

Machiavelli, Violence, and History

By Adam Minter

MACHIAVELLI IS OFTEN HUNG WITH HIS assertion that it is better to be feared than loved, as if it justified unmitigated violence. But a careful reading of Machiavelli's work will reveal that this is a statement which is highly qualified. For Machiavelli, so far as violence is part of politics it should aim at stability, the maintenance of a ruler, and the overall benefit of the community. This is not to deny that Machiavelli observes that there are many other illicit uses of political violence, but his attitude towards these is one of disdain based upon the belief that ultimately they will be destructive to their user. By considering Machiavelli's writings regarding political violence it is possible to see that he makes strict practical and moral distinctions for its use. Though they never overlap, they can be informally coupled in the name of necessity. Furthermore, by examining the historical figures whom Machiavelli uses as models for his theories, particularly Cesare Borgia, clear examples of the circumstances in which he would approve of the use of violence are to be found.

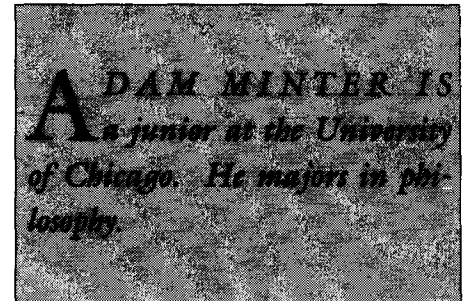
The most obvious type of political violence is war, a topic which Machiavelli considered extensively. Though his attitude towards violence within war is unambiguous, it does not begin to answer the question of why a ruler should use political violence. Nonetheless, much of Machiavelli's moral and practical beliefs regarding the use of violence can be derived in Chapter XVIII of *The Prince* when he considers types of combat:

Thus you must know that there are two kinds of combat: one with laws, the other with force. The first is proper to man, the second to beasts; but because the first is often not enough, one must have recourse to the second.¹

He then justifies the observation with a remark on human nature:

And if all men were good, this teaching would not be good; but because they are wicked and do not observe faith with you, you also do not have to observe it with them.²

These passages offer an insight into some aspects of Machiavelli's attitude



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towards violence. First, it seems that combat — the absolute apex of political violence — is a necessary evil. If all men were good, rulers would not need recourse to violence. But men are evil and a ruler must know the use of violence. Yet Machiavelli does not deny the potential for violence to transcend defensive recourses. Indeed, in Chapters VI and XXVI of *The Prince* Machiavelli emphasizes that circumstances which necessitate great force produce great men. How can Machiavelli reconcile the belief that combat and violence are proper only to beasts with the belief that grandeur is acquired in war and deceit?³

This question is difficult to answer and it is perhaps useful to narrow the consideration to some of Machiavelli's categories. Possibly one of the most important is the distinction between types of wars:

Sometimes they are due to the ambition of princes or of republics which are seeking to set up an empire....The other way in which war is brought about is when a whole people with all its families leaves a place, driven thence either by famine or by war, and sets out to look for a new home and a new country in which to live.⁴

What glory is to be gained from the later of these is never clear. But the glory to be gained from the former is not to be doubted. For the most part, *The Prince* is concerned with the acquiring and maintaining of territories. It is within this context that Machiavelli sees the necessity for political violence. But this would not resolve the problem of necessity in the first case because ambition is by no means a necessity. Furthermore, violence for conquest and ambition's sake are not entirely matters of free will, as Machiavelli observes: “And truly it is a very natural and ordinary thing to desire to acquire...”⁵

WITHIN EVERY RULER THERE IS A NATURAL desire for acquisition. What this desire necessitates is violence. Hence, violence — the role attributed to beasts before men — is implicit in men (and in particular, rulers) not just as a necessary evil to be exercised in extraneous situations, but as the corresponding necessary action to the ambition for acquisition.⁶ Though necessity may play a part in political violence (such as acquisition prompted by famine), Machiavelli is quick to add that men also have a natural disposition to it. However, conquest for ambition's sake has its more valorous side, and these observations can be tempered by a passage from *The Discourses* which states why, if at all, conquest for ambition should be conducted:

