr.” indicates preface.

a free people are “bad,” according to common use of the word. They resemble somewhat the great, described as “malignant,” and Machiavelli goes so far as to postulate a uniform human nature: “all men are bad” (D.I.3.1); “men are more prone to evil than to good” (D.I.9.2); “men ascend from one ambition to another” (D.I.46.title). But the class divide is reinstated by the effects of life in society, which, unlike the wilds of nature (D.I.16.1), afford humans unequal opportunities for acquisition, exciting ambition in some and depressing it in others. With their appetites persistently depressed, the people settle for lives of depravation and struggle, directing their energies toward acquiring daily necessities. They become a passive, unenterprising, at-rest population until threatened, that is, by a great bent on oppression. At which point the people rise in resistance, taking on some of the spirited qualities of their class opponents. The humoral difference still shows by the fact that the people are intermittently prideful and only when stimulated from without (D.I.5.4; I.6.2; I.37.2), while the great are self-starting acquirers always on the move. Liberty is produced and maintained when the humor of the people, in reaction, behaves like the humor of the great—or when the people are bad.

But a free people are also good, for they internalize and practice civic virtue, defined as selfless devotion to country, respect for superiors, piety, frugality, and obedience. An oxymoron is thus the people’s nature, though with opposing parts reconciled in this way: they are good toward their friends; they are bad toward their enemies.³ Sometimes friends include all their fellow citizens, as when the city is under attack by hostile neighbors. In times of war, the people follow their leaders, ally with their betters, and sacrifice for the common good. But when the city is at peace, the circle of friends contracts to include class members only; class opponents become enemies and the targets of the people’s suspicion and jealousy. The community shrinks, the community expands, and the people, if free and virtuous, alternate between the two poles of their nature.

³ Plato’s warriors are similarly described as an oxymoronic mix, likened to noble dogs who are savage toward strangers, gentle toward familiars (*Republic* 375a-376c). See Zmora (2004, pp. 440-42), who reconciles the two sides of the people’s nature by reducing the good side to “passive patriotism.” Clarke treats the good side (faithfulness, loyalty) as a liability threatening the health of republican government (2013). Grant puts all of politics in a middle ground between friendship and enmity (1997, pp. 18-56).

The great are of a different temper. Intelligence is their defining attribute, not goodness (though in Roman history some patricians were plainly good [e.g., Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus in D.III.24]). Lacking in numbers, the patricians were the weaker partner in the regime, despite their wealth, their offices, and their family ties. From their base in the senate, they issued opinions (*senatus consulta*) meant to steer the republic, but they did not rule as such.⁴ And rarely did the patricians confront the plebs directly. The patrician mode was rather to temporize (e.g., D.I.2.7; I.33)—to deceive, deflect, and delay. Patricians gave “willingly” what could not be withheld—for example, when the senate in 405 B.C.E. voted state pay for the soldiers laying siege to Veii (D.I.51). The soldiers accepted gladly what they saw as a free gift but what in reality was a necessary concession, for without pay the ten-year siege could not have been sustained. Anticipation is another term for giving freely. When at their best (or most shrewdly malignant), patricians anticipated plebeian requests, making grants, as with pay, before the tribunes could demand the same and take the credit. Anticipation, Machiavelli continues, is the easiest and least scandalous mode of stopping ambitious individuals in their tracks; applied consistently, anticipation would have resulted in the triumph of the patricians and the end of the tribunate (D.I.52.1). Patricians also temporized by deflection, as when they deflected onto one of their own plebeian outrage against their entire order. The plebs “vented” themselves against Coriolanus, who took the lead in, and the blame for, a patrician plot to force the plebs to give up the tribunate (D.I.7.1; also I.40.7).⁵ Lastly, there is delay, perhaps the principal form of temporizing. The weak may count as a victory a defeat that unfolds over decades or centuries. For nearly a century, from 462 to 367 B.C.E., the patricians prevented plebeian election to the consulship, replacing the office, when pressed, with the military tribunate with consular powers, to which plebeians were eligible, but to which none was elected for 45 years (445-400 B.C.E.) (D.I.47.1; also I.11.1).⁶ And for three centuries patricians successfully blocked plebeian demands for enforcement of agrarian laws, i.e., property caps and equal distributions of newly acquired lands. During this long campaign, patricians frequently resorted to

⁴ Lintott 1999, pp. 3-4, 87-88, 196-99.

⁵ Mansfield 1996, p. 246.

⁶ The consulship was restored in 367, at the insistence of plebeians (D.I.39.2), and in 342 one of its two offices was set aside for plebeian candidates. (Lintott 1999, p. 37).

cooptation, a temporizing maneuver whereby one of several tribunes was bribed, extorted, or flattered into thwarting his colleagues and assisting the patrician side (D.III.11.1).⁷ The dam finally burst during the tribunes of the Gracchi brothers (133-121 B.C.E.), whereupon Rome descended into 100 years of civil wars that ended the republic (D.I.6.1; I.37.1-2).

