

## Voegelin and Strauss on Machiavelli

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It is easy to see what Stauss and Voegelin have in common: the heritage of the Central-European *Kulturbuergertum*, the German University, deeply felt resistance to the ideological climate and the practical enormities of the twentieth century, the turn (or return) to the classical and biblical tradition, emigration to America and considered appreciation for its political order - the list is far from exhaustive.

It is rather more difficult to establish exactly in what way the two thinkers are different. Looking at their respective, widely divergent, interpretations of Machiavelli side by side will help us understand the distinctive character of each. It will also allow us to examine, yet again, the enigma of Machiavelli.

Both, of course, deny that there is such an enigma - pace Benedetto Croce - and they do so in characteristically different ways. Strauss accepts what he calls the wholesome, widespread, common, received opinion that takes Machiavelli to be "a teacher of evil". To Strauss, sophisticated attempts to present Machiavelli as a neutral social scientist or an ardent patriot, who can therefore be justified to our moral sense, are just that: sophistications that miss the core of Machiavelli's teaching. The enigma is born of ideological purblindness. In an important methodological observation Strauss writes "the problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things". [13] It is the scholar's business not to ignore the popular view, but to proceed to a "considerate ascent" from it. It is to such an ascent that Strauss devotes a very substantial book, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, a masterpiece of close reading and brilliant - some would say ingenious - interpretation.<sup>1</sup> It is a most Straussian book, calculated to discourage the impatient reader eager to get the gist without following the twists and turns of the erudite commentary. Straussian exegesis, like a religious practice, is best appreciated from the inside. By staying close to the text Strauss pays the author, i.e. Machiavelli, the compliment of taking his writings seriously on the *prima facie* assumption that they have been carefully and artfully composed. Errors of fact, contradictions, misquotations from well-known authorities that puzzle learned commentators, must not be considered slips but deliberate pointers placed by Machiavelli to guide careful readers - "those who understand" - to the literally unspeakable core of his teachings.

Ascending from opinion to knowledge (in political matters from public opinion) is the proper of philosophy, understood in its classical sense. It is the process of critical clarification that rises from what is commonly said that Voegelin in his writings also recognizes as characteristically and paradigmatically Aristotelian. It is opposed to the willful or fanciful positing of abstract starting points, in the manner of sophists and

<sup>1</sup>Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe Ill.: The Free Press, 1958). Numbers in brackets in my text refer to pages in this or Voegelin's book (see note 2).

modern ideologues, who then do violence to the given phenomena of political life as they attempt to descend from the height of their constructs to particular "applications". As a basis of argument, furthermore, the posited definition forces the interlocutor onto the ground of the sophist's own choosing, thus obscuring or eliding the common ground of reality. Far better, then, to start with what is commonly said, however vague and in need of clarification.

Yet, according to Strauss, we moderns are at a disadvantage with regard to the possibilities of ascent from the concrete conflicts and particular problems of any given polity to the universal and permanent considerations that emerge in the process of philosophical elucidation. The immediacy that linked the naive perception of political problems with the philosophical pursuit of the best regime is clouded by received doctrines. Our political ideas are neither spontaneously nor wholly ours, but colored by what has been handed down. Hence the "enigma" of Machiavelli. The learned expositors misinterpret his views concerning religion and morality, "because they are Machiavelli's pupils". "They do not see the evil character of his thought because they are the heirs of the Machiavellian tradition; because they or their forgotten teachers of their teachers, have been corrupted by Machiavelli". [ 12]

In order to liberate philosophy from history we must do history. The ascent that will reveal Machiavelli's true teaching is also a *via negativa*, to undo what Machiavelli has wrought. It is because Machiavelli succeeded in his intention that he appears as an enigma. The learned expositors are clearly not "those who understand".