And, should a good prince seek worldly renown, he should most certainly covet possession of a city that has become corrupt, not, with Caesar, to complete its spoliation, but, with Romulus, to reform it.⁷

This does not resolve the dilemma, but it adds a path to its neutralization. There is a reason for acquisition which is natural. But a moral goal can direct that natural ambition to some good, giving it the status of a necessity. In this instance Machiavelli appears to say that the good of one state can be extended to the benefit of another. A ruler who has a public end in mind

when exercising ambition will also increase the esteem in which his rule is held. Thus personal ambition linked to the achievement of public ends benefits both parties, the ruler and the ruled. This is the end to which Machiavelli would have politics and political violence aim (of course, the nature of 'public good' is debatable⁸).

It is clear for what reasons Machiavelli believes acquisitions occur: to increase the esteem of a ruler's standing, reform the corrupt for the general benefit of the state and out of a natural tendency and ambition belonging to all men. All of these but the last increase the overall standing of the state. Of the last, it is often destructive and beast-like (in fact, in its raw form it *is* beast-like) but chained to a public goal it can be instrumental in bringing about good (violence itself cannot be transformed into a good).

Specifically, Machiavelli condemns ambition which completely ignores civic goals. In Chapter VIII of *The Prince* Machiavelli considers and judges uniformly unacceptable the ancient Sicilian Agathocles' excessive criminal violence in acquiring Syracuse. It is important to note that the title of the chapter is, "Of Those Who Have Attained a Principality through Evil Deeds"⁹. This seems to sustain the above hypothesis such that violence must be used for acquisition, but sometimes is to a moral end and sometimes not:

Yet one cannot call it virtue to kill one's citizens, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; these modes can enable one to acquire empire but not glory....his [Agathocles] savage cruelty and inhumanity do not allow him to be celebrated among the most excellent men.¹⁰

In contrast one can consider Machiavelli's statements on the Roman Romulus, who had killed his brother and acquiesced in the killing of Titus Tatius, his colleague:

...that for the death of his brother and of his colleague he deserves to be excused, and that what he did was done for the common good and not to satisfy his personal ambition...¹¹

Would Machiavelli say that for these acts Romulus deserves to be among the most celebrated men? Actually, the answer is no. It is not his acts which accord him that position, but the civic good towards which the acts worked. Agathocles is identified as one who acted purely from personal ambition¹². Though he secured and maintained the state of Syracuse, his violent means would have weakened his rule in times of duress, particularly war. But because there was peace during Agathocles' reign, his subjects had no overwhelming reason to dislodge him. Machiavelli's point is that such a ruler could not continue to be successful in the long run without extremely good fortune (a factor which should not be underestimated in Machiavelli's thought¹³) because he would not be able to depend upon the good will of his subjects. Romulus had the common good in mind and the results of his acts are celebrated.¹⁴ There is a very significant distinction to note at this point. Agathocles is condemned for his means, while Romulus is praised for his ends. They both used reprehensible violence, but one had a public end and the other did not. So one is a criminal and the other's violence is forgotten. In discussing Romulus Machiavelli generalizes this principle: "It is

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Machiavelli asserts that in evaluating a ruler’s violent political acts, one judges his means to be either excusable or criminal. Machiavelli by no means implies that the violence is justified. Indeed, he asserts that acts of violence are never moral, but in light of the ends they achieve they are excusable. This could be seen as a rough ethical system for judging the moral worth of a political act, though it is highly unlikely that Machiavelli set out to create such a system.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that Machiavelli never condones violence as a good in itself. It is a necessary evil, one that an individual has a choice about making when that individual chooses to enter politics. This is an important point because without it the idea of excusable means for public ends is seriously weakened: means then could be looked upon as being good in themselves so that no value could effectively be placed upon the end to which they aim. Essentially, the beast of violence would be combined with the reasonable law-making man (though he asserts this in a weaker way in regard to the natural tendency of men to want to acquire). This is nowhere more clear than in a striking passage from *The Discourses*. In it he comments on the merit of ruining a newly acquired state¹⁶:

Such methods are exceedingly cruel and are repugnant to any community, not only to a Christian one, but to any composed of men. It behoves, therefore, every man to shun them, and to prefer rather to live as a private citizen than as a king with such ruination of men to his score. None the less, for the sort of man who is unwilling to take up this first course of well doing, it is expedient, should he wish to hold what he has, to enter on the path of wrongdoing.¹⁷

THIS SHOWS HOW FAR THE MORAL AND PRACTICAL have to go to converge in Machiavelli’s system. Though they may have an uneasy alliance based upon necessity, the underlying immoral character of committed violence cannot be denied. A ruler who uses it must have a proper end because a necessary evil always remains an evil. With this in mind, it is possible to observe how Machiavelli would approve of violence in a practical sense. But to do this one must consider Cesare Borgia:

...for I do not know what better teaching I could give to a new prince than the examples of his [Borgia’s] actions.¹⁸

Borgia’s career was brief, brutal and prolific. His father, Pope Alexander VI, allowed him the prestige and resources of Papal Rome. He conquered the Romagna in the space of a few years and relegated under his central power its ancient and disparate cities and chiefs. Machiavelli’s desire to rid Italy of foreign influence was embodied in his depiction of Borgia’s shrewd and impetuous moves to centralize authority.

In another mode, Machiavelli admired Borgia’s select use of violence. Instead of being overly cruel and vengeful (though he certainly was) and purging a state once he had acquired it, Borgia was content to allow standing ministers to maintain their positions. Generally, property was not seized and senseless slaughter was not encouraged. Violence was used only

as a necessary recourse to consolidate and maintain a position. It was calculated and limited.

Machiavelli's two accounts of the execution of Remirro de Orco found in Chapter VII of the *The Prince* and in his diplomatic legations of 1502 give an example of how and why he believed violence should be used in a limited manner. According to Machiavelli, Remirro de Orco was appointed as Borgia's chief minister in the Romagna to reduce it to peace and unity. Remirro was successful, but his deeds generated hatred. Borgia, worrying about his reputation (it is better to be feared than hated) decided to dispose of the hated minister, thus insuring his stature in the Romagna:

Messer Remirro this morning was found in two pieces on the public square, where he still is; and all the people have been able to see him. Nobody feels sure of the cause of his death, except that so it has pleased the Prince, who shows that he can make and unmake men as he likes, according to their desserts.¹⁹

Ten years later, reflecting upon the same scene, Machiavelli adds another motivation:

The ferocity of this spectacle left the people at once satisfied and stupefied.²⁰

This act conforms to Machiavelli's opinion that properly exercised violence must have an element of spectacle so the power of the ruler is impressed upon the people. By Machiavelli's analysis, Borgia's execution of Remirro de Orco held together the unity of his state by increasing his prestige and the respectful fear of the Romagna's inhabitants. Had Borgia not killed Remirro de Orco, he would have inevitably become hated and there would have been the possibility of destabilizing rebellion:

...one of the most powerful remedies that a prince has against conspiracies is not to be hated by the people generally.²¹

Satiating the Romagna's hatred for Remirro reduced this risk while at the same time producing an appropriate degree of fear for Borgia. In Machiavelli's political system these are civic-minded goals.

Borgia committed a more complicated act of violence (in that it took a degree of subterfuge) at Singaglia on January 18, 1503. The events which caused this began in the autumn of 1502 when a council was organized and convened by the powerful Roman Orsini family at Magione. The council was a result of concerns about the increasing power of Borgia and the decreasing power of the Orsini and its allies. As a direct consequence, the Orsini faction induced parts of Romagna to rebel against Borgia.²² Because he was militarily weak at the time, Borgia lost a large part of his new state. Yet he quickly remedied the situation and assembled a large army including a sizable contingent of French lances. However, he desisted from immediate war:

Although he was now so strong that he could in open war revenge himself on his enemies, nevertheless he decided that to deceive them would be a more secure and profitable method...²³

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Instead Borgia made peace with the Orsini and their allies. Yet he had no intention of letting himself be boxed in by the Orsini, a family which had attempted to thwart his career from the start. But instead of engaging in a war which would have cost many lives and induced further resentment in the Romagna he waited for a suitable opportunity to dispose only of the few leading members of the Orsini faction. The threat then would be extinguished, Borgia’s rule over the Romagna would be secure and his prestige would shine more brightly with the glare of the Orsini gone.