Liberty, in the second instance, is a share in the exercise of power. Machiavelli uses the expressions “a free way of life” (*vivere libero*), “a civil way of life” (*vivere civile*), and “a political way of life” (*vivere politico*) to connote varying degrees of power-sharing in regimes that are not absolute and tyrannical (e.g., D.I.2.7; I.9.1; I.25). The tribunes expanded their powers from defensively protecting plebeians accused of crimes (*provocatio, auxilium*) (D.I.3.2; I.44.1; I.49.3) and vetoing official decrees (*intercessio*), to offensively accusing patricians (D.I.7.1; I.45.3) and arbitrating their disputes (D.I.50.1).⁸ Other offices of state eventually opened to plebeian participation, including the consulship, the censorship, and the praetorship (D.I.5.2). Additionally, the plebeians early on had an assembly of their own, the *consilium plebis*, that made laws for plebs and that in time merged with the *comitia tributa* and made laws for everyone.⁹ Other free practices included civic equality (D.I.17.3; I.55.4-6; III.25), a citizen army (D.I.21.1; I.43), public delegation of authority (D.I.34.1), election of officials (D.I.58.3; III.34.4), and short terms of office (D.I.35).¹⁰ The Roman republic, by involving the people in the exercise of power, was a democratic mixed regime, unlike the Spartan republic that excluded the people and was an aristocratic mixed regime (D.I.6.2). As republics, both states were free, but the fuller meaning of liberty applied only to Rome.

Rome though was not a democracy, a simple regime governed only by the people, because patricians shared in power as did a consulate performing executive functions in lieu of a king. A simple regime—kingship, aristocracy, democracy—concentrates power in one person or group and is premised on the belief that the rulers are good and should have unrestrained power to accomplish maximum benefit for

⁷ The full powers of the tribunate resided in each of its ten members (as of 457 B.C.E.). Thus, any one tribune could veto the decision of the other nine. Heitland 1909, pp. 62-63.

⁸ Lintott, 1999, pp. 121-28. McCormick stresses the importance of the tribunate in the Roman constitutional order (2011, pp. 92-97; 2018, pp. 135-36).

⁹ Von Fritz 1954, pp. 451-52; Nicolet 1980, pp. 217-26.

¹⁰ Colish 1971, pp. 341-42; Viroli, 1990, pp. 152-56; Winter 2019, pp. 149, 153.

all. If, or when, the rulers turn bad—probably because of the temptations of power, but certainly because of hereditary succession (D.I.2.2-3; I.10.4)—a new group takes charge (by revolution), replacing old badness with new goodness, decadence with health. Machiavelli is unimpressed, however, in part because regime change is more tumult than a state can long survive (D.I.2.4); but also because mixed regimes are premised on the more realistic belief that rulers are bad—meaning selfish, insolent, shortsighted, and cruel.¹¹ Bad people in office are wont to do bad things, so bad people should be checked and watched, not set loose and trusted. People are good (rulers and subjects alike) only when they have to be (D.I.3.2), when danger threatens and only collective action can save. In such times, out of necessity, the divided power of mixed regimes coalesces, or the scattered parts of sovereignty combine, enabling now good people to do good and useful things. But when the danger recedes and the danger-induced goodness abates, bad people experience again the constraints on their power that mixed regimes provide. Reactive or negative liberty, practiced by bad people in easy times, oscillates with active or positive liberty, practiced by good people in hard times. The mixed regime is superior to simple regimes because it better reflects the good and bad sides of human nature.

In one other respect was Rome a democratic mixed regime. Rome conferred on its plebeian population the unofficial and ill-defined title of “guard of freedom.”¹² The tribunes performed this function (D.I.4.2; I.40.7), defending the liberty of the city—and not simply of the plebs—by preventing ambitious individuals from supplanting the republic (D.I.29.3; I.46). Dictators, consuls, censors, and senators did, or could do, the same (D.I.5.4; III.1.3; III.8.1; III.28), but primary reliance was placed on the tribunes, because they belonged to and served the more moderate people, who, desiring “not to be dominated,” had “a greater will to live free”; and, being unable to “usurp” freedom themselves, would “not permit others to seize it” (D.I.5.2). Sparta, conversely (and Venice among the modern states), entrusted this responsibility to the nobles, further adding to the aristocratic character of its regime.

¹¹ Pedullà 2018, pp. 121-26.

¹² Guicciardini expresses puzzlement over the title, since in his view guardianship is part of governance and is proper to simple regimes, and since in Rome’s mixed regime nobles and plebs alike guarded liberty against usurpers (Atkinson and Sices 2002, pp. 394-95).

Liberty, in the third instance, means the rule of law. This lesser, attenuated form of liberty is akin to justice and security. Liberty as law, however, is not the preserve of republics, for even monarchical regimes can provide and be tempered by it. France, says Machiavelli, is “a kingdom that is moderated more by laws than any other kingdom of which knowledge is had in our times” (D.I.58.2). Princes can opt to rule by law, and those who do “will find that a small part of them [previously free people] desires to be free so as to command, but all the others, who are infinite, desire freedom so as to live secure” (D.I.16.5). Freedom, as in command, cannot be allowed to subjects, for popular rule is inconsistent with princely rule. But only 40 or 50 citizens in a republic exercise and covet such freedom; all others are satisfied with law, justice, and security, which may encompass property rights and the protection of women (P. 17). A law-bound prince is perhaps what Machiavelli means by a civil prince, the subject of P. 9.

In a fourth, and still thinner instance, liberty means civic independence. Merely to escape the control of a foreign power is to enjoy freedom of a sort. At the moment of its founding, a city is free if it is not a dependent colony of a mother state (D.I.1.4). It may be inhabited by non-native peoples and live under the orders of an authoritative figure—even so, it is counted free. Rome, whether founded by Aeneas in flight from Troy or by Romulus leading settlers from Alba Longa, “had a free beginning, without depending on anyone” (§5). Florence, by contrast, was founded under the Roman empire; and deformed by the experience, it was unable to “make any gains other than those conceded to it by courtesy of the prince” (§3; D.I.49.3).