Strauss does not place Machiavelli in a historical context, in the sense of the contingent events of his time. That would indeed be the act of one duped by consciously or unconsciously Machiavellian lessons. Yet Machiavelli is a pivotal figure in Strauss's view of history. He is the fountainhead of Modern political thought, a mode of thought that rejects the Ancient striving for the best regime. The philosophical aspiration that rises from concrete political experience leads to knowledge that transcends rather than extends opinion. Philosophy, accordingly, transcends rather than extends the city. The city, any real city, cannot but rest on opinion, possibly informed by philosophy, but not *qua* philosophy, for the return to the cave can and does prove deadly. Philosophy is not for everyman and the tension between the city and philosophy cannot be resolved.

Modern thought, by contrast, seeks to resolve the tension between the aspiration to the ideal and the city, dismissing the former as fanciful, and considering men, in the words of the XVth chapter of *The Prince*, "as they live" rather than "as they ought to live". The aspiration of thought is then not to transcend, but to serve the city and the passions it represents. The problem is that of overcoming the vicissitudes of fortune. The classical world-view of a teleological physis is replaced by a capricious nature. Virtue, still and characteristically called that, is accordingly no longer a potential to be developed of what is most human in man, but the capacity to battle fortune. The common good in cities organized to battle fortune cannot be virtue as the finality of man *animal politicum*, but rather liberty, security, wealth and especially glory, a manifestation of collective selfishness, that does not lead to virtue, but that, conversely, "virtue" is meant to serve.

The modern, Machiavellian city is then not an emanation or evocation of the order of the soul, and that is what Strauss takes Machiavelli to mean when he says that *am[a] la patria piu dell'*

*anima*. [10] There is no effort to subordinate the political to what is above and of greater value and permanence than the political. Machiavelli embarks instead on a voyage of discovery, *plus ultra*, claiming to have discovered in his "new orders" a new continent, in the characteristic modern inflection that takes the loss of a vertical orientation to be the broadening of one's universe.

Strauss's Machiavelli is a Miltonian devil: evil and a consummate deceiver but also very grand. He is, among other things, like a true philosopher, a master of esoteric writing, except that he works for the other side. He is a "fallen angel", representing a "perverted nobility of a very high order," manifest in "the intrepidity of his thought, the grandeur of his vision, and the graceful subtlety of his speech". [13]

Voegelin's Machiavelli is a less formidable figure, but still very interesting, and a lot nicer. Voegelin clearly rather likes Machiavelli to whom he devotes a chapter of some fifty pages in his *History of Political Ideas*, parts of which appeared as an article in *The Review of Politics*.<sup>2</sup> According to Voegelin, the confusion about Machiavelli arises not from refusing the received view of him as a "teacher of evil", but from accepting it. He correctly traces the earliest condemnations of Machiavelli (or at least of *The Prince*) to the Counterreformation and its unctuous pieties intended to legitimize authorities in power. "It is hardly necessary to say", writes Voegelin, with sovereign contempt, "that such preoccupations of moralistic propaganda cannot be the basis for a critical analysis of

<sup>2</sup> Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas, Vol. IV, Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. By David L. Morse and William M. Thompson, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin Vol. 22* (Columbia MO: Missouri U.P. 1998). Pp. 31-87.

"Machiavelli's Prince: Background and Formation", *The Review of Politics* 13 (1951) 142-68.

Machiavelli's ideas." [31] Indeed it speaks for Machiavelli, in Voegelin's estimation, that his experience of raw power, exercised without evident legitimating explanation, allows him to unmask "the moralist in politics as the profiteer of the status quo, as the hypocrite who wants everybody to be moral and peace-loving after his own power drive has carried him into a position that he wants to retain." [37]

