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Machiavelli

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3 The philosopher of liberty

With the completion of *The Prince*, Machiavelli's hopes of returning to an active public career revived. As he wrote to Vettori in December 1513, his highest aspiration was still to make himself 'useful to our Medici lords, even if they begin by making me roll a stone'. He wondered whether the most effective way of realising his ambition might be to go to Rome with 'this little treatise of mine' in order to offer it in person to Giuliano de' Medici, thereby showing him that he 'might well be pleased to gain my services' (C 305).

At first Vettori seemed willing to support this scheme. He replied that Machiavelli should send him the book, so that he 'could see whether it might be appropriate to present it' (C 312). When Machiavelli duly dispatched the fair copy he had begun to make of the opening chapters, Vettori announced that he was 'extremely pleased with them', though he cautiously added that 'since I do not have the rest of the work, I do not wish to offer a final judgement' (C 319).

It soon became clear, however, that Machiavelli's hopes were again going to be dashed. Having read the whole of *The Prince* early in 1514, Vettori responded with an ominous silence. He never mentioned the work again, and instead began to fill up his letters with distracting chatter about his latest love affairs. Although Machiavelli forced himself to write back in a similar spirit, he was barely able to conceal his mounting anxiety. By the middle of the year, he finally came to realise that it was all hopeless, and wrote in great bitterness to Vettori to say that he was giving up the struggle. It has become obvious, he declares, 'that I am going to have to continue in this sordid way of life, without finding a single man who remembers the service I have done or believes me capable of doing any good' (C 343).

After this disappointment Machiavelli's life underwent a permanent change. Abandoning any further hopes of a diplomatic career, he began to see himself increasingly as a man of

letters. The main sign of this new orientation was that, after another year or more of 'rotting in idleness' in the country, he started to take a prominent part in the meetings held by a group of humanists and *litterati* who forgathered regularly at Cosimo Rucellai's gardens on the outskirts of Florence for learned conversation and entertainment.

These discussions at the *Orti Oricellari* were partly of a literary character. There were debates about the rival merits of Latin and Italian as literary languages, and there were readings and even performances of plays. The effect on Machiavelli was to channel his creative energies in a wholly new direction: he decided to write a play himself. The result was *Mandragola*, his brilliant if rather brutal comedy about the seduction of an old judge's beautiful young wife. The original version was probably completed in 1518, and may well have been read to Machiavelli's friends in the *Orti* before being publicly presented for the first time in Florence and Rome in the course of the next two years.

It is evident, however, that the most intensive debates at the *Orti* tended to be about politics. As one of the participants, Antonio Brucioli, later recalled in his *Dialogues*, they continually discussed the fate of republican regimes: how they rise to greatness, how they sustain their liberties, how they decline and fall into corruption, how they finally arrive at their inescapable point of collapse. Nor did their interest in civic freedom express itself merely in words. Some members of the group became such passionate opponents of the restored Medicean 'tyranny' that they were drawn into the unsuccessful plot to murder Cardinal Giulio de' Medici in 1522. One of those who were executed after the conspiracy misfired was Jacopo da Diacceto; among those condemned to exile were Zanobi Buondelmonti, Luigi Alamanni and Brucioli himself. All had been prominent members of the *Orti Oricellari* circle – the meetings of which came to an abrupt end after the failure of the attempted *coup*.

Machiavelli was never so vehement a partisan of republican liberty that he felt inclined to associate himself with any of the various anti-Medicean conspiracies. But it is clear that he was deeply influenced by his contacts with Cosimo Rucellai and his

friends. One outcome of his participation in their discussions was his treatise on *The Art of War*, published in 1521. This is actually couched in the form of a conversation set in the *Orti Oricellari*, with Rucellai introducing the argument while Buondelmonti and Alamanni serve as the chief interlocutors. But the most important product of Machiavelli's involvement with these republican sympathisers was his decision to write his *Discourses* on the first ten books of Livy's *History*, his longest and in many ways his most original work of political philosophy.

Machiavelli had of course been immersed in studying ancient history (including Livy) at least since the summer of 1513, and in his dedication to the *Discourses* he boasts about his 'steady reading' of the best classical authorities. There seems no doubt, however, that the spur to write out his ideas – in the typically humanist form of a commentary on an ancient text – came from his affiliation with the *Orti Oricellari* group. The *Discourses* are dedicated to Rucellai, who initiated their meetings, and to Buondelmonti, one of the conspirators of 1522. Moreover, Machiavelli's dedication not only alludes to their discussions and conveys his 'gratitude for the benefits I have received' from them, but also credits his friends with having 'forced me to write what I of myself never would have written' (188).