2. LIBERTY DEFENDED

The case for liberty overlaps with the case for republics and the people. Liberty, as said, is the condition of the people (and of the dominating nobles indirectly), the consequence of their not being oppressed and, in some cases, of their sharing in power and defending the state from usurpers. But are the people competent practitioners and guardians of liberty? Most writers, and Livy included, think not: “That nothing is more vain and inconstant than the multitude so our Titus Livy, like all other historians, affirms” (D.I.58.1). Machiavelli is of a different mind, however, and announces himself the first-ever defender of

the popular cause, taking on himself “a hard task full of so much difficulty.” The task in question is a fair comparison of princes and of peoples in power, shackled or unshackled by law, “for everyone who is not regulated by laws would make the same errors as the unshackled multitude,” and “all err equally when all can err without respect” (§1). But, Machiavelli avers, when likes are compared, the people, shackled, prove to be “more prudent, more stable, and of better judgment than a prince” (§3). The proof of their prudence and better judgment is as follows: the people’s voice is the voice of God; the people possess a “hidden virtue” allowing them to forecast their future; the people are nearly unerring in their choice of policies and candidates and never confer dignities on infamous men. Likewise, the proof of the stability or constancy of the people is established by their centuries-long horror of horrible things (e.g., the Roman people’s aversion to the name of king). Also, states increase rapidly when under popular rule, justifying the conclusion that “governments of peoples are better than those of princes,” exceeding principalities “in goodness and in glory.” And though not matching princes as orderers of laws and civil lives, the people attain equal glory as maintainers of whatever orders have been given (§3). On the other side, when unshackled by law, a licentious and tumultuous people can be returned to goodness by the persuasive speech of a distinguished individual, whereas assassination is the only remedy for a lawless prince. The anarchy of popular misrule is itself nonthreatening, and only future effects are feared (tyranny); while the tyranny of princely misrule is presently threatening, and a better future is anticipated by all (freedom). The wrath of the people is directed against those who would “seize the common good,” the wrath of a prince against those who would “seize his own good.” Finally, the unfavorable opinion of the people, propagated by writers, results from the fact that the people in power are lenient toward their critics; a prince, conversely, is a persecutor (§4). In the next chapter, D.I.59, Machiavelli adds trustworthiness to his panegyric, claiming that the people, republics, are more trustworthy allies than are princes. And in an earlier chapter, D.I.29, he states that the people are less ungrateful than are princes, having fewer causes for avarice and suspicion; further, that ingratitude in a republic, like tumult, is actually a benefit, as it helps to keep a city free (§3).

Machiavelli’s most confident remarks in support of liberty and republics come in D.II.2. Peoples of the ancient world loved liberty most because they experienced first-hand the advantages of life in a free

state. Free states increase in size and wealth, enjoying sudden spurts of growth once a free way of living is adopted (D.II.2.1; I.58.3). They grow because they put the common good ahead of the particular good. Free living is a spur to marriages and procreation, to opportunity and enterprise. Riches multiply because “each willingly multiplies that thing and seeks to acquire those goods he believes he can enjoy once acquired.” Again, law matters, protecting an individual’s inheritance and the fruits of his labor. Political ambition is stimulated in individuals, as the possibility of officeholding (becoming “princes”) exists for themselves or their children. Even rivals are improved by life in republics, competing to advance the public good along with their private advantage (§3). Elsewhere it is said that free states (Rome especially) are better able to expand, because they utilize the energy and optimism of their liberty-loving citizens (D.I.4.1; I.6.3-4). And having expanded, they endure longer, because for leaders they have, through their mode of election, “infinite virtuous princes who are successors to one another”; principalities, on the other hand, are lucky to have two virtuous princes in a row (D.I.20.1). This larger pool of experienced leaders allows free states to adjust to the changing times and thus assert some measure of control over fortune: “Hence it arises that a republic has greater life and has good fortune longer than a principality, for it can accommodate itself better than one prince can to the diversity of times through the diversity of the citizens that are in it” (D.III.9.2). To this list of benefits, *The Prince* adds that republics provide inoculation from princely rule, or eventual escape should it occur, because free institutions are never forgotten and the name of liberty is a rallying cry for rebellion (P.5).¹³

In sum, liberty is a good because it releases the productive energies of the body politic, leading to increases of dominion and wealth; and because the people—prudent, constant, trustworthy, and grateful—are fully capable of sharing in power. Accordingly, republics are better than principalities.

¹³ Pocock 1975, p. 165. Pocock goes further in his praise of republics. Calling the republic a “structure of virtue,” he includes among its advantages the development of man’s nature as a “political animal” (p. 184). But whether Machiavelli would accept this implied linkage to Aristotle is open to question. See Sullivan 1992, pp. 309-18; Vatter 2000, pp. 20-21; Rahe 2008, pp. 22-55; and Levy 2014, pp. 6-8.

