

THE MACHIAVELLIAN MYTHOS

The myth of power in Machiavelli is a multidimensional problem partly because of the difficulties in isolating "myth" in a pure power philosophy and partly because of the historical mythology of the man himself fostered by Gentillet's Antimachiavel and reinforced by the Elizabethan dramatists, the imagery of the unscrupulous power-hungry politician rigorously applying the "reason of state philosophy" and allowing the ends to justify the means.¹

The end-means relationship further involves us in the examination of Machiavelli's values with the observation that the values espoused in the Prince are different from those in Machiavelli's other writings, The Florentine Histories, the Letters and the Discourses on Livy. A caveat should be issued at this point to the effect that political theorists, being human, are eminently privileged to change their minds, evolve, contradict themselves as other mere mortals. At one point St. Thomas Aquinas favors monarchy, at another aristocracy, and at another some form of constitutionalism, or even "mixed government." Aegidius Romanus jumps from the admittedly situational support of Phillip the Fair of France to the pro-papal position, and Nicholas of Cusa from Conciliarism to papalism.² Heretics can recant and opportunists can sway like the Vicar of Bray. There is no good reason that a thinker should be forever bound by his doctoral thesis. Machiavelli, however, appears to be so straightforward and comprehensible that one might expect a modicum of consistency, and it is there but it is difficult to recognize. The thread which runs through Machiavelli's writings is the use of myth to maintain illusion, usually benevolent but if necessary stressing fear over love, and

reinforced by an artistic rearrangement of the facts to support the power structure. The evidence of such reinforcement comes in the curious handling of the death of the Bishop of Ceuta in which Machiavelli nods, falsifies, or ignores history to make a point which is not intelligible today. Why should the Bishop die at a later date than he actually does, especially if we are dealing with a political scientist simply recording objective realities? Some illusion is apparently being created. The use of illusion is common to most of Machiavelli's works including the "Mandragola" which is a play describing the foibles and idiosyncrasies³ of the Renaissance courtier, a dramatization of John of Salisbury's de nugis curialium. The frontispiece features a centaur playing a violin, presumably lulling everyone into a sense of deluded well-being. All of the characters are happy as long as they remain deceived, self-deceived, or deceiving. The "inganno del mundo," or world trickery provides a unifying theme. Timoteo remarks: "I don't know which one has duped the other . . . It's true that I've been duped, nevertheless, this trick is to my profit" (34). Unhappiness results when the piper has to be paid, when everyone is unmasked. Indeed we would like to have Machiavelli's play "The Masks," based upon Aristophanes' "The Clouds;" regrettably it has not survived. In dealing with inganni, Machiavelli indeed merely elaborates in a theme that is important to Castiglione in The Book of the Courtier, which even treats practical jokes. He deals with artificiality as opposed to "artlessness," how a courtier may appear to keep up appearances and how deception may lead to the choice of evil: "s'inganno per una certa similitudine de bene⁴". In The Prince Machiavelli certainly concern himself with the appearance of the ruler in relationship both to his subjects and to other princes.

Machiavelli, of course, may not have intended the dissembling prince as anything more than a situational remedy, desperate at that as Hegel suggests, to extricate Italy from the chaotic factionalism of Neri and Bianchi, Cerchi and Donati, Guelph and Ghibbeline. Certainly he does not spend a great deal of time universalizing by citing evidence from the classics. The Prince circulated as an underground manuscript, which recalls the maxim indifferently attributed to Swift and Le Rochefocauld that "hypocrisy is the debt which vice pays to virtue," that for deception, or inganni, to be successful there have to be innocents to deceive. If all of the princes of Italy use the

Machiavellian strategies, then there will be no basis for mutual trust to make betrayal effective. Mutual suspicion will inhibit mutual assassination. If all of the princes operate on the synthesis of P.T. Barnum and W. C. Fields, that a sucker is born every minute, and never give a sucker an even break, it will not be long before there are no victims to gull. Perhaps, of course, Machiavelli thinks that the power struggle will turn inward, and the wolves and foxes will fall out with each other. It is again interesting to compare some of Machiavelli's theories of deceit and trickery in manipulating the mythology of power with those of Kautilya. Frederick the Great's observations are, as usual, interesting :

If Machiavelli taught crime in a seminary of scoundrels, if he sanctioned perfidy in a university of traitors, it would not be astonishing from him to treat matters of this nature, but he speaks to all men . . .What then is more infamous or insolent than to teach them treachery, perfidy, murder, and all the crimes? It would be more desirable . . .if . . .Agathocles and Oliveretto da Fermo, which Machiavelli cites with such pleasure, were never to be found . . .⁵

