

THE MACHIAVELLIANS: DEFENDERS OF FREEDOM (JAMES BURNHAM)

August 14, 2021

The American Right, like all outsider political movements, has long been susceptible to Gnosticism. This usually manifests as the belief that a small group of wise initiates can see through rationales for political action and find hidden knowledge, of the real reasons men and societies act as they do. Sometimes those reasons are the machinations of the Illuminati, or the Freemasons, or the Lizard Men. More often, they are prosaic, and although economic Gnosticism is the most frequent type, another common gnostic belief is that power is the only real driver of the actions of men, and all other rationales in politics mere epiphenomena, lies designed to conceal the hidden centrality of power. *The Machiavellians* is James Burnham's exposition of this latter Gnosticism.

In order to understand this book, one must first understand Burnham. He was a repentant Communist, of the Trotskyite variety, prominent on the Right in the middle of the twentieth century, and the fierce urge to leave his past behind made him hyper-aware of the dangers of ideology. I, in fact, always use his definition of what an ideology is, "a more or less systematic and self-contained set of ideas supposedly dealing with the nature of reality . . . and calling for a commitment independent of specific experience or events." But in truth, Burnham elevated his Gnosticism to something approximating a new ideology. Perhaps such stridency, such a desire to find the key to certainty, was in his nature, driving the beliefs of both his youth and his maturity. Yet the aim of his new ideology is technical, not utopian—it is to prove that politics can be a true science, that he understands that science, and that this allows him to recommend the optimal system for mankind.

This book, written in 1942 (and slightly revised in 1963) has experienced a renaissance on the Right in recent years, driven in part by Curtis Yarvin, who refers to it often, and has nothing but the highest praise for the book. This is no surprise; as I have analyzed at some length, Yarvin is both Gnostic and a proponent of instrumentalism, the idea that no transcendent moral principle has any relevance in governance, such that men can and should be used as tools to accomplish rational goals. And like Burnham, he claims that only stupid people believe other than

him. (Both Yarvin and Burnham rely heavily on insulting opponents who are intellectual equals, never a good sign. Occasional insults are amusing; constant insults imply either insecurity or a rage problem.) Until very recently, however, *The Machiavellians* was hard to obtain; it's still under copyright, but a small press has reissued the 1963 edition of the book (and Burnham's other work), so now one can buy a hard copy cheaply and easily.

To talk about politics as science, Burnham begins with—Dante Alighieri. Not with the *Divine Comedy*; Burnham has no use whatsoever for religion. Rather with Dante's little-known *De Monarchia*, translated as *On Monarchy*. Burnham compares Dante's book to—the 1932 platform of the Democratic Party. His basic claim is that both documents are lies, which mean nothing on their own terms, and in fact are often diametrically opposed to reality. They are instead covers for their authors' real motivations and intents, and he cleverly chooses these two disparate documents to illustrate his point.

De Monarchia is an entry in the then-current debates, of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, about the relative power of the Pope and secular monarchs, in particular the Holy Roman Emperor. The very short version of the book is that Dante supports the independent authority of the Emperor, using a variety of philosophical arguments. Burnham calls this the "formal meaning." But the "real meaning," which Burnham reveals to us after a long history lesson about Guelphs and Ghibellines, is a "propagandistic defense" of a specific group of exiles from Florence, including Dante himself, who sought to enlist the Emperor to bring about their return, both to Florence and to power. Burnham explicitly finds *De Monarchia* worthless, "vengeful and reactionary" scribblings pushing the program of "an embittered and incompetent set of traitors," "nothing more than emotion, prejudice, and confusion," designed only to lead the reader astray through encouraging a belief the author is "idealistic" and a man with "good will."

From this (and a similar analysis of the Democratic Party's platform, which likewise bore no relationship whatsoever to the real intents of the Party, and in fact reads like a far-Right document today), Burnham constructs his basic assertion. This is that nearly all political writing has as its formal aims "irresponsible" metaphysical aims, which are either imaginary or impossible. It is "politics as wish," and as a result,

political argument is almost all wasted time. "We think we are debating universal peace, salvation, a unified world government, and the relations between Church and State, when what is really at issue is whether the Florentine Republic is to be run by its own citizens or submitted to the exploitation of a reactionary foreign monarch." Burnham's project is for us to instead debate the "real aims" of any political program or claim, using scientific analysis to identify those claims.

