JOHN M. NAJEMY

Introduction

Against the current: Machiavelli's "contraria professione"

Machiavelli introduces himself nowhere better than in his correspondence, particularly with challenging interlocutors like Francesco Guicciardini, his younger contemporary who, when they exchanged a memorable set of letters in 1521, had already risen to political prominence and written a lively history of Florence as well as several memoranda on Florentine government. Their friendship was made possible by a shift in Machiavelli's political fortunes. After eight years in which the Medici had shunned Machiavelli following the 1512 coup d'état that restored them to power in Florence, their antagonism finally softened. Friends intervened to win the assent of Pope Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici) for a Roman performance of Machiavelli's play, *Mandragola*, and smoothed the way for Cardinal Giulio de' Medici's approval of Machiavelli's commission from the university (the Studio) to write a history of Florence. In May 1521, the Florentine government, again with Cardinal Giulio in the background, sent Machiavelli, who had once negotiated with kings, emperors, and popes, as its representative to the chapter general of the Franciscans in Carpi, near Modena, with instructions to promote a plan for the separate administration of Franciscan convents in Florentine territory. When the consuls of Florence's guild of manufacturers of woolen cloth learned of Machiavelli's assignment, they gave him the additional task of finding a Lenten preacher for the cathedral, whose administration was the guild's responsibility. Machiavelli, formerly an influential chancery official, adviser, military organizer, and diplomatic envoy for the republican government displaced by the Medici, was now on a mission of almost comical modesty. Guicciardini, by contrast, had accepted the reimposition of Medici rule in Florence in 1512 (as did many members of his elite class of *ottimati*), subsequently entered papal service under the Medici pope, and in 1516 became governor of Modena and Reggio in the papal state.

Traveling north in May 1521, Machiavelli probably stopped in Modena to spend a few days with the governor before moving on to Carpi, where, on the 17th, he received from Guicciardini a short, jocular letter.[1] Although this seems to have been the first letter sent by either to the other, its familiar

tone and acerbic humor suggest a background of friendly but forthright conversations during their meeting in Modena. The letter elicited a similarly open and candid response from Machiavelli, and the exchange that followed over the next three days reveals, behind the humor, an awkward tension between these two most celebrated political thinkers of the Florentine Renaissance, so close in their origins and culture, yet so distant in their political experiences, loyalties, and inner convictions. Affably mocking Machiavelli, Guicciardini ironically praised the "good judgment" of those who had entrusted the selection of a Lenten preacher to one who, according to common repute, had never thought much about salvation. He was nonetheless certain that Machiavelli would carry out his commission according to the expectations the consuls had of him and as was required by his honor, which "would be dimmed if at this age you became concerned about your soul, for, since you have always lived with different beliefs [*contraria professione*], it would be attributed to senility rather than goodness." Machiavelli's skepticism concerning religion was no secret, but it is still startling to see Guicciardini openly underscore Machiavelli's "contraria professione" and apparent lack of belief in the soul.

In his reply, penned the same day, Machiavelli retorted that he would of course select a preacher "to his own specifications," the implication being that he might not meet the expectations of the "reverend consuls." In insisting that he would choose a preacher as *he* wanted him to be, "because in this matter I want to be as obstinate as I am in my other opinions," Machiavelli was defending his "contraria professione" – his different ideas, and not only on salvation. He also affirmed that the steadfastness with which he maintained such views was the foundation of the loyal service he had always given his republic, for never, he avers, had he "failed his republic" whenever he "was able to help her, if not with deeds, with words, if not with words, with gestures." Nor would he fail her now, knowing full well that his ideas were often at odds with those of most Florentines: "True it is – and I know it – that I am at variance [*contrario*] with the views of my fellow citizens, as I am in many other things." Machiavelli thus turns his "contraria professione" and allegedly insufficient concern for his own soul, for which Guicciardini had amusingly scolded him, into a more general sense of distance, in religion as "in many other things," from the conventional views of most Florentines, among them, implicitly, Guicciardini himself. The consuls of the wool guild had indeed asked the right man to find them their preacher, Machiavelli asserts, because his "contraria professione" allowed him to understand that, whereas they wanted a preacher to show them the way to Heaven, it was better to give them one who would teach them the way to the Devil, because "the true way to get to Paradise is to

learn the way to Hell in order to escape it." Guicciardini had chided him for lack of faith, but Machiavelli turned the accusation on its head, claiming, with a hint of indignation, that he knew better than those who hide behind the "cloak of religion" the difference between "good men" and "bad men," and even how to get to Paradise.