Regardless of the end result Machiavelli's prince is a consummate exercise in the art of mythmaking. Whether he is manipulating the psychology of love or fear, he elicits belief which results in obedience and is self-legitimizing. The prince is a mythological figure who revives the tradition of epic heroism. He serves as the wish p of the people, possibly even in his outlawry or criminality, and embodies all of their desired goals and values. He is Achilles, Ulysses, and Aeneas, compressed into a single ideal form. Certainly in the realm of deception Ulysses provides a suitable model. While evoking the "dread and fear of kings," he is pragmatic and opportunistic, but moreover he creates his own Fortuna. Fortuna is not uncontrollable, not the blind

concept of fata but a deliberate creation of the Prince. The prince is in fact the embodiment of the "right man," the single goddess of fortune is on his side, and Fortuna is to be taken by force, if necessary. Fortuna as the active force in historical explanation is a profoundly mythological concept suited to the self-made, well-rounded man of the Renaissance. The Prince is intelligent but not an intellectual. He has intellectuals around as advisors to do his bidding, but he is a mythologization of pure power, embodied in the Nation-State and the great terminal summons to liberate Italy from the barbarians, for Machiavelli not only creates the "cult of the Prince" but the modern "cult of the state," as a mythological unit which is greater than the sum of its parts.

One of the "beauties" of the Prince is that the book can be used for diametrically opposite purposes, either democratic and anti-authoritarian, or pure authoritarian. It can be used by either Sforza or Mussolini. At one point Machiavelli refers to the book as a mere ghiribizzi which he tossed off as an exercise after a long day's work. It can be a guidebook to power read by either Stalin or Hitler, although there is the omnipresent issue of the extent to which the intellectual is responsible for his mythological fabrications, the nagging theme of the liability of Socrates, Dr. Frankenstein, and atomic scientists for their intellectual creations run slightly amok. The Prince reigns serene without undue concern regarding responsibility or legitimacy because of the fusion of power and value and its reinforcement by myth.

Power, in fact, is the ultimate value and there is no need for divine support because power legitimizes itself. Still this statement is a far cry from the received concept of amoral realism which usually characterizes Machiavelli. Machiavelli's Prince is in one sense an anticipation of the Nietzschean superman, beyond good and evil, but he is not really amoral or value-free, anymore than the Skinnerian Controller. As has been pointed out, his success in seizing opportunities is predicated on the existence of a system of values. He appears to have values in order to manipulate others and create benevolent and not-so-benevolent illusions in his subjects and his opponents. He embodies the values of his times, the virtue of the Renaissance, the intelligence, the cunning, the martial valor, more like Odysseus than Achilles, unconcerned with virtus, pietas, humanitas of Aeneas. He is a colossus who takes the form of classical heroism but guts out the figure leaving only an illusion. The Prince must to some extent take into account

the values of his subjects for to wage war artfully it is necessary to maintain stability at home. The issue of the value-power relationship is further complicated by Machiavelli's own high code of personal values and his attachment to liberty and republicanism in Florence. Macaulay's diabolical power-hungry politician out of "whose surname they have coined a synonym for knave and out of whose given name they have derived a nickname (Old Nick from Niccolo) for the devil" does not easily coexist with his creator. Frederick the Great was right, however, in maintaining that a new prince should begin by disowning Machiavelli and writing a tract to that effect. That Machiavelli derives from Gentillet's mythological stereotype, and scholarship doubts that Gentillet in his tract had actually read Machiavelli rather than constructing a "straw-man" for his arguments. Machiavelli, the man, may in fact have become the victim of his own success at mythmaking.

The effort to rescue Machiavelli from his myth and in doing so creating new mythologies of the man is an interesting exercise in the historiography of political theory. Sir Isaiah Berlin catalogues several dozen opposed interpretations, nationalist, religious, ant-religious, authoritarian, democratic, and so forth. The Prince provides a gateway, a *speculum mentis*, which allows the observer to enter and see just about what he wants to, occasionally glimpsing history, higher truths, himself, and occasionally seeing nothing at all. If Hegel wants to interpret the work situationally as an effort to establish Italian nationalism, Spinoza wants the work to be a warning to Republicans. In Spinoza's case the fact that the book was not circulated publically tends to controvert the warning interpretation although the underground pamphlet has certainly circulated effectively elsewhere. The contention would be that Machiavelli's seemingly straightforward message is a satire or parody on princes showing the danger of giving them too much power. Spinoza offers in his Tractatus Politicus an even more Machiavellian solution, the "martyred democrat theory." It argues that Machiavelli, has been a man misunderstood and that the real purpose of the Prince was to subvert monarchy and to restore the liberties of Florence. The premise is that Machiavelli was not merely writing a tract which would ingratiate himself with the Medici after exile from a fairly important diplomatic post in the Chancery of Foreign Affairs. He

was bitter and certainly as unstoic as Ovid and Seneca in their exiles. He wanted to get even. Better than any other individual in that time of poison pills and assassination plots in spite of Borgia rehabilitation and revisionism, he understood the mythology of political power, hence he anticipated Lord Acton's maxim that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." He therefore gave his enemies a formula for achieving exactly what they desired, political power, but the motive was to allow themselves the opportunity for self-destruction. Could any twist be more Machiavellian? Let the theorist theorize, or is that scenario too far-fetched even for the world of Renaissance politics?