3. LIBERTY ATTACKED

We needn't read far into the *Discourses* before discovering that not all is right with liberty. In the very first chapter, it is stated that wise founders select sites that impose necessities and remove choice. This they do because choice, or liberty, is the cause of corruption—idleness and discord—whereas necessity is the cause of goodness—industriousness and unity: “there is greater virtue to be seen where choice has less authority” (D.I.1.4; also II.12.3; III.6.10). The same point was suggested before, that people are selfless in times of war and scarcity, self-indulgent in times of peace and plenty (D.II.25.1). But more, it seems, is required of a wise founder than simply preferring a barren site over a fertile site, because the wisdom of this selection depends on others making it too (all content to live off their own and not wishing to command others), and Machiavelli warns that such a concert is not to be expected. Thus, truly wise founders replace nature's necessities with the necessities of law. Military orders are the example in D.I.1. In D.I.2, and following chapters, the example is the mixed regime, where the organized opposition of class keeps opponents and rulers in check. Laws though are made by men, exercising some degree of choice, so law affords more freedom of action than does the necessity of the sterile site. Such freedom, however, is not always a detriment, for one drawback to nature's necessities is that, while sure, they are beyond human control—a sterile site prevents expansion should expansion become an imperative—whereas law can be changed (D.I.18). But is law an adequate replacement for nature, retaining enough necessity to forestall corruption with equal effectiveness? Probably not, because Machiavelli devotes three chapters to investigating the question of whether liberty can *coexist* with corruption, taken to be inevitable (D.I.16-18). The results of his inquiry are none too encouraging: a republic cannot be maintained in a corrupt city, and the loss of virtue can only be corrected by modes that are “almost impossible,” namely, “little by little” reform and reform “all at a stroke.” The former mode requires a man of foresight (unlikely “ever to emerge”) able to persuade a sightless multitude (likely “never [to] be able”);¹⁴ the latter mode requires

¹⁴ It bears noting that much of Roman history is an example of little-by-little reform, of continuous foundings and managed accidents, and that half the reason for Machiavelli's admiration of Rome is that it preserved its virtue for so many centuries, even while expanding in size and power (D.I.1.1, 5; I.34.3; I.49.1). See Zuckert 2014, pp. 267, 294.

“violence and arms” and either a good man willing to use bad means or a bad man willing to serve good ends.¹⁵ In cases where corruption is advanced, this latter mode is the only mode, because nothing less than “an almost kingly power” can correct insolent men unwilling to be checked by law (D.I.18.4-5).¹⁶ And while the progress of corruption is ordinarily slow (the centuries it took Rome to subdue the Mediterranean world), corruption can occur in a flash, Machiavelli observes (D.I.42, title).

If the people are easily corrupted and only an uncorrupted people are fit for liberty (D.I.55.2), what is the status of those estimable qualities ascribed to the people in D.I.58 and used to prove their superiority to princes? As it happens, much of the evidence is suspect. To take but two examples:¹⁷ It is stated there that the people, possessing a “hidden virtue” and channeling the wisdom of God, accurately forecast their future (§3). But the opposite is contended in D.I.53 and supported by events in Roman, Greek, and Florentine history, and by the authority of a famed poet. The people cry “‘Life!’ to its death and ‘Death! to its life,” writes Dante; thus, if good and ill futures are correctly foreseen, they are not correctly understood or chosen. Moreover, the people are easily persuaded to launch themselves into reckless adventures. Rome’s several ill-advised battles fought against Hannibal and sold to the public by demagogic leaders serve as proof of how “much are peoples blinded in these mighty opinions” (§2). The same holds for Athens’s calamitous Sicilian Expedition (415-13 B.C.E.), undertaken against the advice of Nicias, and Florence’s failed siege of Pisa (1505 C.E.), undertaken against the advice of “many wise citizens” (§5). From all the above, Machiavelli concludes “that there is no easier way to make a republic where the people has authority come to ruin than to put it into mighty enterprises.” At least in cases of mighty enterprises and for a people “of any moment” (§5), the popular consensus (“universal opinion”) *does not* “produce marvelous effects in its forecasts” (D.I.58.3)—unless by marvelous effects Machiavelli means total disasters!

A second example touches on the alleged competence of the people operating as an electorate. Machiavelli claims that the Roman people’s choice of candidates was nearly flawless over centuries of

¹⁵ While such combinations are rare, Machiavelli has a marked affinity for them (D.I.9.4; I.10.6; I.55.5; II.30.5; III.1.3; III.22.3), and increasing their occurrence is arguably the main purpose of the *Discourses*.

¹⁶ Raimondi 2018, pp. 9-17

¹⁷ For a complete account, see Coby 1999, pp. 255-61.

elections. But Machiavelli reports in D.I.48 that plebeian voters were manipulated by the nobles and that the elections were effectively rigged. For the nobles recruited as candidates plebeians too vile to elect or patricians too worthy to refuse; so if the plebs always judged rightly of candidates—“particulars,” the message of D.I.47—they achieved this record of success courtesy of outside coaching. It was not then by accident that for 45 years the plebs failed to elect a single military tribune from their own ranks. And while it may redound to the credit of the people that words can return them “to the good way” and to the discredit of princes that only “steel” can supply a cure—and while the “greater cure” proves the “greater errors,” as Machiavelli further asserts—it is not at all clear that killing a tyrannical prince is harder than reforming a corrupt society, or that the former cure is indeed the “greater cure” (D.I.58.4; also I.10.6; I.18.5). One argument in favor of principalities is that they are less virtue-dependent and so less vulnerable to the ill effects of corruption.

