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Fortune, Necessity, and Virtù

(from *Machiavelli and Guicciardini* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965, 191-200)

According to Machiavelli, actions, whether they were those of an individual or those of a collective group, could be the result of motivations which could be rationally explained, but they could also be instinctive. Of this there is testimony in Machiavelli's strange description of the pagan "sacrificial acts in which there was much shedding of blood and much ferocity, and in them great numbers of animals were killed. Such spectacles, because, terrible, caused men to become like them." The ideal at which Machiavelli aimed in his recommendations for a perfect republic was the creation of a unified body, which, by acting instinctively, generated the strength, single, minded will power, and vitality necessary for political success. Such a republic possessed *virtù*.

Although there was nothing new in Machiavelli's use of the Roman republic as a pattern for imitation, he differed from his contemporaries in what he believed the Roman example taught. Machiavelli's views made it easier than his contemporaries thought—as well as more difficult—to imitate Rome. To Machiavelli, political revival could not be achieved only by imitating Roman institutions or just by effecting a moral reeducation of individuals in order to produce obedience and self-sacrifice. But they were accompaniments and consequences of what was essential for a political renaissance. To Machiavelli, the imitation of Rome meant a return to a life according to man's inherent nature instincts.

To Machiavelli, man is one of the forces of nature and man's strength emerges in accepting this fate. This conception of man gave Machiavelli's political utopia its unique character. For Machiavelli *was* the creator of an utopia; with his image of Roman politics he made his contribution to the body of literature in which perfect societies are constructed. But whereas the architects of other utopias place man outside history in a social world free of political conflicts and tensions so that he can live in permanent harmony and peace, Machiavelli's ideal political order was one in which man lives in time and is subject to its ravages. It was the test of a good political order to grow, to expand and to absorb other political societies, even to ward off decline for a while as Rome had been able to do. But decline was inevitable; everything on earth has to undergo the natural cycle of birth, flowering, decline and death. Man's action remains tied to a specific, steadily changing circumstances of the situation in which he finds himself at the moment. It was of little relevance to consider man's qualities abstractly and in isolation; the interaction of man and his surroundings was the sensitive point at which the potentialities of man for political action were revealed.

The crucial significance of this idea becomes evident when we go beyond a discussion of Machiavelli's political views and analyze the assumptions on which they were based. Machiavelli was not a philosopher. He intended neither to outline a philosophical system nor to introduce new philosophical terms. Here again what is characteristic is the particular turn which he gave to the commonly used concepts dealing with the problems of human existence. The great images through which Machiavelli tried to define the strength and weakness of man's position in the universe were the same as those used by his contemporaries: *Fortuna*, *virtù*, and *Necessità*. But a precise reading of Machiavelli's works reveals distinctive variations. Like others who wrote before him, Machiavelli recognized *Necessità* as a factor determining actions but outside man's control. However, in Machiavelli's view *Necessità* is not

just a hostile force which makes man's actions purely automatic. *Necessità* may create opportunities. In whatever situation man finds himself the final outcome depends on his response to the conditions which *Necessità* has produced. Thus, according to Machiavelli, rarely is there a situation which ought to be regarded as entirely desperate. At most times there are possibilities for men to turn circumstances to their advantage. As long as man uses all the capacities with which nature has endowed him he is not helpless in the face of external pressures.

The view that man has the possibility of controlling events also shaped Machiavelli's idea of the relation between *virtù* and *Fortuna*. In general Machiavelli's ideas on this topic were again those commonly held in his time: he believed that man can exert a certain counterweight against *Fortuna*, and that there is a certain balance between *virtù* and *virtù*: "I think it may be true that *Fortuna* is the ruler of half our actions, but that she allows the other half or thereabouts to be governed by us," he writes in the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Prince* on "How much *Fortuna* can do in human affairs and how it may be opposed." At the end of the same chapter he wrote the famous statement the "*Fortuna* is a woman, and it is necessary, if you wish to master her, to conquer her by force; and it can be seen that she lets herself be overcome by the bold rather than by those who proceed coldly." Others before Machiavelli had said that *Fortuna* was capricious and smiled only on those who were her favorites. The assumption of *Fortuna*'s preferences for the bold re-echoed the Latin adage that "*fortes fortuna adjuvat*." However Machiavelli's formulation modified these common views. In contrast to the static quality inherent in the belief in the existence of *Fortuna*'s elect, Machiavelli's formulation presumed the dynamism of a constantly changing scene in which sudden action can bring about the assistance of *Fortuna*.

A further implication of Machiavelli's simile of the relation between *virtù* and *Fortuna* also expressed his belief that this constant change takes the form of a struggle; continuous strife is an abiding condition of political life. His insistence on the decisive importance of power in politics can be regarded as the counterpart of this fundamental attitude to the nature of politics. His image pitting *virtù* and *Fortuna* against each other in a struggle for superiority indicates that he believed that the chance of controlling external events is offered to man only in brief, fleeting moments. Therefore man must make use of a singular conjuncture in which there must be a meeting of circumstances and individuality.

This demand for coincidence of individual *virtù* with favorable circumstances pointed to the most striking and revolutionary feature of Machiavelli's political thought. No special human quality will guarantee success in politics; the qualities by which man can control events vary according to the circumstances. The impetuosity with which Julius II conducted his policy was appropriate to the situation in which the Church State found itself in the time of his reign. In less turbulent years the careful, almost timid rationalism of Soderini might have prevailed and saved Florence. This kind of relativism pervades all the chapters of the Prince in which Machiavelli discussed the qualities required for political leadership.