The aim of this scientific approach is not merely to reinforce Burnham's core Gnostic claim of the centrality of the search for power, however. Burnham does have a specific political goal, which is attaining "freedom" or "liberty," by which Burnham means the rule of law, not freedom and liberty as colloquially understood today. To show why recognizing that power is all tends to lead to this beneficial result, Burnham exalts Niccolò Machiavelli, whose thought he analyzes both of itself and through the lens of four fairly obscure modern writers: Gaetano Mosca; Georges Sorel; Robert Michels; and Vilfredo Pareto. Of course, a great many writers have claimed to have the key to understanding Machiavelli and his thought, and it's not at all clear to me that Burnham properly interprets Machiavelli (in particular, he seems to reject any esoteric, layered, or ironic reading of Machiavelli). But no matter; Burnham's theory does not depend on whether his reading of Machiavelli is accurate.

In Burnham's analysis, unlike Dante and all pre-modern thinkers, Machiavelli was unique in that he did not separate formal goals and real goals. He was clear that his only goal was the national unification of Italy, then (in the sixteenth century) extremely fragmented, and all his arguments cohered to aim at this goal. Authoritarian rule, that of a prince, was a tool to achieve this goal, so he recommended, encouraged, and aided it, writing *The Prince* to this end. Machiavelli had no other principles of ethics other than using the tools available to reach his goal, and that is as it should be, for science only follows facts and evidence, and from those draws conclusions. Moral principles have no relevance whatsoever.

True, the scientific method was not yet fully developed in Machiavelli's time. But his key recognition was to reject chimeras such as the search for a good society or social welfare, what Burnham calls "nonsense," and to understand "politics as primarily the struggles for power among

men." At the same time, Machiavelli sees liberty, in the Burnham sense, as desirable. According to Burnham, when Machiavelli uses the word liberty, he similarly means "no external subjection to another group; and, internally, a government by law, not by the arbitrary will of any individual men, princes or commoners." The *Discourses on Livy*, rather than *The Prince*, are concerned with achieving this end, but again, Machiavelli's formal goals and real goals are identical—he does not waste our time by reasoning from moral principles or abstractions of any kind. From this, however, we can see some internal tension in Burnham's claims. Machiavelli sought how a state might achieve prosperity and the rule of law; most would, if those were shared by every citizen, define those as the key elements of both the good society and social welfare. As we will see, however, Burnham ultimately concludes that the search for power itself can lead to these results; they are secondary, if beneficial, effects of men's real actions properly channeled, rather than prime goals.

Machiavelli does not claim that because men seek power over all other goals, that every man is completely identical in his political motivations and actions. Most crucially, men as a whole divide roughly into the rulers and the ruled, each the result of different impulses and psychology, as well as luck. (At several points in *The Machiavellians*, Burnham suggests that psychology will progress until it is able to offer the precision and accuracy of the hard sciences, such as chemistry or physics. This was a common belief of his time, although now it is obvious that psychology, like most or all the so-called social sciences, is a mere pseudo-science and probably takes more away from our society than it adds.) The key difference between the types of men, as it relates to politics, is not moral; it is the presence of *virtù*, along with a good dose of fraud, that tends to distinguish the ruler type. The interplay of the types of mankind leads to politics, buffeted by history and by Fortune. No perfect state is possible; the only question is what is the best state for a time and place, given these underlying truths. Burnham, for example, claims that he can know with total certainty that Machiavelli's ideal state in the abstract was a republic, but he nonetheless wanted a monarchy in order to unify Italy.

After this discussion, which is really introduction, Burnham turns to his four thinkers, the Machiavellians. First up is Mosca, an Italian who lived from 1858 to 1941. His most famous work, and the one on

which Burnham focuses, is *The Ruling Class*, published in 1896 and revised in 1923. Mosca rejected unitary theories of history, popular at the time, such as racial or climatic. Rather, history is the confluence of many factors, most of them random and interdependent. In other words, Mosca's approach is scientific, and seeks only the truth. Mosca's great truth, not original but updated for the modern age, is that every society, always and everywhere, has two general groupings, the rulers and the ruled. The specifics vary greatly, to be sure, but the groupings remain, and none of the form of government, the dominant culture, or any other factor often seen as crucial to social structures, change this essential truth.