What though of the many practical benefits of liberty spoken of in D.II.2? They too are not as clear-cut as they appear. For example: Rome was successful in its wars because it fought its enemies one at a time (D.II.1.1). Machiavelli is at pains to show that Rome’s good fortune was in fact Rome’s sound strategy. In the campaign against Tuscany (Etruria) just to the north, Rome conquered Veii, one of the twelve cities of the Tuscan league, without having to engage the combined might of the confederation—an obvious case of one-by-one warfare (though mentioned in the following chapter). Veii was detached from the confederal whole because the liberty-loving Tuscans could not abide that Veii had given itself a king to better provide for its defense against Rome. So offended were the Tuscan confederates by this abandonment of republicanism, that they refused their assistance to Veii in its hour of need (D.II.2.1). It seems, therefore, that ideological purity—the love of liberty carried to the point of blind intransigence—caused the Tuscan confederation to neglect its own interest and fall prey to the Roman strategy of one-by-one conquest. When faced with a comparable threat the century before, against a Latin alliance, Rome augmented executive power with the creation of the dictatorship (D.I.33.1). On the occasion, Rome avoided using the name of king so as not to disturb its people’s hatred for the same—a mark of the people’s constancy, it’s been said (D.I.58.3). But such constancy by the Romans was mostly a fraud (D.I.2.7; I.25.1), while the more genuine

constancy displayed by the Tuscans was the reason for their undoing. Nor is Machiavelli much impressed with names: “it is forces that easily acquire names, not names forces” (D.I.34.1).

Corcyra provides another example of liberty-loving gone awry. During the early years of the Peloponnesian War, the demos of Corcyra, locked in battle with the city’s oligarchs, sought and received succor from Athens (425 B.C.E.). Gaining the upper hand, the demos inflicted unspeakable cruelties on their class opponents. Machiavelli’s purported lesson is the vehemence with which lost freedom is avenged; but another, implied, lesson is the subjection to outside powers that such vehemence can produce (D.I.2.4; I.7.2). Party strife made Corcyra a pawn in a great-power struggle and a client state of Athens. And the barbarism exhibited at Corcyra is a reminder that the liberty of the people and their devotion to the common good need not encompass the liberty and the good of individuals, who often are “crushed” (D.II.2.1).

Seen from the other side, the examples of conquered and subjected states call into question the value of civic independence, one of the meanings of liberty identified earlier. Rome’s military and diplomatic policy, which proceeded by force and by fraud, compelled or deceived adversaries into submitting to Roman rule. Some even surrendered willingly, expecting better government by Roman praetors than by their own elites (D.II.32.2). Over time, subdued Italians became Roman citizens (to varying extents), subsuming their identities as Veientes, Hernici, Volsci, Samnites, etc. (D.II.3). Did they lose by the exchange? Is association at higher levels always a mistake? If so, free families should resist joining into free villages, free villages into free cities. Indeed, the solitary individual, being freest of all, should remain forever in a state of isolation. The love of liberty is more intense the more locally liberty is practiced, but such love and such liberty can interfere with combinations needed for defense or better living. Machiavelli contends that the “unhappiest [state] is that of a prince or a republic brought to the extreme where it cannot accept peace or sustain war.” Freedom does not make states happy if freedom cannot be defended but will not be given up. For such states “must either throw themselves forth as prey for whoever aids them or be left as prey for the enemy” (D.II.23.2). Circumstances matter, and in circumstances where the cost of freedom is inordinate, or where compensatory benefits avail—peace, prosperity, legal rights—the wiser course may be amalgamation in a larger union (D.I.12.2). And since only a handful of citizens ever take

full advantage of free living or concern themselves with glory, what harm do they suffer by trading the thick identity of a village Samnite for the thin identity of an imperial Roman?

In fact, Machiavelli's praise of liberty in D.II.2 is offered chiefly as a compliment to Roman imperialism. In amassing its empire, Rome had to overcome the stiff resistance of republics spread throughout central and southern Italy. The love of liberty, remarks Machiavelli, was what made these cities so obstinate and fierce. At the same time, their defeat at the hands of Rome afforded opportunities for displaying Rome's "excessive virtue," or "rare and extreme virtue" (D.II.2.1-2).¹⁸ Machiavelli then traces the absence of republics in the modern world to "the Roman Empire," that "with its arms and its greatness, eliminated all republics and all civil ways of life." Christianity, or "our religion," by glorifying "humble and contemplative more than active men," is given as the reason why no republican revival has yet occurred in the West (§2). But it was Rome in the first place that destroyed these republics.

That record of despoliation notwithstanding, Machiavelli chooses Rome as the ancient republic most serviceable for imitation by moderns, speaking often of the greatness that it obtained (e.g., D.I.6.4; 34.3; II.Pr.3; II.9), a greatness, we now learn, that came at the expense of liberty. Since Machiavelli makes it his purpose to resuscitate Rome (D.I.Pr.2)—that destroyer of liberty!—should we conclude that Machiavelli regards liberty as an instrumental good only, useful for gathering strength and delivering worthy opponents for conquest in battle—who by their defeat add luster to the conqueror's glory—but not a primary value in its own right?

Some scholars think so; some do not. Mark Hulliung, insisting on the prominence of the imperial theme in Machiavelli's thought, describes Rome as a predator state whose free institutions supplied the energy for its expansion: "Social conflict . . . fuels a machine of war, the Roman republic bent on greatness;" and: "Republicanism is predatory . . . such is Machiavelli's striking claim."¹⁹ Quentin Skinner appears to agree, though perhaps without a strong means-end correlation intended. Searching for prehumanist correspondences with the *Discourses*, he represents greatness as the civic goal and liberty as its cause:

¹⁸ Benner construes these adjectives as a criticism of Rome (2009, pp. 215-16).

