# ***Discourses on Livy***
(Niccolò Machiavelli)

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Niccolò Machiavelli is known today for two things: the adjective "Machiavellian," and the book from which that adjective is derived, *The Prince*, which provides advice for monarchs who accede to power. But Machiavelli wrote more than one book, and his second-most-famous book is this one, *Discourses on Livy*. In it, he provides advice for the founding, structuring, governing, and maintenance of republics, along with advice to individuals holding power, and a good bit of practical military advice. All this he extracts primarily from the extant writings of the historian Livy (64 B.C.– A.D. 12) on early Roman history, although he also brings in much other matter, including his own personal experiences and then-current events (Machiavelli wrote *Discourses* about 1517). Thus, this book is part history, part mirror of princes, and part advice to those holding power in a republic on how not to get killed.

Of course, using Rome as a frame for political thoughts is pretty much the oldest continuous line of political thought going, and *Discourses* is one of many Renaissance and modern books revolving around that theme. Each such writing reflects not only Rome, but its own times. For example, Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*, written 250 years after *Discourses*, has many commonalities with *Discourses*, but also many points of difference. *Considerations* is a book of the Enlightenment; *Discourses* of the Renaissance. Moreover, *Discourses* is a much longer book that makes much broader claims to offer a complete approach to the good governance of a republic. At the same time, *Discourses* is also narrower than *Considerations*—it is arranged into 142 different chapters, each with a precise focus, usually drawing on a few very specific events from Roman history, often buttressed by more recent examples. History is used both mechanically in the form of examples of happenings, and for its illumination of human nature in the service of understanding how men act. The cumulative effect, like a wall made up of many bricks, is very impressive, but each building piece is small in scope.

It is therefore hard to summarize this book. *Discourses* is nearly 400 dense pages, and it does not lend itself to any kind of pithy summation.

Much of the book is devoted to carefully categorizing different historical events that have, or can be shown to have, political implications, and then making distinctions among them. What is more, scholars have spent their lives trying to reconcile apparent contradictions between *Discourses* and *The Prince,* given that the former appears to strongly endorse republics and rejects terror, while the latter exalts one-man rule and implicitly endorses, if not terror, a harsh regime. The translators and interpreters of this edition, the husband and wife team of Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, take the position that there is little contradiction between the books, claiming that in *The Prince* Machiavelli focuses on the individual who *founds* a state and *Discourses* focuses on the larger set of people necessary to *maintain* a state. However that may be, the book is still hard to boil down (although the Bondanellas add a lot with their notes and Introduction).

Nonetheless, being fond of hearing my own voice in type, I will say a few things, both in general about the book and drawing lessons for applicability to today. Machiavelli has little truck with the idea that people are naturally good, and his thoughts on that give an idea of his style, which is both direct, and difficult for today's readers. "As is demonstrated by all those who discuss civic life—and every history is filled with such examples—it is necessary for anyone who organizes a republic and establishes laws in it to take for granted that all men are evil and that they will always act according to the wickedness of their nature whenever they have the opportunity, and when any wickedness remains hidden for a time, it arises from a hidden cause that is not recognized by those who lack experience of its contrary, but time, which people say is the father of every truth, will eventually uncover it." This is, if anything, the core principle of the book, that no man can be trusted to be virtuous, so a combination of social structures and clear, objective thinking based on history is necessary to produce the best possible results for a republic, which for the same reason is not likely to be as good as hoped, or to last as long as might be desired.