This implies that true rule by an individual is impossible—even a theoretical total autocrat must depend on many others to implement his wishes, and those helpers are the ruling class (usually itself divided into upper and lower strata). It also implies that rule by the majority is equally impossible—power always defaults to a minority, who are better organized and otherwise more competent. The larger the political community, in fact, the smaller a proportion of the whole is the ruling class. (This analysis has a good deal in common with what is now called public choice theory.) Finally, it is only the ruling class that matters for the destiny of a nation. “A nation's strength or weakness, its culture, its power of endurance, its prosperity, its decadence, depend in the first instance upon the nature of its ruling class.” Even if the mass, by violent action, overthrows the ruling class, its only effect is to create a new ruling class, never to have any other relevance in and of itself.

How does the ruling class come to exist? Not through Darwinian struggle for existence, but through a struggle for social pre-eminence. In this struggle, hard work and ambition are the key drivers, followed by intuition and confidence in oneself, as well as characteristics specific to preeminence in a particular society (e.g., warrior status in some times, commercial talent in others, what Mosca calls “social forces”). Moral principles are not relevant. A ruling class can maintain its position as long as it controls the relevant social forces; when those change, the ruling class tends to be replaced, sometimes wholesale, but more often by admission of new types of people. Ruling classes, of course, see themselves as ruling through some “political formula,” such as divine right

or racial superiority, or simple tradition, but that is a fiction, although one necessary to maintain the ruling class.

Within this framework, just as Machiavelli did, Mosca does have an opinion about what the best achievable form of government is. Given the struggle for preeminence, that government system is best which achieves “juridical defense,” the rule of law, rather than arbitrary rule, which is tyranny, and which includes certain core freedoms, such as association, assembly, religion, and speech. Although autocracy is fully compatible with the rule of law, Mosca also believes that sclerosis and corruption tend to follow an excessively autocratic regime; thus, a society can flourish and progress when the ruling class diffuses power among it, and the rule of law is paramount, for which desirable result checks and balances are the primary tool.

Next, Burnham very briefly covers Sorel. He is a Machiavellian because he is anti-formalist and he views all politics as the struggle for social power, and he matters mostly because he influenced Michels and Pareto. Sorel specifically saw the struggle for socialism as doomed, because if it succeeded, it would only result in a new ruling class, not the freedom of the masses. The only solution was no organized politics at all, the worker self-organization of syndicalism, achieved through the spontaneous and catastrophic general strike. Sorel thought this not only unlikely, but impossible. However, the myth is what matters; it moves the revolutionists, in a fashion that prevents hijacking by those already in charge. Part of what is needed is violence; it is true that violence has declined in the modern world, but this is in large part because the ruling class abhors violence as a threat to itself, and instead rules by fraud, thereby more effectively maintaining their own rule. Accepting violence as the price of remaking society for the benefit of workers will, in point of fact, likely reduce violence by ending wars—but Sorel is no utopian, and in fact a realist/pessimist. Whether this is a legitimate interpretation of Sorel, I do not know—but this section could easily be omitted from the book, and nobody would notice.

Third is Michels, author of the 1911 book *Political Parties*, a book whose name does not really indicate what it is about. But its subtitle does: “A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy.” Michels coined the Iron Law of Oligarchy, which states that, accurately, and explains why, no matter how a group is formed,

or under what principles it operates, it will be ruled by a minority of its members. For Michels, all human societies result in the forming of organizations, that is to say, groups of less than the whole, based on common interests. Universally, within any group, democracy gives way to oligarchy. The mass, that is, the crowd, always yields to leadership (shades of Gustave Le Bon), because most members of the mass are either incapable or can't be bothered to prioritize leading; because often decisions must be made quickly, and mass consent is impossible to obtain in a timely fashion (or at all); and leadership itself requires rarely-found devotion to the group's aims, as well as talent for the very complex nature of running any organization. Thus, any organization will quickly find itself in possession of a dominant sub-group, the leaders. One can, and hyper-egalitarians do, eliminate titles; you cannot eliminate the fact of leaders. No matter the supposed adherence to democracy, sovereignty in fact resides in those leaders, and the mass is happy with this result. These leaders tend, over time, to entrench and enrich themselves (Michels primarily studied trade unions, and Burnham speaks of American unions of the 1930s and 1940s, but it is all the same), thereby forming an oligarchy.