The Discourses on Livy reveal several additional variations on Machiavelli's treatment of political myth in the concept of fraud and his manipulation of religion in Book I. He recommends the use of oaths, auspices, and prodigies for political purposes without undue concern to moral implications. In general he follows Polybius Book VI on this point as he does in dealing with the cycles of the Roman Constitution. Polybius writes:

"it is essential to restrain the vulgar crowd by specious dreads and fictitious terrors of this kind. Hence the ancients do not seem to me to have been rash . . . in inculcating belief in the gods and in punishment in Hell amongst the vulgar crowd. . ." ⁶

Thus the Delphic Oracle could be used to bolster morale or create an attitude of defeatism. All sorts of deceit and deception are permissible instruments of foreign policy. When Ferdinand heard Louis XII's claim that the former had defrauded (read:deceived) him twice, he reputedly remarked: "Tell the king he is a liar, for I have deceived him ten times." ⁷ The concept of fraud is usefull in the inganni of international affairs and is what is meant in the Digest I.3.29-30 "in fraudem legis" in keeping the letter while circumventing its meaning" or in the maxim, quod fieri noluit, fieri autem non vetuit, "in doing what the law forbids, but what it is meant to forbid." In this manner Hitler could take a chapter out of Machiavelli and adhere to the form of the Weimar Constitution while destroying its substance -- and Henry III and Henry IV of France could be charged with having a copy of the Prince on their persons when they were assassinated.

In dealing with the Roman religion, Machiavelli uses religio where Polybius uses superstitio and the general thrust of the argument is that the astute general or politician will manipulate myths to prey upon the superstitious masses. Numa will use his conversations with the nymph Egeria to legitimize his lawgiving, and indeed a liaison with a nymph does not appear to be particularly threatening as it might with a Fury. We also find that oaths are so binding that when Titus Manlius extracts

an oath from Marcus Pomponius not to prosecute his father, Marcus holds to his pledge even though extracted by force, which really would seem to imply the possibility that he found the prosecution at that moment impolitick rather than invoking the wrath of the immortal gods. The recourse to the Sybilline books was a popular technique for bolstering morale or in other cases for forcing the plebians to rethink their position on the Terentillian Law. The seige of Veii was furthered by a prophecy regarding the overflowing of the Alban Lake, a wonder that some astute politician had not thought of a way to make it overflow. The Samnites had recourse to fearful oaths to sustain their troops--but here the Samnites did lose because of the fear resulting from past defeats which overrode the manipulation of myth. During the sack of Veii, the soldiers who entered the temple of Juno either heard the goddess nod or say yes in response to the question: "Do you want to come to Rome?" Then there were the auspices which more than occasionally hampered a Roman campaign. The armies were accompanied by a poultryman whose duty it was to declare that the poultry had pecked or not. In the campaign against the Samnites, the head poultryman decided that the circumstances were auspicious for attack even if the poultry disagreed, and even when Papirius heard the truth, he agreed and ordered the first wave in. The victory was won although the head poltryman was killed by the friendly throw of a Roman spear, thus absolving the Romans from responsibility for disobeying the signs. When the poultry^tman declared to Appius Pulcher during the first Punic War that the poultry would not peck, he had the recalcitrant fowl thrown into the sea with the remark: "Let's see if they'll drink." This attack was lost and criticized. One indeed wonders how Rome managed to succeed in spite of itself saved by geese and guided in its military fortunes by a few intelligent generals willing to make their own Fortuna. Machiavelli's major point is that the manipulation of myth is useful among the gullible, and most people are gullible in varying degrees. Oaths among the cognoscenti are binding only as a matter of expediency.

NOTES:

1. Sir Isaiah Berlin, "The Question of Machiavelli," New York Review of Books, November 4, 1971, pp. 20-32. The article is the best available summary of the Machiavelli historiography. Cf. Sheldon Wolin, "Political Theory as a Vocation", pp. 22-75 in Martin Fleisher's Machiavelli and Political Thought (1972); Cf. also the Count Sforza edition of Machiavelli's Letters dealing with the circumstances of writing the Prince, also Giuseppe Prezzolini, Machiavelli (1967).
2. Cf. George Holland Sabine, A History of Political Theory (1981); Charles Howard McIlwain, The Growth of Political Thought in the West (1932); Walter Ullmann, A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages; William Y. Elliott and Neil A. McDonald, The Western Political Heritage 1965 (1949); Sir R.W. Carlyle and A.J. Carlyle, A History of Medieval Political Theory, 4 vols., n.d. John D. Morrall, Medieval Political Thought (1968). Most of these works are basic texts, but all are useful in understanding the cultural context of political mythology, especially W.Y. Elliott to whom I owe a great debt.
3. Niccolo Machiavelli, "Mandragola" (1984).
4. John Robert Woodhouse, Baldesar Catiglione: A Reassessment of the Courtier (1970), p. 153, Courtier, IV:xiii.
5. Frederick of Prussia, The Refutation of Machiavelli's Prince or Anti-Machiavel, Paul Sonino, ed. (1981), p.65; note also the treatment of Grasmci in Euben, op. cit.: 4-6, 16; there are also a large number of fictitious reconstructions and adaptations, e.g., The New Machiavelli.
6. Machiavelli, Discourses on Livy (1950), pp. 241-251, "Concerning the Religion of the Romans."
7. Ibid., loc. cit.