Machiavelli's definition of "republic" is not what we think of when we hear that word, which is, basically, a democracy with a few fripperies, like an upper and lower house in the legislature. On the contrary, for Machiavelli, ancient Sparta was as much a republic as Athens. For him, what is not a republic is a monarchy, whether the prince is a tyrant or a

just man, or an oligarchy that is equivalent to a monarchy. A government that represents all important sectors of society is a republic, but that does not at all mean that every individual has a voice. Thus, in Rome, the plebeians normally had almost zero direct influence—but their interests were aggressively attended to by the extremely powerful tribunes of the *plebs*, who could veto almost any action of the state. Machiavelli's purpose, therefore, is not to push democracy or an expanded franchise. It is to recommend the most perfect form of republican government that is practical. Thus, not only is Machiavelli's definition of republic very catholic, he strongly endorses institutions such as the Roman dictator, granted absolute power by the magistrates for a term of months (but unable to modify institutions, and thus not a structural danger, unlike the *decemvirs*, whom Machiavelli excoriates).

It is also important to note that Machiavelli sees conflict among groups in society as inherent, necessary, and desirable in creating the best form of government. In these days of vicious conflict among various sectors of American society, the Platonic vision of societal harmony as the ideal republic has a lot of resonance, but Machiavelli (just like Montesquieu) has little sympathy for this. He sees such conflict, or at least some conflict, along with its underlying dynamic of tensions, as necessary for the smooth, organic operation of a republic, since it reflects inevitable human nature. Such conflict is potentially very dangerous, of course. It has to be channeled by well-designed sociopolitical structures. But without conflict, a society cannot function, at least not well or for long. This line of thinking is the basis of our modern theories of separation of powers.

Of course, Machiavelli's focus was on conflicts based on self-interest, not ideological conflicts of the modern type. On the other hand, he was very familiar with conflicts based on religion, having lived through, among other events, the turmoil surrounding the rule in Florence of Girolamo Savonarola, which perhaps contributed to his cynical, instrumental view of religion. He would doubtless not have had any sympathy with any modern political ideology, and less sympathy for an ideology's necessary destructive effect on social structures. Machiavelli's' view of Christianity was basically Nietzschean—he (correctly) recognized it as having "more often glorified humble and contemplative men rather than active ones. . . . This way of living [Christianity] seems, therefore

to have made the world weak and to have given it over to be plundered by wicked men, who are easily able to dominate it, since in order to go to paradise, most men think more about enduring their pains than avenging them." At least Machiavelli, if he showed up today, would recognize our society and its relationship with Christianity. He would find other sources of conflict bizarre—not so much relatively crisp, if stupid, ideological ones like classical Marxism, but the howling idiocy of social media, "being woke," autonomic individualism, sexual fluidity, and so forth, all informed by a complete lack of education and reasoning, of the type Machiavelli valued so very highly. If he showed up today, he'd probably immediately kill himself so he could exit the scene as fast as possible.

With these basics as the frame, most of the book is, directly, or indirectly, an analysis of possible sociopolitical structures, ranging from the relatively minor and technical (requiring that public officials be "subject to indictment," that is, both be under the rule of law, and be capable of being curbed if overly ambitious to the detriment of the body politic, although Machiavelli warns false accusations must be severely punished), to the major (how to manage transitions from monarchies to republics). Much of the book consists of contrasts between republics and princes, for example, discussing whether forming treaties with princes or republics is better (answer: republics are slower and harder to come to agreements with, but for the same reason, less likely to break the agreement). In all things, though, he emphasizes action over words. "I believe that one of the great means of exercising prudence that men can employ is to abstain either from threatening anyone or from injuring them with words, for neither of these actions take any strength away from the enemy, but the first makes him more cautious and the second increases his hatred toward you and makes him think more actively of harming you." At no point is a complete, point-by-point plan offered; instead, presumably the reader is expected to make his own way through the thicket of recommendations and come up with his own plan for his own republic, informed by what Machiavelli has offered.

Relatively narrow object lessons abound, mostly taken from history. For example, Machiavelli cites Manlius Capitolinus, who saved Rome from the Gauls in 390 B.C., and was greatly rewarded, but was later executed for stirring up civil unrest. "After having instituted rewards

for a good deed and punishments for an evil one, and after rewarding a man for having acted well, if that same individual later acts badly [the republic] punishes him without any regard whatsoever for his good deeds. When such regulations are well observed a city lives in freedom for a long period of time; otherwise it will always come to ruin very quickly, because if a citizen who has rendered some distinguished service to his city adds to the reputation his deed has brought him additional audacity and the confidence that he will be able to undertake without fear of punishment some action that is not good, he will become in a brief time so insolent that every element of civic life will disappear."