In the same letter Machiavelli also recounts the trick he was playing on the friars. Pretending that the letters he received from Guicciardini were filled with "inside information" about world events, he let them think that he was (as indeed he had once been) a major player on the political stage. Guicciardini agreed to go along with the joke, sending a messenger "as quickly as possible" to make them believe "that you are a great dignitary." Machiavelli reported that everyone was taken in by the prank and that the friars assumed he was receiving bulletins of the highest importance. Even Sigismondo Santi, his host in Carpi and chancellor of that city's lord, was so impressed that he "drooled" over the letters. In mock self-deprecation, Machiavelli signed this letter "Niccolò Machiavelli, ambassador of the Florentine Republic to the Friars Minor," intimating that, although he never achieved the rank of ambassador ("orator") in his chancery days, he had now finally gained the elusive honor in this inglorious mission. Guicciardini replied with a gratuitously unkind amplification of the meaning of that signature: "When I saw your title of 'ambassador' of the Republic to the friars and thought of how many kings, dukes, and princes you once negotiated with, I was reminded of Lysander," the Spartan general who, as Guicciardini recalled from Plutarch, fell into disgrace "after many victories and triumphs" and was relegated to the demeaning task of serving food "to the same soldiers he had once so gloriously commanded." No one needed to remind Machiavelli of how far he had fallen, and, although he could laugh over it himself, it was the kind of laughter that masked, or exposed, sorrow.

Prompted by this unhappy comparison between the demoted "ambassador" and the unfortunate Lysander, Guicciardini further suggests, somewhat maliciously, that Machiavelli's mission to the Franciscans might serve him well in writing the history of Florence, whose commission he had just received. He then parodies Machiavelli's well-known view that, because human nature and the basic structures of things remain constant, events can usefully be compared with their analogous counterparts in earlier ages: "so you see that, with only the appearances of individuals and the surface aspects of things changing, all the same events repeat, and we never see any occurrence that has not been seen before." In the preface to book I of his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli had presented a similar theory of history that serves as the foundation, or enabling fiction, of the work's many

comparisons between antiquity and modernity and of the possibility of imitating the ancients. It was not an approach that Guicciardini found congenial, preferring as he did to emphasize the uniqueness of each historical moment and its complex circumstances. "Only prudent observers," Guicciardini says with irony, can see through the "changes in the names and outward features of things" to perceive their underlying sameness: "therefore history is good and useful because it sets before you and makes you recognize and see anew that which you have never known or seen" in your own experience. For this reason "those who gave you the task of writing a work of history are much to be commended, and you should be urged to carry out this assigned duty diligently. I believe this legation will not be entirely useless to you in this regard," he continues, because, even spending a few days among the friars, "you will have savored the entire Republic of the Wooden Clogs," as he derisively refers to the Franciscans, "and you will make use of this model for some purpose, by comparing it to, or assessing it in terms of, one of those forms of yours." Guicciardini was challenging – in playful, friendly, teasing, but still confrontational terms – Machiavelli's basic presuppositions about the study of politics and history: that comparisons across the ages to antiquity are indeed relevant and that one must understand the "forms" – the theoretical structures of governments and states – in order to grasp the particulars.

Machiavelli kept his reply and defense brief, in the last letter of this exchange, holding his ground and maintaining the validity of both his method and his experience:

> As for writing history and the Republic of the Wooden Clogs, I don't believe that coming here has cost me anything, because I've learned about many of the [Franciscans'] constitutions and institutions [*constitutioni et ordini*], which have much of value, so that I believe I can indeed make use of them for some purpose, especially in comparisons. Should I have to write about silence, I'll be able to say that they're more silent than friars eating. And I'll be able to refer to many other things that this humble experience has taught me.

A poor thing perhaps, this "esperienza" of the gullible friars, but Machiavelli in effect tells Guicciardini that he will not on that account abandon his convictions about the utility of "comparisons," any more than he was about to relinquish, or apologize for, his "contraria professione."

