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Josh Yount '95

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Mountains, Valleys, and Machiavelli

Josh Yount

“It has always been no less dangerous to discover new methods and institutions than to explore unknown oceans and lands, since men are quicker to criticize than praise the deeds of others” (Machiavelli 169). Perhaps this statement should have been the epitaph for the man whose tombstone reads, “who needs an epitaph when you have a name.” Niccolo Machiavelli, derided for his pioneering voyage into the art of government that is known best for the “ends justify the means” argument, still stands as an intriguing and insightful political thinker capable of inspiring furious debates on politics, government, justice, corruption, and history concerning the ends and the means. Nevertheless, it is Machiavelli’s perceptive theory of history, inspired by his long nights in “the ancient courts of ancient men” (Machiavelli 69), that truly does justice to his political theories. Through reading Livy’s *History of Rome*, Machiavelli, instead of finding only pleasurable stories about interesting people, discovered a distinguishable pattern, in effect a cycle of re-occurring situations, choices and outcomes. In his words, “the same problems exist in every era” (Machiavelli 252). Using Machiavelli’s cyclical theory of history as a backdrop, his supposedly amoral political theory incorporating “the ends justify the means” argument becomes the intellectual path of the destructive renewal explicit in the nature of his theory of history.

Those who most vehemently attack “Machiavellian” thought generally have two major objections. The first is that the ends don’t always justify the means because when the ends are bad or indifferent, the means are never acceptable, much less justified. Many would cynically say Machiavelli’s theory implies that America’s past racial segregation, as an end, was justified by the lynchings and injustice used as means to bring about that segregation. Wrong. This dilemma arises out of a plain and simple misun-

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derstanding of the meaning behind Machiavelli's political theory. In *The Discourses* he says, "One should reproach a man who is violent in order to destroy, not one who is violent in order to mend things." Machiavelli, himself, provides an example of this in his analysis of the founding of Rome, where Romulus, in founding a constitutional state, "first murdered his brother and then . . . consented to the death of Titus Tatius" (Machiavelli 200). In the same way, if the riots in Watts, Detroit, and other cities in the late 1960's were means by which attention was drawn to the end of solving America's racial problems, the riots, despite their violence, would be justified.

The second bone of contention with Machiavelli's political theory lies not in the ends, but in the means. Some would say the goodness of the end doesn't matter; if the means are evil, they can never be justified. For example, some believe violence is never justified, no matter if it is the means by which one of the longest-lived republics in the history of man is founded, or the means by which hundreds of years of racial injustice is reversed. Since this contention is not the result of a "plain and simple" misunderstanding, it would seem that Machiavelli's political theory may not be as far-reaching as could be thought. To rescue his political theory from the fires of morality, Machiavelli's cyclical theory of history must also be considered as a backdrop to his views on the "ends and means."

"It is this in particular that makes the study of history salutary and profitable: Patterns of every sort of action are set out on a luminous monument for your inspection, and you may chose models for yourself and your style to imitate, and faults, base in their inception, to avoid" (Livy 18). Just as Livy before him, Machiavelli was a student of history, absorbed in "the patterns of every sort"

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that engrossed Livy. For Machiavelli, the patterns he saw, in his regal robes when he spoke with the ancients, provided an intricate set of “do’s” and “don’ts” for principalities and republics; and possibly more importantly, the patterns inspired a theory of history based on repetitive cycles.

Machiavelli saw a cycle of governments degenerating from golden age to tyrannical reign, while at the same time, moving from monarchy to aristocracy to democracy, and back again. The cycle begins with an uncivilized people who come together and form a mutually beneficial society. This society forms around a king, “the one who was most prudent and most just” (Machiavelli 177), and thus the society lives in peace and tranquillity. This only lasts for a time, though, because as rule is passed hereditarily, the government degenerates into a tyranny of fear and injustice. The nobility, offended by the evil nature of their king and the destruction of their state, then rise and kill the evil king. In his place, they put themselves as a group, ruling with new-found vigor and justice. Once again, though, as rule is passed to their sons, “avarice, ambition, and violation of other men’s women” (Machiavelli 178) become the ways of society. In time the people grow sick of the oppressive oligarchy and rise up behind a leader to destroy the degenerated government. Then, because the people remember the evils of the tyranny and the oligarchy, a democracy is established. This government, too, enjoys a time of profitable rule, but then devolves into anarchy. Finally, the circle is completed when a prudent and just leader smashes the democracy and re-establishes the monarchy, thus beginning the cycle anew.

In each ever-changing stage, the good governments always degenerate by themselves, but the bad ones must be killed, destroyed, or smashed by someone in order to attain that golden

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age government again. In other words, as opposed to the degeneration to a unjust government, where inertia is the driving force, some action, usually one requiring violent means, must always be taken to return to good government. Thus the dynamic nature of Machiavelli's cyclical theory of history has far reaching implications, not only for historical interpretation, but also for his own political theories.

The Schumpeterian-like creative destruction explicit in Machiavelli's theory of history is the driving force behind a government's movement from "order to chaos and then back again from chaos to order; . . . thus . . . always descend[ing] from good to bad and ris[ing] from bad to good" (Machiavelli 557). Also, because in Machiavelli's eyes society was declining, "in the present there is nothing to be seen but utter misery, infamy, and vituperation" (Machiavelli 289), the descent from good to bad is much simpler than the rise from bad to good, "for a principality easily becomes a tyranny; aristocrats can very easily produce an oligarchy; democracy is converted into anarchy with no difficulty" (Machiavelli 177).

His theory can be seen by imagining a person pushing a large boulder through mountainous country. The boulder easily rolls down the mountains, to the valleys of tyrannical reign, but it is far from simple to push the boulder out of those valleys, up the mountains, to the peaks of the golden age, where it is difficult for the boulder to remain. In order to attain the government of the golden ages, a method must be devised that will allow government and society to be lifted out of the valley of corruption to the peak of justice. Machiavelli's much maligned "ends and means" political theory provides a path to do just that. In Roman history, the killing of the Tarquin king by Brutus was justified because it brought about the good end of lifting the Romans out of the valley of licen-

tiousness and corruption, into a golden age of aristocracy, under the Senate.

To those who would condemn violent means under all circumstances, Machiavelli would say that good ends justify their means, because this theory provides a road for society's cyclical ascension from corruption to justice, without which humanity would be stuck in a valley of despair, injuring humanity much more than violent means ever would. So in the context of Machiavelli's cyclical view of history, his political theory stating that good ends justify their means enables people to rise up and reverse society's tendency toward corruption.

Machiavelli's legacy stretches down from renaissance Italy to the twentieth century as a lesson in misinterpretation. After hundreds of years of being accused of preaching immorality, despising humanity, and having his most famous work *The Prince* likened to the devil's scripture, Niccolò Machiavelli's political and historical theories, when seen together, paint an entirely different picture of this victim of Fortune. The true Machiavelli, the one behind the evil reputation, is not a ruthless advocate of tyrants, but rather is a brilliant teacher, illuminating a path of ascent from the valleys of corruption to the peaks of justice.

I shall boldly declare in plain terms what I understand of those ancient times and of our own times...
For it is your duty as a good man to teach others whatever good you yourself have not been able to do. (Machiavelli 290)

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