The opportunity came after the Orsini and Vitelli had seized the town of Singaglia. After being invited to inspect the town Borgia made his plans to trap and kill them. He was given an honored welcome at the city’s gates, after which the Orsini were taken prisoner and strangled. Meanwhile Singaglia suffered damage, but much less than the rest of the Romagna would have suffered in open warfare.

This deferred and minimized violence served both to increase Borgia’s standing and to eliminate a destabilizing rival faction. Also, it minimized the negative impact that large scale warfare would have had on Borgia’s young state in the Romagna. For these reasons Machiavelli saw this act as one which best exemplifies the necessary and proper use of violence.

Furthermore, by eliminating the Orsini Borgia was eliminating a power which encouraged foreign influence in Italy. Machiavelli argued for the elimination of Italy’s dependence upon foreign powers. For Machiavelli, such action would have been the mark of a ruler who was willing to build and stand upon his own foundations, and such a ruler would have been a ruler of prestige, to be held in esteem by his subjects. The result would be a strong and stable state. Thus Machiavelli could look upon Borgia - whom he readily believed was cruel - as a merciful figure:

Cesare Borgia was held to be cruel; nonetheless his cruelty restored the Romagna, united it, and reduced it to peace and faith. If one considers this well, one will see that he was much more merciful than the Florentine people, who so as to escape a name for cruelty, allowed Pistoia to be destroyed.²⁴

The reference to Pistoia is to Florence’s encouragement of factions within the town of Pistoia from 1500 to 1502. These factions were played against each other to maintain some semblance of stability, but in the end this resulted in the veritable destruction of the city. Comparing Pistoia to Borgia’s act at Singaglia it is easy to see why Machiavelli sees one as more merciful than the other. At Singaglia Borgia had a clear civic goal and his violence was executed swiftly to that end. Though the cultivation of factions in Pistoia may have had a public end, the violence was drawn out due to the hazy nature of that end. Like Borgia’s act at Singaglia, Machiavelli believes violence should be quick, calculated and with a clear end or it will become a liability:

Hence it should be noted that in taking hold of a state, he who seizes it should examine all the offenses necessary for him to commit, and do them all at a stroke...nor can one ever found himself on his subjects if, because of fresh and continued injuries, they cannot be secure against him.²⁵

The use of violence to maintain a state does not differ substantially from the use of violence to hold newly acquired states. The important principle is that it is essential to induce a degree of fear from the people. Acts and appearances which maintain a healthy degree of fear and respect will be the most effective in maintaining the state and its ruler's position. In considering the brief reign in Florence of the charismatic priest Savonarola, Machiavelli decides that his ultimate ruin was that he was unarmed. Had Savonarola a recourse to violence he would have been able to inspire a proper degree of fear in the Florentines:

He was ruined in his new orders as soon as the multitude began not to believe in them, and he had no mode for holding firm those who had believed nor for making unbelievers believe.²⁶

Savonarola was destroyed by his inability to hold his supporters and force others to his side. By Machiavelli's analysis, if he could have had a recourse to some sort of violence to impose and maintain his order, he could have survived. As it was, Savonarola depended upon the good will of men — a fatal error in Machiavelli's political world where men are evil and untrustworthy.