The exchange with Guicciardini illuminates central aspects of Machiavelli's intellectual personality: his pleasure in the punch and counterpunch of intellectual combat; his willingness to dispute accepted wisdom; his insistence that only by thinking apart from the crowd – even the sharp crowd of the Florentines, Guicciardini included – is it possible to see through

appearances and the fog of conventional piety; and his readiness to make use of "experience," even seemingly insignificant experiences, to illuminate the theoretical constructs that constitute what in *The Prince* he had called "verità effettuale," the kind of truth that can have an effect in the world. Given his humanist formation and the extent to which antiquity was his constant point of reference, Machiavelli is inconceivable without the culture of the Renaissance of the preceding two centuries; yet he, more than anyone, subjected that culture's orthodoxies and habits of thought to analytical, skeptical scrutiny. He is both the epitome of the Renaissance and its moment of unsparing self-reflection: shaped by its reverence for the ancients and desire to emulate the Romans, by its assumptions concerning the beneficent power of language, and by the civic culture of city-republics – yet all the while standing back and taking critical distance. As the speaker in the prologue of *Mandragola* says about its author, "If anyone supposes that by finding fault he can get the author by the hair and scare him or make him draw back a bit, I give any such man warning and tell him that the author, too, knows how to find fault, and that it was his earliest art; and in no part of the world where *sì* is heard [where Italian is spoken] does he stand in awe of anybody, even though he plays the servant to such as can wear a better cloak than he can."[2]

Machiavelli's universality

Machiavelli is now everywhere: routinely invoked by political commentators and talking heads; appropriated, adapted, and distorted by authors of manuals for success in politics, business, and war; denounced by self-appointed defenders of political virtue for having unleashed the dark forces of the modern world; and admired for having exposed such naiveté in a world in which, allegedly, only toughness works. He is studied, analyzed, and debated by scholars from a greater variety of academic disciplines and intellectual directions (literature, history, philosophy, government, political science, theater studies, religion, military science, and even art history) and assigned as required reading (albeit usually only *The Prince*) in more university courses and departments than any other writer. "Machiavellian" has taken on a life of its own as a universally recognized proper adjective and become common currency, particularly in English, used (and abused) in everyday speech far beyond academic and intellectual circles, in senses unconnected with the historical Machiavelli. In television debates and newspaper opinion columns on political and social issues, whereas "Marxist" and "Freudian" have by now acquired a musty whiff of quaintness and most other historical names mean little to the general reading or listening

public, no one, regrettably, thinks it necessary to ask what a speaker means in characterizing some person or idea as "Machiavellian" or whether the characterization is justified.

Books proclaiming the applicability of purportedly "Machiavellian" principles to modern life pay an odd kind of homage to him. Machiavelli's relevance to business is claimed in an astonishing number of books, including (and this is merely a sample of what Amazon.com gave me when I searched the keywords "Machiavelli" and "business"): Antony Jay, *Management and Machiavelli: A Prescription for Success in Your Business* (Prentice Hall, 1996); Alistair McAlpine, *The New Machiavelli: The Art of Politics in Business* (Wiley, 1999); Ian DeMack, *The Modern Machiavelli: The Seven Principles of Power in Business* (Allen & Unwin, 2002); Stanley Bing, *What Would Machiavelli Do? The Ends Justify the Meanness* [*sic*] (HarperCollins, 2002); Gerald R. Griffin, *Machiavelli on Management: Playing and Winning the Corporate Power Game* (Praeger, 1991); Phil Harris et al. (eds.), *Machiavelli, Marketing, and Management* (Routledge, 2000); and (sadly and perhaps inevitably) *The Mafia Manager: A Guide to the Corporate Machiavelli*, whose author hides as V (St. Martin's Griffin, 1997).

Machiavelli's applicability to modern politics is asserted by, among others, Michael Ledeen in *Machiavelli on Modern Leadership: Why Machiavelli's Iron Rules Are as Timely and Important Today as Five Centuries Ago* (Truman Talley Books, 1999); by Carnes Lord in *The Modern Prince: What Leaders Need to Know Now* (Yale, 2003), written in the "now" of the aftermath of 9/11, published as the United States and Britain were launching their invasion of Iraq, and organized, like Machiavelli's *Prince*, in twenty-six chapters addressed to "leaders who rule the people in a manner not altogether different from the princes and potentates of times past" (p. xi); and by Leslie Gelb, whose *Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy* (Harper, 2009) draws on Machiavelli's alleged lessons and directly addresses the American president as *The Prince* addressed Lorenzo de' Medici. Not all efforts to relate Machiavelli to modern problems assume that the only relevant lessons are about power and empire (as Machiavelli's misleading modern reputation might cause one to imagine). In the mid-1990s, historians Susan Dunn and James MacGregor Burns, who have written about early Americans who knew Machiavelli well, condensed their reflections on Machiavelli in an essay entitled, "The Lion, the Fox, and the President: What Advice Might Niccolò Machiavelli give Bill Clinton?" Pondering the vicissitudes of his modern reputation, they concluded that "Machiavelli's true vision of life" was not unlike that of "our Founding Fathers: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," and that, although "sometimes a