Voegelin explains that "furious concentration on the evil book", i.e. *The Prince*, placing the dubious morality of Machiavelli's advice to rulers in the forefront, was intended by progressivist historiography to demonize and thus explain away Machiavelli as an aberration in the purported rise from the darkness of the Middle Ages to ever sunnier uplands of the Enlightenment and beyond. Like Strauss, Voegelin objects to the speculative convergence, supposedly carried out by history itself, of the true and the good as the ends of philosophy on the one hand, with the intramundane institutions of politics on the other. He also recognizes the tendency as characteristically and nefariously modern. But rather than cast Machiavelli as the fount and origin of modern corruption, he sees in him the realist who, like Thucydides before him and Hobbes after him, recognized realities of power without trying to edulcorate them. None of them are "spiritual realists" in the sense developed by Prof. Germino, i.e. thinkers open to the entire ontological range from the inanimate to the divine, but all appreciated by Voegelin because they

call a spade a spade:

"A man like Machiavelli who theorizes on the basis of his stark experience of power is a healthy and honest figure, most certainly preferable as a man to the contractualists who try to cover the reality of power underneath established order by the moral, or should we say immoral, swindle of consent." [37]

So much for the *Declaration of Independence* and the derivation of just powers. Although both Voegelin and Strauss explicitly embrace the American polity, they do so for rather different reasons. Voegelin sees in the living American "form of mind" the greatest, least damaged, most vital, residue of the "substance of order" as prefigured (as well as handed down) by the Christian and Classical orienting experience. Strauss, more cautiously and perhaps less candidly, instead quotes, without quite endorsing, Thomas Paine to the effect that, unlike all the governments of the Old World, the foundation of the United States alone was laid in freedom and justice. Without saying that it rests on consent and contract, i.e., ultimately on the will of autonomous subjects, this means, according to Strauss - in a telling optative - that "the United States may be the only country in the world which was founded in explicit opposition to Machiavellian principles". [13]

Voegelin allows for no such (be it prudently dissimulating) exceptionalism. For him there is no escaping what Ken Minogue once called "the stink in the basement". The fratricide of Romulus is emblematic: "Every political order is in some part an accident of existence. The mystery of existential cruelty and guilt is at the bottom of the best order." There is violence and injustice at the origin and in the make-up of *every* human order, however purified and legitimated it may become in the course of events. There is no accounting for the *mysterium iniquitatis*. This is not to equate power with evil, but to pose the existential question of the origin of evil and the sources of order in a universe in which evil is unquestionably and inevitably present. It is the merit of Machiavelli, according to Voegelin, that he faces the problem squarely and "never tries to base morality on the necessities and expediencies of existence." His teaching is not that might is right, but that might and right are incommensurable. "Spiritual morality is a problem in human existence precisely because there is a good deal more to human existence than spirit. All attacks on Machiavelli as the inventor or advocate of a "double morality" for private and public conduct, etc., can be dismissed as manifestations of philosophical ignorance." [82/83]

This clearly shows how far Voegelin's intellectual and moral temperament is from that of Strauss, for whatever the faults of the latter, it is difficult to accuse him of philosophical ignorance. Yet it is also clear that, if for Strauss the philosopher who would survive in the city needs to dissimulate the truth of the spirit, Voegelin emphasizes the need, in the medium of the city of opinion, to mask the concomitant and antipodal truth of existence:

"By social convention the mystery of guilt is not admitted to public consciousness. A political thinker who through his work stimulates an uncomfortable awareness of this mystery will become unpopular with the intellectual retainers of an established order". [83]

Voegelin recognizes that there is something radically new and strange about Machiavelli, who, he writes, brings about "a severe break with the traditions for treating political problems". [3 1]

