

RICHARD DRISCOLL

# The Principality & the Republic

## *Machiavelli's Protectors of Liberty*

The breadth of Machiavelli's contribution to the history of political thought is often overshadowed by his discussion of ruling in *The Prince*. This text, which provides cruel governing tactics to autocrats seeking to maintain their power, negatively portrays Machiavelli as a proponent of tyranny. However, this one-sided portrayal of Machiavelli's political positions ignores his support for freedom and republicanism in the lesser-known *Discourses on Livy*. At face value, the principle themes and arguments of *The Prince* seem to conflict with those of the *Discourses*. Nevertheless, both texts focus on the practical administration of the state and the necessity of liberty. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a practical solution for restoring the liberty of the political subject. He uses the *Discourses* to provide key political theories that assert the republic's role in preserving liberty. Machiavelli's concern for liberty connects both texts: it is the main theme of the *Discourses* and the final goal of *The Prince*.

A casual reader of *The Prince* might dismiss the proposition that Machiavelli supports freedom of the citizen, citing the countless oppressive tactics that he offers. One should, however, consider the entirety of the book and examine Machiavelli's scholarly career in order to recognize that liberty is *The Prince's* primary goal. Machiavelli himself acknowledges the potential for his book to be misread. Just before arguing that it is better to be feared than loved,<sup>1</sup> he expresses his hope "to write a book that will be useful, at least to those who read it intelligently" (48). Machiavelli primes the reader to carefully examine his work, which initially seems to endorse tyranny, but ultimately endorses liberty. The course of Machiavelli's scholarly career also reveals his republican sympathies and motives. Machiavelli champions liberty and republicanism in the *Discourses*. In contrast, he displays uncharacteristically oppressive attitudes

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1 Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*, trans. Wootton. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995. Page 51.

in *The Prince*; the ideas of liberty in *The Prince* reveal Machiavelli's support for republicanism, although they are initially disguised.

Machiavelli's model for princely rule resembles the Roman dictator, who defended the republic's liberty in times of great danger. This is revealed in the final chapter of *The Prince*, which deviates from the book's style and exhorts the ruler, Lorenzo de' Medici, to liberate Italy from the barbarian invaders (80). Unlike the rest of the book, this chapter evokes patriotic emotions in the reader. In the first twenty-five chapters, Machiavelli appears to support the harsh actions of the ruler, which initially constrain citizens' liberty. In the final chapter, his purpose becomes clear: the prince should exercise his power to free Italy. Machiavelli says that in times of "urgent danger," the Romans instituted a dictator as a remedy that "always remained extremely useful in all those circumstances which arose at different times to hinder the republic's efforts to expand its empire."<sup>2</sup> While the idea of empire seems contrary to the idea of liberty, both the Romans and Machiavelli viewed this as a characteristic and safeguard of the republic's liberty. By exerting its power over other states, Rome guarded its autonomy and liberty against foreign forces. Although, the dictator also seems to contradict the idea of a free state, Machiavelli's support of the dictator demonstrates his willingness to employ pragmatic solutions for sustaining liberty. He nearly uses the entirety of *The Prince* to precede his endorsement of extreme power for the sake of protecting liberty.

In contrast to his work in *The Prince*, Machiavelli's focus on liberty is clear in the *Discourses*, in his initial investigation of the forms of government that are propitious to it. While he recognizes that democratic functions play an important role in maintaining liberty, he withholds his support of this in favor of mixed government. He shares with Aristotle the view that governments take the forms of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, alongside the reciprocal forms of tyranny, oligarchy, and anarchy. Machiavelli, however, argues that "all the forms of government mentioned above are defective because of the brief duration of the three good ones and... the evil nature of the three bad ones"

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2 Machiavelli, Niccolò. *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Julia Bondanella and Peter Bondanella. New York: Oxford, 1997. Page 914.

(*Prince* 26). He asserts that a balanced combination of the three good forms offer suitable protection from their flaws. In Rome, the monarchical power was never fully abolished by the aristocrats, and the aristocratic power was never fully abolished by the democrats; the result was that the mixed government “created a perfect republic” (*Livy* 27). Machiavelli considers this balance to be the leading cause of Roman liberty. Furthermore, he argues that fairly balanced struggles among internal factions foster liberty in the state (29). Despite his distaste for popular rule, Machiavelli credits the Roman success to the creation of the democratic magistrate, the tribune of the plebs. He says, “The desires of free peoples are rarely harmful to liberty, because they arise either from oppression or from the suspicion that they will be oppressed” (31). Machiavelli considers it to be unlikely that the majority would oppress itself; therefore, it will reject any form of oppression from the other factions of government. Machiavelli recognizes that the primary benefit of a republic is that it contains elements from a variety of governing forms. It is in the balance of government that one finds liberty,



rather than extremes.

At the same time, Machiavelli points out the destructive potential of democracy. He does not associate liberty with democracy; rather, he criticizes democratic institutions for providing a weak and susceptible constitution (26). He clearly scorns the Athenian form of democracy in that it failed to preserve its freedom (26). Moreover, Machiavelli directly criticizes the Roman democratic forces for corrupting the balanced system. In discussing the agrarian laws of Rome, which redistributed lands of wealthy estates to the common people, he argues that the laws of the Gracchi “completely destroyed Roman liberty, because . . . the law ignited such hatred between the plebeians and the senate that it led to armed conflict and bloodshed beyond every civil usage and practice” (101). The democratic faction reacted so explosively, that the republic was not able to survive. Although Machiavelli claims that democratic elements are more favorable to liberty, he argues that the republic, a mixed government, allows liberty to thrive. Democracy on its own can act as a kind of tyranny of the majority. Democracies praise themselves for being free from the rule of foreigners and aristocrats; however, the freedom that they produce also involves the instability and insecurity of the mob. In contrast to this, a republic provides greater freedoms for all classes and protects against both the tyranny of the mob and the tyranny of the prince. Pure democracy—that is democracy unchecked by other political forces—is more oppressive than a tyrant.

Machiavelli asserts in the *Discourses* that the fluctuation between absolutist and republican governments protects liberty from the corruption of democratic forces. He recognizes that democratic factions in a state usually brings down republics and principalities. The people respond to a prince by overthrowing him, instead instituting a republic: “[People] returned once again to the principality, and from that, step by step, they returned towards a state of undisciplined liberty in the ways and for the reason given” (25). Machiavelli recognizes that this cycle exists within temporal limits but nevertheless still maintains liberty in the state that presently exists. Liberty survives through this cycle, even as the collective identity of a people changes or ceases to exist. While Machiavelli would prefer a republican form of government, he supports the cycle as a pragmatic defense of liberty. This demonstrates Machiavelli’s commitment to

the principle of liberty rather than a particular form of government.

Machiavelli uses *The Prince* and the *Discourses* to propagate the idea of liberty. By looking at his other scholarly works, namely the *Discourses*, the reader realizes that Machiavelli aims to protect liberty so it is unfair to characterize Machiavelli only by his most well know work, *The Prince*. Although he appears to endorse absolutist practices, Machiavelli would rather endure a brief period of tyranny for the sake of long lasting liberty. ■

## ANALECTS OF THE CORE

Paradise Lost: O sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams / That bring to my remembrance from what state I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere.

William Blake: The modest Rose puts forth a Thorn. / The humble Sheep a threat'ning Horn. / While the Lily white shall in love delight. / Nor a Thorn nor a threat stain her beauty bright.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day. You shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.