Leo Strauss

Introduction:

Thoughts on Machiavelli

WE shall not shock anyone, we shall merely expose ourselves to good-natured or at any rate harmless ridicule, if we profess ourselves inclined to the old-fashioned and simple opinion according to which Machiavelli was a teacher of evil. Indeed, what other description would fit a man who teaches lessons like these: princes ought to exterminate the families of rulers whose territory they wish to possess securely; princes ought to murder their opponents rather than to confiscate their property since those who have been robbed, but not those who are dead, can think of revenge; men forget the murder of their fathers sooner than the loss of their patrimony; true liberality consists in being stingy with one's own property and in being generous with what belongs to others; not virtue but the prudent use of virtue and vice leads to happiness; injuries ought all to be done together so that, being tasted less, they will hurt less, while benefits ought to be conferred little by little, so that they will be felt more strongly; a victorious general who fears that his prince might not reward him properly, may punish him for his anticipated ingratitude by raising the flag of rebellion; if one has to choose between inflicting severe injuries and inflicting light injuries, one ought to inflict severe injuries; one ought not to say to someone whom one wants to kill "Give me your gun, I want to kill you with it," but merely, "Give me your gun," for once you have the gun in your hand, you can satisfy your desire. If it is true that only an evil man will stoop to teach maxims of public and private gangsterism, we are forced to say that Machiavelli was an evil man.

Machiavelli was indeed not the first man to express opinions like those mentioned. Such opinions belong to a way of political thinking and political acting which is as old as political society itself. But Machiavelli is the only philosopher who has lent the weight of his name to any way of political thinking and political acting which is as old as political society itself, so much so that his name is commonly used for designating such a way. He is notorious as the classic of the evil way of political thinking and political acting. Callicles and Thrasymachus, who set forth the evil doctrine behind closed doors, are Platonic characters, and the Athenian ambassadors, who state the same doctrine on the island of Melos in the absence of the common people, are Thucydidean characters. Machiavelli proclaims openly and triumphantly a corrupting doctrine which ancient writers had taught covertly or with all signs of repugnance. He says in his own name shocking things which ancient writers had said through the mouths of their characters.[1] Machiavelli alone has dared to utter the evil doctrine in a book and in his own name.

Yet however true the old-fashioned and simple verdict may be, it is not exhaustive. Its deficiency justifies to some extent the more sophisticated views which are set forth by the learned of our age. Machiavelli, we are told, was so far from being an evil teacher of evil that he was a passionate patriot or a scientific student of society or both. But one may wonder whether the up-to-date scholars do not err much more grievously than the old-fashioned and simple, or whether what escapes the up-to-date scholars is not much more important than what escapes the simple and the old-fashioned, although it may be true that the one thing needful which is ignored by the sophisticated is inadequately articulated and therefore misinterpreted by the men of noble simplicity. It would not be the only case in which "a little philosophy"[2] generates prodigious errors to which the unphilosophic multitude is immune.

It is misleading to describe the thinker Machiavelli as a patriot. He is a patriot of a particular kind: he is more concerned with the salvation of his fatherland than with the salvation of his soul. His patriotism therefore presupposes a comprehensive reflection regarding the status of the fatherland on the one hand and of the soul on the other. This comprehensive reflection, and not patriotism, is the core of Machiavelli's thought. This compre-

hensive reflection, and not his patriotism, established his fame and made him the teacher of many men in all countries. The substance of his thought is not Florentine, or even Italian, but universal. It concerns, and it is meant to concern, all thinking men regardless of time and place. To speak of Machiavelli as a scientist is at least as misleading as to speak of him as a patriot. The scientific student of society is unwilling or unable to pass "value-judgments," but Machiavelli's works abound with "value-judgments." His study of society is normative.

But even if we were forced to grant that Machiavelli was essentially a patriot or a scientist, we would not be forced to deny that he was a teacher of evil. Patriotism as Machiavelli understood it is collective selfishness. The indifference to the distinction between right and wrong which springs from devotion to one's country is less repulsive than the indifference to that distinction which springs from exclusive preoccupation with one's own ease or glory. But precisely for this reason it is more seductive and therefore more dangerous. Patriotism is a kind of love of one's own. Love of one's own is inferior to love of what is both one's own and good. Love of one's own tends therefore to become concerned with one's own being good or complying with the demands of right. To justify Machiavelli's terrible counsels by having recourse to his patriotism, means to see the virtues of that patriotism while being blind to that which is higher than patriotism, or to that which both hallows and limits patriotism. In referring to Machiavelli's patriotism one does not dispose of a mere semblance of evil; one merely obscures something truly evil.

As regards the "scientific" approach to society which many of its adherents trace to Machiavelli, it emerges through the abstraction from the moral distinctions by which we take our bearings as citizens and as men. The indispensable condition of "scientific" analysis is then moral obtuseness. That obtuseness is not identical with depravity, but it is bound to strengthen the forces of depravity. In the case of lesser men, one can safely trace such obtuseness to the absence of certain intellectual virtues. This charitable explanation could not be tolerated in the case of Machiavelli, who was too thoughtful not to know what he was doing and too generous not to admit it to his reasonable friends.