¹⁹ Hulliung 1983, p. 26. Fisher adopts the same view (2000, pp. 88-89).

“Machiavelli fully endorses the long-standing view that the highest ends to which any city can aspire are those of civic glory and greatness”; and: “The essence of Machiavelli’s republicanism” is “that no city can ever attain greatness unless it upholds a free way of life.”²⁰ Maurizio Viroli reverses the relationship, elevating liberty to the end and demoting greatness to the means: “Machiavelli was arguing not that we should give priority to the pursuit of greatness over the preservation of the *vivere politico*. Expansion and war . . . can have no priority over the liberty and the good order of the city.”²¹ Mikael Hörnqvist, also looking for humanist and prehumanist precedents, regards liberty and greatness as complements reflecting the internal and external ends of a healthy republic: “Far from being two contrary or separate values, liberty and acquisition are thus inextricably connected; they lend each other mutual support, and they constitute together the nerve center of the healthy republic.”²² Still another scholar, John Plamenatz, sees liberty and greatness as opposites and concludes that Machiavelli never could decide between them: “Though he loved freedom . . . he also loved Italy, and wanted her to be great. . . . He never succeeded in reconciling his two stronger passions: for political freedom and for the independence of Italy.”²³

The position taken here—somewhat different from the above—is that liberty and greatness relate as stages in a cycle, equally valid and equally welcome. One is not the inferior good appreciated as the precondition for the superior (however inferior and superior are decided); nor are they complements exactly, not when the logic of imperialism is carried to its conclusion;²⁴ and nor are they irreconcilables, moral opposites, demanding total commitment to one at the expense of the other.

Before making that case, however, an excursus on middle ways and extreme ways is necessary.

²⁰ Skinner, 1990, pp. 137, 141; see also 1978, pp.157-58.

²¹ Viroli 1990, pp. 159-60; 1998, pp. 115-16, 121-43.

²² Hörnqvist 2004, pp. 74, 186-87.

²³ Plamenatz 1992, p. 82.

²⁴ The danger of coming to Machiavelli from Florentine history is that Florence’s power, regional at best, never encountered the problem of greatness devouring liberty. Huiling speaks to this point: “[Leonardo] Bruni’s imperialism quit after reaching the outer limits of Tuscany because he recalled the history of ancient Rome. . . . For Machiavelli, however, there was no turning back, no halfway measures were acceptable—it was all or nothing . . .” (p. 26). Scholars who read Machiavelli’s advice as less than “all or nothing” (certainly for Florence and perhaps for Rome) include Zuckert—defensive confederation (2014, pp. 264, 270, 273-74, 278, 281; 2017, p. 185); Levy—multipolar competition (2014, pp. 41-48); and Winter—invisible administration (2018, pp. 161-65). Cf. Coby 1999, pp. 118-21, 245-47.

4. MIDDLE WAYS AND EXTREME WAYS

Machiavelli insistently, and famously, rejects the middle way: The Romans “always fled from the middle way and turned to extremes” (D.II.23.1).²⁵ In the matter of judging conquered cities, Rome “either benefited them or eliminated them” (§1), whereas the Florentines “used that middle way that is very harmful in judging men,” exiling, fining, or degrading fallen foes (§2). Of the extreme Roman mode, says Machiavelli, “it is notable and deserves to be observed so that it can be imitated” (§1); while of the middling Florentine mode (and Samnite mode among the ancients), he says, “one ought to flee altogether from the middle way, which is harmful” (§4).

The middle way that Machiavelli scorns appears in numerous forms throughout the *Discourses*. It is, as in D.II.23, retributive justice, or the aspiration to give in rewards or punishments exactly what is due, thus falling between the extremes of giving too much reward (caressing) or giving too much punishment (eliminating). In a related form, it is a political ideal, the nontumultuous politics of the aristocratic mixed regime (“the true political way of life and true quiet of a city”) where domestic forces are forever harmonized, balanced, and at rest (D.I.6.4). It is also a forced compromise grudgingly accepted by the parties or the least bad of several bad options. Examples are the military tribunate with consular power, a mean between patrician consuls and plebeian consuls (D.I.47.1); another is the man of quality who tries hoeing to a middle way between befriending or opposing his prince (D.III.2.). In ethics too there is a middle way, conduct between the “altogether wicked” and the “altogether good” (D.I.26.; I.27.title—but see below). Here one encounters princes who set their sights on wicked ends but who, encumbered by conscience, fear, or small-mindedness, permit themselves commission of one or two crimes but not the number needed to accomplish their objectives, or who vacillate in the selection of means, settling for half measures implemented in slow-motion. Steady adherence to any of these middle ways is quite impossible. Either they seek escape from nature’s “true way,” which is acquisition (D.II.19.1; also P.3), or nature’s motions, “the times,” turn against them, disfavoring caution for impetuosity, or impetuosity for caution.

²⁵ Hörnqvist 2004, pp. 103-12.

Thus, Machiavelli recommends surrendering to character and proceeding “as nature forces you” (D.III.9.1), the ultimate extreme way.