strong and duplicitous prince would have to rule, [Machiavelli] never wavered in his belief that a republic, based on civic virtue, was the superior form of government."[3] In 2008 *The New Yorker* published an essay by Claudia Roth Pierpont on Machiavelli's life and thought that begins with his experience of torture and concludes with ruminations on the question of torture in our time in the light of what Machiavelli does and does not say about ends and means.[4] John Bernard has recently offered an enthusiastic defense of Machiavelli for the vital lessons he offers in civic virtue and the ethics of democratic politics.[5] Feminists too have found inspiration in Machiavelli: in *The Princessa: Machiavelli for Women* (Doubleday, 1997), Harriet Rubin outlines eighteen strategies for women to overcome "power anorexia." There is even a "Machiavellian" guide for children: Claudia Hart's *A Child's Machiavelli: A Primer on Power* (Studio, 1998). Whatever their differences (and these books and essays range from the silly to the thoughtful), such appropriations of Machiavelli share the assumption that he taught timeless lessons.

Frequently accompanying the notion that Machiavelli still speaks to us is the conviction, shared by many commentators, critics, and scholars, that he marked, and may even have been the chief protagonist of, an epochal turning point in the history of the West, the emergence of modernity, or indeed in the evolution of human consciousness – but without any consensus as to whether this was a good or a very bad thing. Early in the last decade of the twentieth century, the conservative political commentator George Will nominated five "finalists" for the honor of "person of the millennium." His selections were governed by the premise that the "two great, and related, developments of this millennium are the nation-state and political freedom, which involves limiting the state." Will's five contenders were Machiavelli, Martin Luther, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln (and not surprisingly, given the lopsided American representation, Jefferson took home the trophy). Will explained Machiavelli's inclusion on the grounds that he "disturbed the Western mind as an early, vivid example of modern masterless man, obedient to no god and only to the rules he wrote." Despite this implicitly negative judgment of Machiavelli's contribution to modernity, Will underscored its importance in claiming that Machiavelli and Luther were "hammer[s] that helped shatter suffocating systems of thought and governance."

To appropriate Machiavelli as a guide to modern life and politics and to attribute to him such transformative significance presume a familiarity with his writings, which is nonetheless often accompanied by indifference to close analysis and context. Indeed, such philological and historical grounding is sometimes seen as an obstacle to a deeper understanding of his importance.

We are sometimes told what he meant, or what his works mean or should mean to us, by readers who know him only slightly and have read him hurriedly, in English (or other) translations, without much awareness of the historical circumstances in which he wrote. Perhaps the only true parallels in the Western tradition to this curious combination of willful distance from Machiavelli's language and context and profound certitude concerning the "truths" he gives us are Marx and the Bible. Machiavelli has been assigned, we might say, the status of a prophet whose revelations concerning what is constant in human nature and politics are still and always valid (quite apart from whether or not we welcome or like them), because they are believed to have foretold our condition.

As with all prophets, or those deemed prophets, Machiavelli's message has been furiously fought over, and the truths he allegedly gave us have been defined in chaotically different ways. He is often characterized in contradictory terms: for example, idealist/cynic; republican/monarchist; coolly analytical/passionately patriotic. Among the revelations attributed to him are the autonomy and amorality of politics; the indispensable role of force and fraud in the conquest and preservation of power; reason of state, or the state as its own moral system; arms as the essence of princely power; the people in arms as the essential ingredient of a state's survival; the rational, scientific nature of politics; the irrational power of fortune and human inability to comprehend or control it; the capacity (or incapacity) of free will to adapt to circumstances and change outcomes; the crucial role of charisma, intimidation, and spectacular theatricality in successful leadership; religion as the essence of a people and critical to a strong state; religion as an instrument to be manipulated by leaders or elites; human nature as fundamentally evil; the superiority of republics over monarchies; the superiority of princely freedom of action over the slow deliberateness of republics; liberty as the good state's chief goal; empire and expansion as the state's highest goal. Some of these are obviously (and here deliberately juxtaposed as) mutually exclusive. All have their believers and devoted defenders, even among scholarly specialists. What they have in common is making Machiavelli a harbinger of modernity and a "prophet" vindicated.

Machiavelli is indeed a writer of enduring fascination. Five centuries of readers have found him captivating, albeit for wildly different reasons, negative and positive. While explanations of his appeal are as varied and nearly as numerous as his interpreters and have shifted with evolving constellations of thought over these centuries, one can reasonably surmise that the overriding reason is that Machiavelli provocatively addressed, with his characteristic freedom from the chains of convention and tradition, fundamental issues of his and all political cultures. He refused, moreover,

to resolve such questions with straightforward dogmatic pronouncements or doctrinal declarations, preferring instead a discursive, dialectical style of analysis that enters into the terms of debates (in some cases already centuries old), ponders contrasts, measures the different sides and aspects of controversies, subverts received solutions, and proposes new and unsettling perspectives. Depending on how far one wishes to subdivide these issues and consider their constituent parts separately, the list could be very long. For purposes of overview and introduction, however, five recurring questions can be highlighted.