But his originality is not an aberrant singularity that would allow him to be conveniently bracketed so as not to interfere with the ideological postulate of the common march of "progress". His individual genius is undeniable, but he is nonetheless embedded in a tradition, and responds to the stimuli of a particular time. Voegelin does not reduce Machiavelli's work to a function of his time (whatever that would mean), but he cannot consider it apart from the contingent circumstances in which it emerged: The republican intermezzo in Florentine constitutional history (it is interesting to note that for Voegelin Florentine republicanism is "weltgeschichtlich" a lost cause, doomed in the larger scheme of things, poignant perhaps, but certainly pathetic), during which Machiavelli was active as chancellor, a period especially conducive to discussions of constitutional matters; the invasion of Italy in 1494 and its aftermath that revealed the newly consolidated national monarchies, France and Spain, as the dominant forms of effective political organization for the age; the shocking effect and aftereffect on European attitudes of the Mongol advance westward; all manifesting, from an Italian point of view, "naked power destructive of meaningful order." This was most painfully and humiliatingly evident by the incapacity of Italy, the center of intellectual and cultural sophistication of its time, to organize and defend itself against the marauding barbarians. Voegelin paints with a broad brush, but there is no denying the collapse of various modes of received legitimacy and the emergence and just as frequent quick collapse of dynasts and powers in Jacob Burckhardt's words "rein tatsaechlich" i.e. of merely pragmatic existence without a shred of normative cover.

In responding to this world out of normative joint Machiavelli was not without intellectual antecedents - and Voegelin provides the outline of a specifically Italian tradition of secular statesmanship, meaning a statecraft detached from considerations of transcendent legitimation, that "treats the state as an autonomous absolute historical phenomenon, without relation to a legitimating environment of meaning". [40] This line of political thought is said to begin, somewhat oddly perhaps, with the quintessentially Spanish Cardinal Albomoz and his provisions for re-founding the Papal state.

The transition from the multiple intersecting autonomies and dependencies of the Middle Ages to the idea of the sovereignty, internal and external, of territorial states, is subsumed in Voegelin's account under a broader pattern of the "history of order." He presents it as the breaking up of a "spiritually animated whole into legal jurisdictions" with the concomitant development of subjectivity understood as an "insistence on personal and national rights no longer subordinated to the whole":

"The disintegration of Christianitas affected both the spiritual and the temporal order insofar as in both spheres the common spirit that induces cooperation between persons in spite of diverging interests, as well as the sense of an obligation to compromise in the spirit of the whole was seeping out." [35]

The notion of a Christianitas as an effective historical order informed by a spirit of cooperation and compromise beyond the sphere of symbolic justifications, requires an effort of the imagination, but it is a useful heuristic device and certainly important to Voegelin's scheme of history. The invasion of Charles VIII, that undoubtedly marks an era in the fortunes of Italy was, according to Voegelin, the first manifestation of modern *pleonexia*. [38] It is not clear whether we should suppose, say, the Hundred Years War or the Sicilian Vespers to have been motivated

by "obligation to the whole".

What Voegelin is concerned about, however, is not the effective violence or injustice of events, but the terms in which they appeared meaningful to the participants. He is lamenting the loss of an understanding of history as a meaningful unfolding, as the consciousness of providential development through time, expressed by means such as the speculation on the four world monarchies or the *translatio imperii*.

For Voegelin Machiavelli's turning to the model of the Roman polity and to the example of Livy's historiography is symptomatic for this vacuum. In his view, which is amply illustrated in earlier volumes of his *History of Ideas*, "the stream of secular state history" of Rome "did not admit a divine Providence governing universal History" whereas following Livy leads to emphasis on contingent events "wars and revolution to the exclusion of the permanent factors and the long-range developments that determine the texture of history".

On the other hand Machiavelli represents an advance, because, under the impetus of the events in Asia, it was no longer possible to uphold the view of a *single* line of meaningful development, and the questioning of the Augustinian model of a *historia sacra* opened the field for a more adequate understanding of universal human history to include the great Eastern civilizations that could no longer be ignored.