But there are other middle ways that do not violate nature’s true way, that are themselves modes of acquisition.²⁶ One example, perhaps unexpected, is the virtuous prince of P.15-19. Far from surrendering to character, this prince strives to have no character at all so as to be free to alternate between qualities that lie in a middle way of praise-winning behavior, while avoiding extremes ways of blame-incurring behavior—who is liberal, merciful, faithful, when lovable qualities pay; or is miserly, cruel, faithless, when fearsome qualities pay—and who thus stays always in the good graces of the humors. Comparable to an actor on a stage, the characterless prince is a performer, changing personae like costumes to suit the changing moods of his audience. Such a prince is a consistent crowd-pleaser and master of his personal fortune.²⁷

²⁶ Strauss 1958, pp. 240-44.

²⁷ The table combines Machiavelli’s comments on rule by love and rule by fear with the list of qualities presented in P.15 and discussed in following chapters; and it adds moral categories taken from D.I.26-27. It shows a middle way consisting of actions deemed “good” because in line with conventional morality, but also of actions deemed “honorably wicked” because excused by necessity. (Four qualities fall outside the middle way, because they are only described as blame-incurring.) Providing a praise-winning lane for “honorably wicked” conduct might be regarded as the essence of Machiavelli’s ethical innovation. The mastery of fortune that these chapters from *The Prince* imply is, however, disputed in P.25 and D.III.8-9, with fatalistic reflections on the fixity of character.

EXTREME WAY BLAME	MIDDLE WAY PRAISE		EXTREME WAY BLAME
CONTEMPT <u>“Altogether Good” (D.I.26)</u> effeminate & pusillanimous (unarmed—P.14) light	LOVE (Gentleness, Peace) <u>“Good” (P.15)</u> liberal giving merciful faithful humane chaste honest agreeable religious	FEAR (Strength, War) <u>“Honorably Wicked” (D.I.27)</u> mean (miserly) cruel faithless fierce & spirited proud astute hard grave unbelieving	HATRED <u>“Altogether Wicked” (D.I.26)</u> rapacious lascivious

This middle-way acquiring is not restricted, however, to cleverly flexible princes seeking selfish advantage without limit. For some acquisitive modes are moderate and cooperative, with acquired goods shared and not hoarded.²⁸ The primary example is the Roman mixed regime, structured to endure and expand, while evolving over time. Its founder, Romulus, shared power with patricians (senate) and the people (citizen army) (D.I.9.2; I.11.2; I.19.1), and he shared glory with reformer princes who reformed *inside* of ancient orders (cf. D.I.9.title). Rome was an amalgam of old and new—a combination of ancient republicanism and modern cosmopolitanism. It espoused the republican principle of private poverty/public wealth (D.III.25.), but in practice it was never as austere and egalitarian as Sparta (D.I.37.1; I.6.2-3), nor as pious as contemporary Germany (D.I.55.1-2); and it certainly was not isolated, but rather an expansionist power encountering new nations on its ever-advancing borders; on the other hand, Rome was fully timocratic, deriving its wealth from conquest, not industry (D.II.19.1; III.5.). Its military policy relied chiefly on indirect warfare, alliances that absorbed and subordinated partners, and on repeated raiding that achieved victory in less time than sieges, but in more time than stormings (D.II.32.2). A preference for defensive wars fought at home cost Rome the chance of acquiring a kingdom at the moment of winning a battle (D.II.12.1). And Roman equanimity, based on knowledge of the world, was a virtuous mean between insolence in good fortune and abjectness in bad (D.III.31.2-3). Other approved middle ways include law as a mean between necessity and choice; plebeians trained to be both proud and humble; temporizing nobles, whose tactics fell between resistance and capitulation; and, of course, liberty, a state between domination and servility.

Some of this material repeats from the preceding review of liberty, which is not surprising, because the middle ways endorsed by Machiavelli bespeak his genuine regard for liberty,²⁹ just as the extreme ways bespeak his genuine regard for greatness—or so it is here contended.

²⁸ For a possible parallel, see Benner (2017, pp. 171, 184), who distinguishes between “go-it-alone” and “collaborative” realism.

²⁹ What though of the prince who travels the middle way of praised behavior? Is he an agent of liberty? Yes, if only inadvertently. He is told, pursuant to saving his state, that he has more freedom of action than he might realize, but that in choosing between good and bad qualities, he must be ever mindful of the opinions of his subjects, whose praise and blame are everything to him. Such advice effectively obliges the prince to attend to his subjects’ interests

5. LIBERTY AND GREATNESS

Acquisition is the true way, but the qualities needed for acquisition represent the true goal. These qualities, called *virtù*, are the boldness of the lion and the craftiness of the fox (P.18). They are for their own sake, the human good that Machiavelli most admires and hopes to revive.³⁰ They appear in different forms and concentrations, depending on person and class. In the people, *virtù* is civic virtue manifesting as love of liberty, a “Don’t Tread on Me” defiance of abusive power, but also a willingness to cooperate for common benefits. In the nobles, *virtù* is foxy astuteness, the temporizing cleverness by which the nobles manage the conflict of the orders, while their love of power, the ambition to command and dominate, turns virtuously outward, toward conquest, when checked domestically by the plebs.³¹ In the prince, *virtù* is greatness, conquest on a grand scale earning the prince glory. *Virtù* then is intelligent fighting, whether for liberty, for domination, or for fame. When all three acquiring types combine, Rome (or its equivalent) is the result.³²

Rome passed through phases. It began, under kings, as a village along the Tiber; it ended, under caesars, as an empire bestriding the world. In between it was a republic with a democratic bent and a regional, then a peninsular, and finally a Mediterranean power. Machiavelli is not so partial toward the republican phase as to be hostile toward the imperial, for Rome was incipiently both: “Those who read what the beginning was of the city of Rome . . . will not marvel . . . that afterward the empire that the republic attained arose there” (D.I.1.1).³³ Moreover, Machiavelli appeals to necessity to justify expansion, and he

simultaneous with attending to his own. The middle-way prince, therefore, is part of the republican subtext of *The Prince*, along with befriend the people, arm the people, forego fortresses, etc. Tarcov 2007.