Perhaps the most pervasive of these issues is Machiavelli's meditation on the role of the past in understanding the human condition. Two centuries of humanism's attempts to recover antiquity had profoundly instilled the idea that proper apprehension of the world and effective action in it, both theoretical wisdom and practical knowledge, began with the study of ancient history and literature. From this perspective, the trajectory of history led from the perfection of antiquity to long centuries in which that perfection was dispersed and fragmented, and then to the heroic, if still precarious, attempt to revive and rescue it. This vision of history no longer appeals to us, because we know more about the legacy of the Middle Ages to modernity than the Renaissance did and no longer so fulsomely idealize antiquity (not the Romans, in any case). Yet only by appreciating how axiomatic this assumption was for the Renaissance can we approach its sense of the relevance of the past. From Petrarch in the fourteenth century to the spread of the humanist movement in the fifteenth, the Romans were the paragons of political excellence and their historians and poets the unrivalled exemplars of eloquence and sources of political and ethical wisdom. To assimilate and emulate the ancient Romans, who had inhabited the same cities and walked the same streets as did Renaissance Italians, became the essence of education and culture, in language, literature, historiography, art, moral philosophy, and political theory.

Machiavelli's education was deeply immersed in these assumptions, which he shared to a significant extent. He pondered the power of historical myths and the exemplarity of legendary founders of states and religions; he felt the forceful attraction of cyclical theories of history and the need for societies to renew contact with their life-giving origins and first principles. But he also raised questions about historical memory, about how quickly it can be lost or overwhelmed and how far it is dictated by history's winners. Although he frequently urged imitation of the Romans, in the *Art of War* Machiavelli simultaneously acknowledged the desirability of such imitation and recognized its impossibility in the utterly changed circumstances of the modern world. At the beginning of the dialogue, set in the Rucellai

family gardens (where Machiavelli participated in actual discussions of politics and history with friends and young disciples sometime between 1515 and 1519), the host, Cosimo Rucellai, notices that their guest, the mercenary captain Fabrizio Colonna, does not recognize some of the garden's more unusual trees. Cosimo explains that certain trees planted by his grandfather Bernardo were "more popular in antiquity than they are today," to which Fabrizio replies that he wishes that Bernardo and others who planned gardens on ancient models had preferred to imitate the Romans in "arduous and difficult" rather than "delicate and soft" matters like gardens. Defending his grandfather, Cosimo asserts that no one more than Bernardo detested the "soft life" or was a greater lover of the "rugged life" that Fabrizio praises. But Bernardo knew that neither he nor his sons could actually live such a life, because he "had been born in such a time of corruption that anyone who departed from common customs would have been ridiculed and considered crazy." Cosimo's defense of Bernardo anticipates Fabrizio's defense of himself (in book 1) for never having put into practice the ancient principles of warfare that he nonetheless insists are far superior to modern methods. This is one of several places where Machiavelli admits that imitating the ancients is an ideal destined never to be realized. The purpose of trying, as he suggests in chapter 6 of *The Prince*, is that aiming high, as archers do, hoping to reach not the heights but distant targets, at least comes closer to the goal. One should still strive to imitate the greatest examples, even if one never attains their greatness. Machiavelli's meditations on antiquity as a lost, elusive, but deeply appealing object of desire permeate his writings. The awesome magnitude of both the achievements and utter ruin of the Romans made them the indispensable point of reference for Machiavelli's inquiry into political greatness and decline: impossible not to seek to emulate, equally impossible to replicate. And his reflections on history, historians, collective memory, and the power of historical myths have made *him* an indispensable point of reference for anyone searching for meaning in the relationship of past and present.

The most contentious of the foundational issues treated by Machiavelli is the relationship of morality and politics. Rejecting what he considered the naive and simplistic view that good government is necessarily virtuous government, he argued that princes and republics may not survive if they unthinkingly follow the strictures of traditional morality expected of individuals. States have an overriding responsibility to survive and defend their populations, obligations that often require disregarding conventional moral codes. But this only scratches the surface of Machiavelli's approach to ethics and politics. Although he never quite wrote what is often attributed to him – that the ends justify the means – he did worry a great deal about ends and