The Wall Street Journal
July 30-31, 2016

Masterpiece

"Discourses on Livy" (1531) by Niccolo Machiavelli

What Makes Republics Tick

Rome as the model of endurance

Illustration: Ryan Inzana

by Joseph Epstein

Surely no reputation is more locked in, at least in the public mind, than that of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). Sometimes referred to as the founder of modern political science, he is better known as the progenitor of a policy that everywhere places expediency over morality. As a result Machiavellism has come to mean immoral actions, and a Machiavel a cunning, utterly self-regarding person, evil incarnate.

"The Prince," Machiavelli's most famous—some might say infamous—work, is a manual of instruction to princes on how to capture and retain power. In this manual, a single criterion obtains: what succeeds. The instructions are unstinting in their specificity, often unflinching in their brutality. Apropos of such great leaders as Moses, Cyrus, Theseus and Romulus, Machiavelli writes: "Hence it comes about that all armed prophets have been successful, and all unarmed prophets have been destroyed." Only Machiavelli could hold up the cruel regime of Cesare Borgia as worthy of emulation. As Isaiah Berlin, in his essay "The Originality of Machiavelli," wrote: "He seems wholly unworried by, indeed scarcely aware of, parting company with traditional western morality."

Yet there is another Machiavelli, and he is to be discovered in a less read, more complexly textured work called “Discourses on Livy.” Livy (c. 59 B.C.-A.D. 17) was the first Roman historian without an earlier career in public office; his history began with the founding of Rome. Machiavelli’s purpose in this book is to bring readers to “a right understanding of ancient and modern affairs; so that any who shall read these remarks of mine, may reap from them that profit for the sake of which a knowledge of History is to be sought.” Machiavelli restricted his comments in “The Prince” to principalities; here he also considers republics.

The richness of Machiavelli’s classical learning is on display throughout the “Discourses.” Early in the book he sets out the reasons why the laws of the Spartan Lycurgus had a permanence, while those of the Athenian Solon were transient. The chief reason is that laws not supported by good customs are fragile, while good customs stand in need of strong laws for their support. Customs and laws both are required to stay the avarice and rapaciousness of men, who “are, by nature, more prone to evil than to good.”

One can scarcely read Machiavelli’s “Discourses” without reflecting on their significance for our day. When he writes that “no kingdom can stand when two feeble princes follow in succession,” one thinks of recent American history and its string of poor presidents. His explanation of how good men were excluded from office, owing to the valuation of wealth over honor and the insidious influence of corruption, so that men of merit gave way to those with ambition merely, makes one think of current American politics.

The “Discourses” tend to be wider-angled, less instructive and more cautionary than “The Prince.” “A lost freedom,” Machiavelli writes, “is defended with more ferocity than a threatened freedom is defended.” On the subject of soldiers, he thinks little of mercenaries, and avows “it is not gold, as its vulgarly supposed, that is the sinews of war, but good soldiers”—iron, in other words, everywhere defeats gold. Evidence of Machiavelli’s dazzling mind is shown in his ability to draw useful distinctions. In “The Prince,” he distinguishes between necessary and unnecessary cruelty; in the “Discourses,” between accusations and calumnies, between wars fought for mastery and those fought for life itself (this borrowed from Sallust), and many more.

Machiavelli’s great model in the “Discourses” is Rome in its republican years. “For if no commonwealth has ever been found to grow like the Roman, it is because none was ever found so well fitted by its institutions to make that growth.” Athens and Sparta may have been governed by better laws, but Rome, by the steady increase of its population through conquest and by admitting strangers to the rights of citizenship, all the while maintaining its military spirit under steady discipline and the need to strive for glory, endured longer than either.

In the “Discourses,” Brutus, Appius Claudius, the Decemvirs and Julius Caesar play cameo roles. Of Caesar, Machiavelli notes that he was “able to so blind the multitude that it saw not the yoke under which it was to lay its neck.” Machiavelli’s mastery of Roman history is buttressed by his steady view of human nature with its inability to curb either its ambition or its envy and its need to gratify the desire of the moment. Such, he held, is the general perversity of men, “a sorry lot,” that they “may aid fortune but never withstand her.”

In the 24th chapter of the “Discourses,” Machiavelli wrote: “When it is absolutely a question of the safety of one’s country, there must be no question of just or unjust, of merciful or cruel, of praiseworthy or disgraceful; instead, setting aside every scruple one must follow to the utmost any plan that will save her life and keep her liberty.” His stringent view of human nature combined with his originality and penetration made Niccolo Machiavelli, in his day and still in ours, the pre-eminent political philosopher of the world not as it ought to be but as it is.

—Mr. Epstein is the author, most recently, of “Frozen in Time, Twenty Stories” (Taylor Trade Publishing) and “Wind Sprints, Shorter Essays” (Axios Press).