The ultimate result, in the political realm, is a tendency toward Bonapartism, exemplified by Napoleon Bonaparte and Napoleon III, in which the will of the mass is, in the view of the leader, concentrated in himself, such that his decisions are unimpeachable. He is "the executive organ of the popular will." Burnham, channeling Michels, says this, democratic despotism, is the "logical culmination of democracy." This possibility is also something Carl Schmitt, writing a decade later, pointed out in his *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*. Still, it is not something we have seen in the past eighty years, but certainly in the 1940s it appeared to be the coming thing, and as we will see, Burnham put a new spin on the concept.

Last, we cover Pareto. Nobody reads Pareto today; his magnum opus, *Mind and Society*, is four large volumes, which Burnham distils for us, though who can say whether he puts his own spin on it. Pareto is remembered now not for his political thought, but for the Pareto principle, the empirical observation that in many circumstances, roughly twenty percent of inputs generate roughly eighty percent of outputs, or more broadly that many actions and goods tend not to be randomly

distributed, or distributed in a bell curve, but in a power-law distribution, the Pareto distribution. Pareto attempted a complete “scientific sociology”—again, a goal that might have made sense a hundred years ago, but now is dubious, to put it nicely. In short, Pareto attempted to break down why people acted in certain manners, logical (an orderly, fact-based method of achieving a specific achievable goal) or non-logical (everything else). Pareto’s claim was that the vast majority of human action, including political action, was non-logical, even though those taking action believed otherwise. The parallel to Burnham’s Gnosticism is obvious, though Pareto is making a broader claim. There is much talk of “residues” and “derivations,” and other terms created by Pareto. All this has the feel of trying too hard, but the takeaway seems to be that a strong society has to be one that has a competent elite, reflective of the essential nature of a society, that is balanced among Foxes (those who live by cleverness) and Lions (those who live by force), reasonably open to new entrants. Which is true enough, but probably didn’t need 2,000 pages to convey.

Finally, Burnham informs us that he will distil for us Machiavellianism, “a way of looking at social life, an instrument for social and political analysis.” Machiavelli, from an earlier, less scientific age, implicitly recognized this analysis; the four later thinkers formalized it; and Burnham synthesizes it. He offers a thirteen-point summation, in each case with the opposite, in his mind discredited, opposing view also stated (if a bit tendentiously). These are, roughly, all the points outlined above, subdivided in some cases. From this, he proceeds to analyze “the present historical period,” that is, at the middle of World War II.

Here *The Machiavellians* intersects with Burnham’s earlier (1941) *The Managerial Revolution*, and Burnham turns to something he only touches briefly on when discussing the Machiavellians, social revolution. When a ruling class decays, becoming detached, self-doubting, sclerotic, and closed, it will be replaced. Burnham believed that a new ruling class was rising in America, where managerial competence was replacing the old elites. There is much truth in this, I imagine, although you will have to wait until I read and review that other book (soon). On the other hand, the main takeaway Burnham chooses to import into this book from *The Managerial Revolution* is a lengthy and strident set of assertions about how crucial and prominent military men will be in this new ruling class,

not because of the then-ongoing war but because they have too long been irrelevant, and he was certainly wrong there, so I am not sure *The Managerial Revolution* has held up well. We will see.

Then Burnham makes some predictions about democracy in America, primarily that the trend is toward Bonapartism, and this trend will accelerate. It would seem that living through three tedious terms of Franklin Roosevelt had a role in this prediction, but Burnham saw further. Who the leader is doesn't matter; "they take as their leader the one who happens to be in the saddle." No, what he predicted was "democratic totalitarianism." "Democracy is the supremacy of the people. Therefore, democracy is the supremacy of the state. Whenever the state absorbs another phase of social life, that is a victory for democracy. And therefore, more particularly: a serious critic of the state or its policies is an extremist and maybe a traitor." (You may draw parallels to our current anarcho-tyrannical regime's behavior, especially with respect to the Electoral Justice Protest, yourself.) Burnham therefore predicted that "the rights and freedoms that still protect the individual from the advance of the unbridled state" would be erased. We have certainly gotten that erasure, through the crushing combination of an utterly rotten ruling class, a massively powerful government answerable to nobody but that class, and their joint intertwining with the Lords of Tech, increasingly using their power to fully implement a totalitarian Left ideology. No Bonaparte, but instead fractalized Bonapartism, where it is even impossible to determine to whom one should appeal, or whom one should attack.