Machiavelli believes that once a republic (which he often calls a "city") has become defective, in whatever way, it is very hard to correct the problem, "for most men will never agree to a new law that concerns a new order in a city unless a certain necessity shows that it is required, and since this necessity cannot arise without risk, it is an easy thing for that republic to be ruined before it can be brought to perfection in its organization." His example for this is not an episode from Roman history, but from Florentine history, and in fact from his own life—the destruction in 1512 of the Florentine republic Machiavelli had served, to be replaced by Medici rule. Thus, establishing a republic with the best institutions possible *ab initio* is important, which to Machiavelli means a mixed government, with elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. This was not original to Machiavelli (it was an emphasis of the Greek historian Polybius, for example), but Machiavelli in a sense resurrected the doctrine for the modern world, to be followed by various Enlightenment thinkers and by the American Founding Fathers (which is why a certain brand of neoreactionaries, followers of Leo Strauss, are very focused on Machiavelli's political thought).

*Discourses* notes that broad public participation in meeting the needs of the republic is important. Machiavelli loathes mercenaries ("foreign henchmen"); he insists that only with citizen soldiers can a republic long prevail. The same is true for non-military matters. For example, if people evade taxes, the republic lacks virtue, and therefore strength. Talking of emergencies, "When these [virtuous] republics need to spend some amount of money for the public welfare, the magistracies or councils that have the authority to do so assess all of the inhabitants of the city at 1 or 2 percent of their income [and people pay on the honors

system].” One can only wonder what Machiavelli would think of our modern American republic, where most people pay no income tax at all, and others are assessed at rates exceeding fifty percent as a matter of course, forced to pay at the point of government guns. Probably not much, is my bet.

Machiavelli even attacks gun control, or rather, the philosophy behind gun grabbers. Noting “How One Should Not Make Threats First and Then Request Authority,” he says “how much stupidity and how little prudence there is in asking for something and later declaring: ‘I want to do such and such evil deed with this,’ for one must not reveal one’s intentions, but instead should attempt to obtain what one wants by any means possible. For it is enough to ask somebody for his weapons without saying ‘I want to kill you with them,’ because when you have his weapons in hand, you can then satisfy your desire.” Although Michael Bloomberg may not want to kill us deplorables (though he may), he certainly wants to make us more killable, and he and the various stooges he funds with his vast fortune, such as “Everytown For Gun Safety” (or whatever names his shill groups are going by today), have clearly been taking notes, because they will rarely admit their true goal of total gun confiscation, instead purveying almost any lie in the service of disarming the American people. Machiavelli would approve of the method as competently done, if not necessarily of the end.

Innumerable examples applicable to America today appear, mostly casting us in a negative light. “I do not believe there is any worse example in a republic than to make a law and then not to observe it, and even more so when it is not observed by the person who made it.” That pretty much sums up the entire governing method of the Democratic/judicial/media complex, as they cackle over Hillary’s email crimes and Robert Mueller’s team of vicious partisan hacks twists the law to overthrow Trump’s election by any means necessary. This, of course, will not end well, not least because “Men who begin to suspect they are about to suffer some evil protect themselves in every possible way from such dangers and become more daring and less cautious in attempting something new [i.e., new and harmful to the republic].” It’s almost like everything old is new again, or never got old at all, which is pretty much Machiavelli’s basic point.