We do not hesitate to assert, as very many have asserted before

us, and we shall later on try to prove, that Machiavelli's teaching is immoral and irreligious. We are familiar with the evidence which scholars adduce in support of the contrary assertion; but we question their interpretation of the evidence. To say nothing of certain other considerations, it seems to us that the scholars in question are too easily satisfied. They are satisfied that Machiavelli was a friend of religion because he stressed the useful and the indispensable character of religion. They do not pay any attention to the fact that his praise of religion is only the reverse side of what one might provisionally call his complete indifference to the truth of religion. This is not surprising since they themselves are likely to understand by religion nothing other than a significant sector of society, if not an attractive or at any rate innocuous piece of folklore, to say nothing of those sincerely religious people who are gratified by any apparent benefit conferred upon religion. They misinterpret Machiavelli's judgment concerning religion, and likewise his judgment concerning morality, because they are pupils of Machiavelli. Their seemingly open-minded study of Machiavelli's thought is based on the dogmatic acceptance of his principles. They do not see the evil character of his thought because they are the heirs of the Machiavellian tradition; because they, or the forgotten teachers of their teachers, have been corrupted by Machiavelli.

One cannot see the true character of Machiavelli's thought unless one frees himself from Machiavelli's influence. For all practical purposes this means that one cannot see the true character of Machiavelli's thought unless one recovers for himself and in himself the pre-modern heritage of the western world, both Biblical and classical. To do justice to Machiavelli requires one to look forward from a pre-modern point of view toward an altogether unexpected and surprising Machiavelli who is new and strange, rather than to look backward from today toward a Machiavelli who has become old and our own, and therewith almost good. This procedure is required even for a purely historical understanding. Machiavelli did know pre-modern thought: it was before him. He could not have known the thought of the present time, which emerged as it were behind his back.

We thus regard the simple opinion about Machiavelli as indeed decisively superior to the prevailing sophisticated views, though

still insufficient. Even if, and precisely if we are forced to grant that his teaching is diabolical and he himself a devil, we are forced to remember the profound theological truth that the devil is a fallen angel. To recognize the diabolical character of Machiavelli's thought would mean to recognize in it a perverted nobility of a very high order. That nobility was discerned by Marlowe, as he ascribed to Machiavelli the words "I hold there is no sin but ignorance." Marlowe's judgment is borne out by what Machiavelli himself, in the Epistles Dedicatory to his two great books, indicates regarding his most precious possession. We are in sympathy with the simple opinion about Machiavelli, not only because it is wholesome, but above all because a failure to take that opinion seriously prevents one from doing justice to what is truly admirable in Machiavelli: the intrepidity of his thought, the grandeur of his vision, and the graceful subtlety of his speech. Not the contempt for the simple opinion, nor the disregard of it, but the considerate ascent from it leads to the core of Machiavelli's thought. There is no surer protection against the understanding of anything than taking for granted or otherwise despising the obvious and the surface. The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.

There are good reasons for dealing with Machiavelli in a series of Walgreen lectures. The United States of America may be said to be the only country in the world which was founded in explicit opposition to Machiavellian principles. According to Machiavelli, the founder of the most renowned commonwealth of the world was a fratricide: the foundation of political greatness is necessarily laid in crime. If we can believe Thomas Paine, all governments of the Old World have an origin of this description; their origin was conquest and tyranny. But "the Independence of America [was] accompanied by a Revolution in the principles and practice of Governments": the foundation of the United States was laid in freedom and justice. "Government founded on a moral theory, on a system of universal peace, on the indefeasible hereditary Rights of Man, is now revolving from west to east by a stronger impulse than the Government of the sword revolved from east to west."[3] This judgment is far from being obsolete. While freedom is no longer a preserve of the United States, the United States is now the bulwark of freedom. And contemporary tyranny has its roots

in Machiavelli's thought, in the Machiavellian principle that the good end justifies every means. At least to the extent that the American reality is inseparable from the American aspiration, one cannot understand Americanism without understanding Machiavellianism which is its opposite.

But we cannot conceal from ourselves the fact that the problem is more complex than it appears in the presentation by Paine and his followers. Machiavelli would argue that America owes her greatness not only to her habitual adherence to the principles of freedom and justice, but also to her occasional deviation from them. He would not hesitate to suggest a mischievous interpretation of the Louisiana Purchase[4] and of the fate of the Red Indians. He would conclude that facts like these are an additional proof for his contention that there cannot be a great and glorious society without the equivalent of the murder of Remus by his brother Romulus. This complication makes it all the more necessary that we should try to reach an adequate understanding of the fundamental issue raised by Machiavelli.

We may seem to have assumed that Machiavelli is the classic exponent of one of the two fundamental alternatives of political thought. We did assume that there are fundamental alternatives, alternatives which are permanent or coeval with man. This assumption is frequently denied today. Many of our contemporaries are of the opinion that there are no permanent problems and hence no permanent alternatives. They would argue that precisely Machiavelli's teaching offers ample proof for their denial of the existence of permanent problems: Machiavelli's problem is a novel problem; it is fundamentally different from the problem with which earlier political philosophy was concerned. This argument, properly elaborated, has some weight. But stated baldly, it proves merely that the permanent problems are not as easily accessible as some people believe, or that not all political philosophers face the permanent problems. Our critical study of Machiavelli's teaching can ultimately have no other purpose than to contribute towards the recovery of the permanent problems.

1. *Prince* chs. 17 (Dido) and 18 (Chiron).
2. Bacon, *Essays* (*Of Atheism*).
3. *Rights of Man*, Part the Second, Introduction.
4. Cf. Henry Adams, *The First Administration of Thomas Jefferson*, II (New York 1898), 56, 71-73, 254.