³⁰ Animal strength and animal intelligence represent for Machiavelli the real human good and are real human virtues, whereas “humane” and “humanity” in P.18 are but outward appearances. Huilling 1983, p. 23; Levy 2014, p. 36.

³¹ Winter 2018, p. 160.

³² Hörnqvist 2004, p. 191. By conflating the prince with the nobles, Mansfield reduces three acquiring types to two and aligns them with the two humors (1996, p. 24).

³³ Machiavelli uses the word “empire” in a loose sense to mean riches, power, expansion, in which case expansionist Rome was imperial throughout its history, whether led by kings, consuls, or caesars. He also uses the word to mean Rome under the emperors, as in, “when Rome became an empire . . . those emperors” (D.I.10.4). In this latter sense, Rome’s empire had a fairly clear beginning—and its republic a fairly clear end—allowing for approximate division into republican and imperial phases. The imperial phase might also include conquests outside Italy by the late republic. Machiavelli places the “ultimate greatness” of the consular republic in 265 B.C.E., just before the start of the Punic Wars (D.I.20). The statement is oblique, however, with alternate interpretations possible: for either “ultimate

accepts tumult between the classes “as an inconvenience necessary to arrive at Roman greatness” (D.I.6.4). Expansion and greatness are requirements of nature; grow or die is the rule (D.II.Pr.2). By the same token, republican Rome is not merely a prelude to imperial Rome, with liberty viewed as the means by which strength is acquired, and greatness the end to which strength is put. Machiavelli respects and defends them both. He is a constitutionalist who analyzes the counterbalancing offices of Rome’s mixed regime and who counsels shared power, the rule of law, middle ways, and common goods. Caution is advised (D.II.27). He also is an imperialist who celebrates Rome’s attainment of world dominance and who strives to persuade contemporaries to take up the cause of national greatness. Extreme ways, exemplary punishments, *uno solo* founders, and new princes (usurpers) all meet with his approval. Impetuosity is advised (P.25). In the former case, virtue is distributed between the humors and dispersed across states. Equals combat, bringing out the best in their opponents; none though is excellent, illustrious, and memorable. In the latter case, virtue is collected in one champion, whose final victory is both the culmination and the termination of the competition. The triumphant state is singular and glorious; but without challengers it soon loses its edge and its virtue declines. Rome destroyed all republics in the ancient world, and Rome then destroyed itself—by prolonging commands (D.III.24), abusing election laws (D.I.18.3), paying tribute (D.II.30.2), hiring mercenaries (P.13), etc. But with the fall of Rome, other states regained their liberty.³⁴ Virtue did not disappear, or even diminish, for the sum of virtue is constant, Machiavelli affirms, wherever virtue happens to locate: “I judge the world always to have been in the same mode and there to have been as much good as wicked in it. But the wicked and the good vary from province to province.” No empire succeeded the Roman empire, keeping “its virtue together”; rather Roman virtue was “scattered in many nations where they lived virtuously”: Franks, Turks, Germans, etc. (D.II.Pr.2).

greatness” refers to something other than territorial extent, or the year 265 marks the beginning of the republic’s decline and of Rome’s transition to empire.

³⁴ Machiavelli’s failure to solve the corruption problem and so ensure a permanent escape from the cycle of regimes (the mixed regime, offered as an escape [D.I.2.4-5], in fact moves along its own, extended, cycle—Romulus to Caesar in the case of Rome) is, ironically, part of Machiavelli’s work to “bring common benefit to everyone” (D.I.Pr.1), for the decline of the strong provides opportunity for the rise of the weak. See Coby 1999a, pp. 616-17.

It matters little to Machiavelli whether virtue is scattered across multiple republics or virtue is concentrated in one great empire, so long as virtue survives. Machiavelli is determined to ring every ounce of virtuous liberty out of republics, to prolong their life and time on the stage. He advises returning to first principles as a virtue restorative (D.III.1.1). But when a republic has run its course, succumbing to corruption and autocratic rule, its passing permits the emergence of virtue in another form, no less prized—greatness in place of liberty. Hence, there is no desperate attempt to hold on to republican Rome, no tragic regret in reporting its demise, because virtue in all its forms is admirable. And even though Rome eventually did destroy itself, Rome still is Machiavelli's choice, because Rome was the free republic, then world empire, most in accord with nature's motions.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Patrick Coby is the Esther Booth Wiley 1934 Professor of Government at Smith College, where he teaches courses in political theory and American political thought. He is the author of six books, including *Machiavelli's Romans: Liberty and Greatness in the Discourses on Livy*, and of numerous journal articles, book chapters, and book reviews. At Smith he is the recipient of the Smith College Faculty Teaching Award, the Sherrerd Prize for Distinguished Teaching, and the Board of Trustees Honored Professor Award. He has also taught at Kenyon College and Idaho State University.