The suspension of the Augustinian model together with a turn to Roman history on the model of Polybius allowed Machiavelli, furthermore, to recover a problem that the Christian linear history had concealed. That is the problem of cycles, the pattern of growth and decay of civilizations (or, as Voegelin writes, "the course of national history") passing through various forms and stages of government. In so doing Machiavelli anticipates the speculation on *corsi* and *ricorsi* of Vico, Eduard Meyer, Spengler, Toynbee and, implicitly, of Voegelin himself. [86]

In Voegelin's view, to the extent that Machiavelli attaches his reflections on political order to natural cycles, far from postulating the "State as a Work of Art," (Burckhardt), i.e., as a modernistic product of ingenious artifice, he recognizes organized society as a natural phenomenon "complete with its political, religious, and civilizational order." [63] Voegelin is quick to add that Machiavelli's naturalism is pagan, but not mechanical, thus leaving room, like its Stoic ancestor, for free human agency.<sup>3</sup>

The figure of the Founder, crucial to Machiavelli's scheme, is thus for Voegelin the vehicle of a cosmic force, a mediator who brings forth the substance of order. Machiavelli's *uno solo* is an instance of the charismatic personality that we find as the hero in several stages - and at different levels of differentiation - of the History of Order as told by Voegelin: the exceptional, creative, mystical individual, who draws the substance of order out of the depth of his psyche, moved by and against the corruption and obtuseness of his age and who creates a social field that we recognize as political order by his compellingly persuasive effect on others. Machiavelli would have spoken of *occasione*, of the opportunity for the founder to create new orders in the malleable material thrown up by the disorder of his times.

Machiavelli's Founder - by implicit intention Machiavelli himself - introduces new modes and

orders. But how does the innovation become socially effective? For Voegelin because the charismatic figure creates a social field - in the case of Machiavelli, a field of force, but force of "stoic" inspiration, that creates order in the image of the cosmos and held together by "sacramental" bonds. From a more differentiated point of view, open to the order of transcendence, it must appear as a deficient order, as "the demonic naturalism of power as a formal principle of order restricted as to its substance ... by the idea that the order of power should be the order of a nation". [88]

<sup>3</sup> There is, of course, a significant body of thought ranging from the Italian neo-guelf authors to Sebastian De Grazia's Pulitzer-prize winning book *Machiavelli in Hell*, that argues that Machiavelli, far from being "pagan", was Christian in significant ways. Indeed, Prof Germino's paper on this panel adduces evidences to that effect.

Machiavelli's order is, of course, merely the order of power. Voegelin is acutely aware of this. The entire section of the pertinent volume is titled "The Order of Power". It is a neo-pagan order that remains closed towards transcendental reality and hence reverts to the tribalism of a particular national community rather than aspire to the openness and common bonds of mankind. But it is nonetheless a principle of order that is rooted in the psyche and operates by means of virtue. Strauss, as we saw, would wonder at this point how this anchoring of the order of power in the soul as the sensorium of natural order squares with loving one's country more than one's soul.

Strauss interprets Machiavelli's founding intentions in conjunction with his discussions of the "unarmed prophet". [ 174 ff.] For all the disparagement of Savonarola the fact remains that the unarmed prophet *par excellence*, Jesus, was an enormously successful Founder. This is because he was in fact a master of the "effective reality of things" which is, if one reads closely, really the effectiveness of creating perceptions, of guiding opinion. Machiavelli is then the first political philosopher who sought to impose his new orders by propaganda, and thus undo Christianity by emulating its means. For Strauss, therefore, Machiavelli is not merely a non-Christian neo-pagan, but a virulent and very effective anti-Christian.

For Voegelin, Machiavelli's order is still an emanation of the soul, a soul that partakes of the entirety of experience albeit falling back inexcusably in the level of differentiation. For Strauss a coherent Machiavellian order emerges because the master passion that drives the dominant personalities, the thirst for glory, can only be realized in terms of the acclaim and the perceived benefit of others, so that individual masterselfishness can rest on ostensibly more respectable collective selfishness.