The good news, Burnham says, is that any opposition to dominant power punches above its weight, allowing the possibility of effective pushback against democratic totalitarianism, but for opposition to exist (and it must exist within the ruling class, not the masses, to be effective), multiple "social forces" in the sense Mosca uses must remain present. No one such force can dominate all social life, because the opposition must have social weight to be effective. The key, therefore, to successful opposition is to be able to maintain social weight. Today's attempted marginalization of Right opposition by the Lords of Tech should be seen in this light, but I think this unlikely to be successful, because the same technology allows organization to route around opposition and gain social weight. It hasn't, yet; that opposition is mostly in the

shadows, because the Right is too disorganized and has allowed itself to be made afraid. But in easily foreseeable chaotic circumstances, the social weight of the Right could become enormous overnight.

What is Burnham's ideal form of government? Surprising nobody, Burnham has no use for democracy, viewed as majority rule, which he regards as impossible, as shown by the scientific derivations of the Machiavellians. He does have use for democracy viewed as the rule of law, "a measure of security for the individual which protects him from the arbitrary and irresponsible exercise of personally held power." He regards the rule of law as not only desirable in itself, but an absolute necessity for the flourishing of any civilization. And because "only power restrains power," we must see the centrality of power clearly, in order to achieve the rule of law, through, in essence, checks and balances. Appeals to other restraints are doomed to fail. "Heaven exists, if at all, outside of space and time, and can therefore have no bearing on political action." It is not that Burnham despises moral claims so much as he regards them as useless and pointless to achieve his goal, which is never precisely stated, but seems to be, with Machiavelli, that a nation attain both prosperity and the rule of law.

All this hangs together, and I can't say that I disagree with anything in this book, or with the thoughts of the Machiavellians, even if Burnham makes no attempt to address any possible counter-arguments, merely brushing them aside as cobwebs unworthy of his attention. Let's dig a bit deeper, though. Burnham's claim, which as I say is a gnostic one, seems to be that nobody desires political goals for moral ends, only for personal benefit. But this is obviously false in some cases, even if it is undoubtedly true that many seek personal benefit, either covertly or overtly. What if, for example, Dante had desired only the good of society, rather than personal benefit? He could, in fact, have written the exact same book as he did. Burnham heaps scorn on Dante's arguments, implying they are transparently false and bad, but he does not actually make that case.

Burnham appears to believe that the only political goal permissible is one that develops organically out of the search for power. This is a blinkered view that does not take into account man's search for transcendence, which will always alter the behavior of many. Burnham ignores that, in practice, the motivations of men can vary wildly without causing

damage to society, as long as the rule of law is maintained. He would forbid any “unscientific” rationales for political action, and while that would, if implemented, certainly destroy the Left’s temporary stranglehold on power in America, man cannot live on bread alone, so such a purely rationalist society would not likely be a pleasant one. It is no answer to say that private morals acting outside the public sphere are themselves adequate to form a decent society; some elements of not-strictly-rational morality must be built into the system of government.

Burnham never discusses what the purpose of power is; he seems to assume that it is always, at root, purely selfish, the quest for gain. However, one can also view, and use, power as a tool to accomplish purely moral goods, or more likely given human nature, a mix of the two. Take Charlemagne, for example. He certainly sought power, and used it in what we regard as unpleasant ways. But it is simplistic and erroneous to say that a great and hugely influential man such as Charlemagne sought only power; he sought the salvation of his soul, and even more, he sought the salvation of his people’s souls. Certainly religion is an ideology, but Burnham, being allergic to ideology, lumps all ideologies together as worthless and pernicious, thereby limiting his own insight. Or, for another example driven by another religion, take Lenin. He sought power, and openly—famously using the phrase *kto kvo*, that is, what matters is who can do what to whom. Yet his goal was a principled one, the achievement of an (insane) utopia, however, not gain for himself.

On the other hand, maybe these underlying impulses to the seeking of power, even though ignored by Burnham, do not contradict Burnham. Maybe the search for power is always precedent to political action, even if the ultimate goal is a perceived moral good. I, for example, want to implement the political system of Foundationalism. When I speak of doing so, it is not a cover, it is the real goal. And given that Foundationalism is strictly reality-based, it does not expect that human beings will always act in a particular moral fashion, or attempt to reach some new pinnacle of moral behavior. Yet it is informed by moral principles, because those are transcendent. They inspire adherents and modify their behavior, and to ignore them means disaster. Nonetheless, it is true that power must first be brought to bear to implement Foundationalism, and so, perhaps, one should begin there, as Burnham wanted.