However to maintain the state it is not enough to be feared — but it is a solid start. Still a ruler must also show proper respect for the property of the people. Taking his cue from Borgia's relative restraint in this matter Machiavelli implies that seizing property is politically worse than seizing blood:

...if he also needs to proceed against someone's life, he must do it when there is suitable justification and manifest cause for it. But above all, he must abstain from the property of others, because men forget the death of a father more quickly than the loss of a patrimony.²⁷

These are criteria for the use of violence in maintaining the state which are also applicable in regard to violence used in acquisition. The principle (or principles) is the same: violence must aim at a public benefit. 'The benefit' is general — the establishment and/or preservation of a healthy state. It is clear that, above all, Machiavelli values independence, stability and unity in a state. So long as violence promotes these goals it is excusable.

The main conflicts in Machiavelli's thoughts on the exercise of violence are between his recognition that extraordinary means (say, ruining a city) are repugnant and the belief that greatness and stability will not come to a state and a ruler without them.²⁸ The reconciliation is difficult. First, he distinguishes that which is necessary for the community's overall interests, such as the prestige of a ruler. These necessary acts are distinguished from those which are performed without any concern for a community's interest, but purely out of a ruler's interest. Machiavelli observes that the desire to conquer and the use of violence are natural and bestial. Yet when they are chained to a community's interest they are excused. The proper use of



violence is found in that context.

Because Machiavelli was not a moral philosopher there is some danger in this sort of analysis. After all, he was an eminently practical political man. But to deny an ethic to his politics would be foolish. The point is not that there is a moral reason to use or not use violence but that, in a sense, the moral and practical should be considered together in judging an action. So long as a ruler seeks to maintain and acquire with proper ends (and success) his means will be excused. If anything, this could be called a practical morality. But again, morality was never the implicit issue in *The Prince* or *Discourses* (much less in Machiavelli's legations). These writings were concerned with the proper acquisition and maintenance of a state. But it is precisely this emphasis of state goals over individual ends which lends Machiavelli's politics such a practical ethic. φ

ENDNOTES

¹Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, tr. Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), Chapter XVIII, 69.

²Ibid.

³This problem is found, for example, at *Prince*, Chapter XXI, 87.

⁴Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, tr. Bernard Crick (Middlesex: Penguin, 1970), Book II, Chapter VIII, 294.

⁵*Prince*, Chapter III, 14.

⁶For comments on actions resembling nature see *Discourses*, Book II, Chapter III, 282.

⁷*Discourses*, Book I, Chapter X, 138.

⁸This ambiguity can be found in *Discourses*, Book II, Chapter VI, 291.

⁹Machiavelli used Latin chapter titles, in this case, "De His Per Scelera Ad Principatum Pervenere". I thank Professor Elissa Weaver of the University of Chicago for this translation.

¹⁰*Prince*, Chapter VIII, 35.

¹¹*Discourses*, 133.

¹²*Prince*, 34.

¹³See *Prince*, Chapter XXV.

¹⁴*Discourses*, 133

¹⁵This is my translation of, "Conviene bene che, accusandolo

il fatto, lo effetto lo scusi...". from Niccolo Machiavelli, *Il Principe e Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, ed. Sergio Bertelli (Milano: Feltrinelli Economica, 1977), Libro Primo, Capitolo IX, 153. I find the Crick translation incorrect in this instance. All further references to *The Discourses* will be to the Crick translation.

¹⁶Also see *Prince*, Chapter V, 20.

¹⁷*Discourses*, Book I, Chapter XXVI, 177.

¹⁸*Prince*, Chapter VII, 27

¹⁹Niccolo Machiavelli, 23 December, 1502 from Cesena to the Balia in "The Legations" in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others*, Vol. I, tr. Allan Gilbert (Durham: Duke University Press, 1965), 142.

²⁰*Prince*, Chapter VII, 30.

²¹*Prince*, Chapter XIX, 73.

²²Niccolo Machiavelli, *A Description of the Methods Used by Duke Valentino in Killing Vitellozzo Vitelli, Oliverotto Da Fermo, and Others*, in Gilbert, Vol. I, 163.

²³Ibid 165.

²⁴*Prince*, Chapter XVII, 65.

²⁵*Prince*, Chapter VII., 38.

²⁶*Prince*, Chapter VI, 24.

²⁷*Prince*, Chapter XVII, 67.

²⁸See *Prince*, Chapter XI, 87.