To Voegelin the advice to rulers that appears so shocking in *The Prince* makes sense in light of the final chapter, the exhortation to liberate Italy from the barbarians. Voegelin does not say this with the intention of taking nationalist exaltation as a good reason for cruelty and fraud, but it is the case, he writes, that "in order to create and maintain a stable political order, the prince must observe certain rules of conduct." [78]

Voegelin, unlike Strauss, does not seem to think that Machiavelli's advice may aim to assist the prince in merely in attaining and maintaining his own rule, whatever his reasons. The pathos of the last chapter of *The Prince* persuades Voegelin that Machiavelli leaves the sphere of realistic observation to rise to redeeming faith. This is, of course, national, not Christian redemption, but the trope is analogous, and Voegelin finds echoes of *Hebrews*: "The age is hopeless - yet [Machiavelli] does not *want* to abandon hope ... His hope is the substance of his faith in a structure of the field of action in which *ordinata virtus*' has half or 'almost half a chance to prevail." [80 see also 85] Fortune in this scheme is the relation between the force of circumstances and the prowess of man.

Voegelin sees the situation of Italy as described in the passionate pages of Machiavelli as a *mythic* depth of misery, such as gave rise to Moses, Cyrus, and Theseus. He points to the apocalyptic portents in Machiavelli's text, recognizing a "type" of text that seeks to call forth a redeemer, a text speaks of a cloud showing the way, of the sea opening, of manna from heaven, of rocks spouting water, etc. It is precisely the kind of counterfactual assertion that Strauss finds suspicious and telling in a very different sense. Since we know (and Machiavelli knows that his sensible and attentive readers know) that such things *did not* happen, what are we to make of the rest of the story?

For Voegelin Machiavelli "crystalliz[es] the ideas of the age in the symbol of the prince who, through fortuna. and virtus' will be the savior and restorer of Italy." [36] And that "symbol" is best represented, not in any of the major or best known works, but in the *Life of Castruccio Castracani* which, as Voegelin shows, is no biography in the ordinary sense but contains many standard elements of the stories of redeemer-heroes, such as the topos of the foundling who performs feats of amazing prowess in childhood, eventually makes his way to the throne, etc.

Both Strauss and Voegelin discuss the importance Machiavelli attributes to religion. But whereas Strauss sees in Machiavelli's religion an *instrumentum regni*, a tool doubly insidious because by insinuating a counterreligion it undermines the real thing, Voegelin appreciates Machiavelli's emphasis for the need of sacramental bonds holding societies together. The experience of the failure of positivist legal formalism, such as that of his former master Kelsen who had drafted the Austrian constitution, suggested that the pretence of constructing an order, structured by purely formal, procedural rules, an order that is not *lived* as a partaking of a common substance could only create a vacuum bound to be filled by ideological ersatz divinities. Hence his quarrel with contractualists.

Voegelin, as we saw, deplores Machiavelli's closure toward transcendence, but he regards the pagan naturalism that comes back to the surface as more compactly articulated, but nonetheless valid openness to the experience of cosmic reality that prevents Machiavelli from "derailing into Gnosticism" and connotes also an open approach to history. [85] "On the plane of finite existence, history will still be shaped by the virtus' that has faith in its own substance" [85]

Both Strauss and Voegelin battle against the *hubris* of controlling history, the ideological intellectuals' presumptuous folly of believing himself outside and above a process in which in fact he partakes, the structure of which he cannot fully comprehend, much less determine. In Strauss' binary division of "Ancient" and "Modern" modes of political thought Machiavelli



stands at the head of those who seek to command fortune. By contrast, in Voegelin's scheme of increasingly differentiated evocations of the spirit, threatened by reification and loss of substance such as to evoke further evocations as a reaction, Machiavelli represents a fall back and an advance at the same time. We should be grateful for Machiavelli's demystifying candor, that reveals, among other things, the consciousness of ancient cosmic rhythms. Yet, in terms of history, his mythopoetic pathos ultimately yields to the mere flow of unstructured, contingent, i.e. for Voegelin meaningless events, as is manifest in the Florentine Secretary's latest work, the *Florentine Histories*. [86]