These chapters of the Prince contain the essence of Machiavelli's thought in the sense that they exhibit most strongly his view that political action cannot be kept within the limits of morality. Although he indicated that amoral action might frequently be the most effective measure which can be taken in any situation, he never showed a preference for amoral actions over moral actions. He was not a conscious advocate of evil; he did not want to upset all moral values. But it is equally misleading to maintain the opposite: that Machiavelli wanted to replace Christian morality by another morality and that he encouraged politicians to disregard

customary morality because their motives for acting ought to be the good of the political society which represented the highest ethical value. Just as Machiavelli admitted that it might be possible to found political societies which could exist in peaceful isolation, he also believed that men could arrange their lives in such a manner that they could follow Christian morality. But when men joined the game of politics they had to follow its rules; and these rules did not contain a distinction between moral and amoral actions.

Because Machiavelli felt that Christian morality frequently formed an obstacle to actions dictated by the rules of politics, he criticized Christian morality and the Church. On the other hand, because he realized the usefulness of religion for disciplining the members of society, he envisaged a religion, perhaps even a true Christianity, which broadened the concept of morality in such a way that it would encompass not only the virtues of suffering and humility, but also that of political activism. But such observations were incidental rather than basic to Machiavelli's thinking. The central point of his political philosophy was that man must choose: he could live aside from the stream of politics and follow the dictates of Christian morality; but if man entered upon the *vita activa* of politics, he must act according to its laws.

Finally, Machiavelli's image of man's need to conquer *Fortuna* by force—corresponding to man's sexual drive—suggests the tension which Machiavelli regarded as a necessary accompaniment of political action. The need to concentrate on a brief moment, the need to use all possible weapons, and the need to choose from a variety of methods the one best suited to the given situation—all this implied that political action demanded not only awareness of one's aim but also intensity in pursuing it. Similar to the passage in the Discourses in which he saw men becoming animals, he suggested in the Prince that the ruler should be lion or a fox, or best, both. He did not refer to animals because they symbolize

human qualities; to Machiavelli, animals possess the pristine genuineness which, in men, is weakened by reason. Man's control over his world depends on his attaining a level of instinctiveness where he becomes part of the forces surrounding him. This identification is prerequisite for man's mastery of political life.

Machiavelli believed in the creative power of man in the world of politics. Man's political potentialities comprised two aspects. Like many of his contemporaries Machiavelli believed in the rational nature of man; to him man was an instrument which had a rationally definable purpose and he could be employed in a calculable way. But at the same time, Machiavelli also saw man as an animal, driven by instincts which made him disregard obstacles and rational interests and which enabled him to exploit incalculable forces. But the opportunity when man could exert his power was rare, the moment brief and fleeting. Man was placed in a constantly changing world in which new forces and new situations were thrown up at any moment.

This recognition of the supreme challenge inherent in the ceaseless movement of history was a reflection of what Machiavelli had seen happening in Italy and all over Europe. And what had happened was becoming increasingly evident to greater numbers of Italians. Although Machiavelli's political proposals were aimed at answering questions raised by specific problems of the Florentine city-state, he was aware—and because of his experience as a diplomat he was certainly quite as well aware as anyone—of the relation of the Florentine crisis to the appearance of foreign armies on Italian soil. Since the French invasions of 1494, whatever happened in Italy was dependent on the struggles among the great powers beyond the Alps. The Italians had lost control of their fate, and every order, every peace was put in jeopardy again and again by new waves of invaders. The crises which had been shaking the Italian states since 1494 made it clear that every political action in Italy was circumscribed by forces originating at great distances. It

was natural for Machiavelli to draw the conclusion that every political action had to be fitted into the context of historical change.

If, as we set forth at the beginning of this chapter, it was Machiavelli's intention to startle his readers with novel and contrary statements, his success was greater than ever he could have expected. To the religious of his age and of the following centuries his teachings—especially his proposition that man must choose between the rules of political activism and the precepts of Christian morality—were thought to be machinations of the devil. For his insistence on struggle and force as the quintessence of politics he was anathematized by those who believed in the harmony existing between enlightened self-interest and the common good. In more recent times he has been called the prophet of the national state and he has been credited with the discovery of the role of the ruling group in politics. There has been no generations since the time of the Renaissance which has not found some aspect of Machiavelli's writings repulsive or prophetic, puzzling or revealing. But the individual theses which he propounded would hardly have provoked such a furor had they not formed parts of a vision of politics, relevant and valid. Machiavelli expressed what men were slowly coming to realize: it is impossible to establish one permanent social order which mirrors the will of God or in which justice is distributed in such a way that it fulfills all human needs. Machiavelli clung to the idea that politics had its own laws and therefore it was, or ought to be, a science; its purpose was to keep society alive in the ever-moving stream of history. The consequences of this view—a recognition of the need for political cohesion and the proposition of the autonomy of politics which later developed into the concept of the state—have made Machiavelli's writings a landmark in the history of political thought. We can never return to concepts of politics which existed before Machiavelli wrote.

But Machiavelli is not merely a figure who contributed to the evolution of modern Western political thought. When we read his works we find that they still speak to us directly, immediately, in a strangely compelling way. Many of his examples are antiquated, many of his proposals exaggerated and unreal. But there are insights which disclosed an opposite truth, there are passages which touch us like an electric shock. In placing politics in the stream of history, in demonstrating that every situation is unique and requires man to use all his forces to probe all the potentialities of the moment, Machiavelli has revealed—more than anyone before or after him—that, at any time, politics is choice and decision. *Tanto nomini nullum par elogium.**

* The phrase is engraved on Machiavelli's tomb in Santa Croce:
"For such a name no praise is adequate."