Another principle Machiavelli expounds is that people like Hillary Clinton deserve suppression, since their acts are signs of decay. "The [republics] that have the best organization and the longest lives are, however, those that can renew themselves often through their own institutions, or that come to such a renewal through some circumstance outside these institutions." This renewal is not necessarily a gentle process, nor one confined to republics, though the principle is universal. "Those who governed the Florentine state from 1434 until 1494 [i.e., the first period of Medici, princely, rule] used to say . . . that it was necessary to take the state back every five years or it was otherwise difficult to preserve it, and what they called 'taking the state back' meant striking the same terror and fear into the hearts of men that they had instilled upon first taking power, when they struck down those who had, according to that way of life, governed badly. But when the memory of such a beating fades away, men grow bolder in making new attempts and in speaking evil, and it therefore necessary to make provision against this by bringing the state back to its beginnings." And rigor is necessary—as he says of his patron and mentor, the republican Piero Soderini, who led Venice until overthrown by the Spanish (who returned the Medici), "He believed that he could overcome those many who opposed him out of envy without any unusual acts, violence, or disorder, and he did not know that time does not wait, kindness is insufficient, fortune varies, and malice receives no gift that placates her."

It's not all good for Republicans, though. Machiavelli notes "That It Is Necessary for Those Who Wish Always to Enjoy Good Fortune to Change with the Times." "When a man with one mode of conduct has been very prosperous, it is impossible to persuade him that he can do as well by proceeding in a different manner; it happens in this way that fortune varies for a single man, because she brings about the changes in the times while he fails to modify his methods." Conservatives who spend their days pushing Reaganism, #NeverTrumpers who think all we need to do is elect another Bush, and such lot should all take notice. New methods are needed for new times.

Mixed in with all this are chapters with more down-to-earth advice, often combined with military tactical advice, such as "That One Should Not Jeopardize All of One's Fortune or All of One's Forces; and, for This Reason, Defending Passes Is Often Dangerous." There are chapters

that are wholly technical: "How Much Land the Romans Gave to Their Colonists" and "How Much Value Should Armies in the Present Day Place on Artillery; and If the Generally Held Opinion About Artillery Is True." There are sonorous chapters full of macro advice: "Weak States Are Always Ambiguous in Their Decisions, and Slow Decisions Are Always Harmful." Machiavelli also offers advice that is practical on a micro level as well as a macro level, such as (in the midst of several chapters relating to gratitude, rewards, and their role in civil structures) quoting Tacitus, "Men are more inclined to repay injury than kindness: the truth is that gratitude is irksome, while vengeance is accounted gain." Examples of this in practice are legion—observe, for example, Donald Trump's treatment of Steve Bannon, who got him elected. There are combination chapters: "Wealth Is Not, Contrary to Popular Opinion, the Sinew of Warfare," which advises that "good soldiers are the sinew of war and not gold, because gold is an insufficient means of finding good soldiers, but good soldiers are a more than sufficient means of finding gold." Ha ha. And, finally, there are chapters that are just odd, such as "Before Important Events Happen in a City or a Province, Signs that Foretell Them or Men Who Predict Them Appear."

*Discourses* also contains another famous treatment of a topic not previously covered in most political thought, at least in a systematic way: "On Conspiracies." Machiavelli introduces the topic with humor—he notes that almost all conspiracies fail, and says "Thus, so that princes may learn to guard themselves from these dangers and private citizens may enter into them more cautiously (or rather, so that private citizens may learn to live content under whatever dominion has been imposed on them by fate), I shall speak of conspiracies in great detail, not omitting any noteworthy case of relevance to either sort of person." (I assume that the parenthetical is meant as a wink-wink joke.) And great detail is what we get, along with more punchy statements like "Making threats is extremely dangerous, while ordering executions involves no danger whatsoever, because a dead man cannot think about a vendetta, while those who remain alive most often leave the thinking to the dead." I can't do justice to the analysis, though, so go check out Book III, Chapter 6. Actually, it's more a of how-to manual than an analysis. If I ever decide to run a conspiracy to overthrow the government, I now know where

to start my plotting. And if my conspiracy succeeds, then I can use the rest of the book to get started on organizing the new dispensation!