The means to greatness

Although Machiavelli ranges widely in his three *Discourses* over the civil and military affairs of the Roman republic, there is one issue which above all preoccupies him as he sets out to investigate the early history of Rome. He first mentions the topic in the opening paragraph of the first *Discourse*, and it underlies most of the rest of the book. His aim, he says, is to discover what 'made possible the dominant position to which that republic rose' (192).

There are obvious links between this theme and that of *The Prince*. It is true, of course, that in *The Prince* Machiavelli begins by excluding republics from consideration, whereas in the *Discourses* they furnish him with his main evidence. However, it would be a mistake to infer that the *Discourses* are ex-

clusively concerned with republics as opposed to principalities. As Machiavelli stresses in chapter 2, his interest lies not in republics as such, but rather in the government of cities, whether they are ruled 'as republics or as principdoms' (195). Moreover, there are close parallels between Machiavelli's desire in *The Prince* to advise rulers on how to attain glory by doing 'great things' and his aspiration in the *Discourses* to explain why certain cities have 'come to greatness', and why the city of Rome in particular managed to attain 'supreme greatness' and to produce such 'great results' (207–11, 341).

What, then, were 'the methods needed for attaining to greatness' in the case of Rome (358)? For Machiavelli the question is a practical one, since he endorses the familiar humanist contention that anyone who 'considers present affairs and ancient ones readily understands that all cities and all peoples have the same desires and the same traits'. This means that 'he who diligently examines past events easily foresees future ones' and 'can apply to them the remedies used by the ancients', or at least 'devise new ones because of the similarity of the events' (278). The exhilarating hope that underlies and animates the whole of the *Discourses* is thus that, if we can find out the cause of Rome's success, we may be able to repeat it.

A study of classical history discloses, according to Machiavelli, that the clue to understanding Rome's achievement can be encapsulated in a single sentence. 'Experience shows that cities have never increased in dominion or riches except while they have been at liberty.' The ancient world offers two particularly impressive illustrations of this general truth. First, 'it is a marvellous thing to consider to what greatness Athens came in the space of a hundred years after she freed herself from the tyranny of Pisistratus'. But above all it is 'very marvellous to observe what greatness Rome came to after she freed herself from her kings' (329). By contrast, 'the opposite of all these things happens in those countries that live as slaves' (333). For 'as soon as a tyranny is established over a free community', the first evil that results is that such cities 'no longer go forward and no longer increase in power or in riches; but in most instances, in fact always, they go backward' (329).

What Machiavelli primarily has in mind in laying so much emphasis on liberty is that a city bent on greatness must remain free from all forms of political servitude, whether imposed 'internally' by the rule of a tyrant or 'externally' by an imperial power (195, 235). This in turn means that to say of a city that it possesses its liberty is equivalent to saying that it holds itself independent of any authority save that of the community itself. Liberty thus comes to be equated with self-government. Machiavelli makes this clear in the second chapter of his first Discourse, where he states that he will 'omit discussion of those cities' that started by being 'subject to somebody' and will concentrate on those which began in liberty – that is, on those which 'at once governed themselves by their own judgement' (195). The same commitment is reiterated later in the chapter, where Machiavelli first praises the laws of Solon for setting up 'a form of government based on the people', and then proceeds to equate this arrangement with that of living 'in liberty' (199).

The first general conclusion of the *Discourses* is thus that cities only 'grow enormously in a very short time' and acquire greatness if 'the people are in control of them' (316). This does not lead Machiavelli to lose interest in principalities, for he is sometimes (though not consistently) willing to believe that the maintenance of popular control may be compatible with a monarchical form of government (e.g. 427). But it certainly leads him to express a marked preference for republican over princely regimes. He states his reasons most emphatically at the beginning of the second Discourse. It is 'not individual good but common good' that 'makes cities great', and 'without doubt this common good is thought important only in republics'. Under a prince 'the opposite happens', for 'what benefits him usually injures the city, and what benefits the city injures him'. This explains why cities under monarchical government seldom 'go forward', whereas 'all cities and provinces that live in freedom anywhere in the world' always 'make very great gains' (329, 332).

If liberty is the key to greatness, how is liberty itself to be acquired and kept safe? Machiavelli begins by admitting that

an element of good Fortune is always involved. It is essential that a city should have 'a free beginning, without depending on anyone' if it is to have any prospect of achieving civic glory (193, 195). Cities which suffer the misfortune of starting life in a servile condition generally find it 'not merely difficult but impossible' to 'find laws which will keep them free' and bring them fame (296).

As in *The Prince*, however, Machiavelli treats it as a cardinal error to suppose that the attainment of greatness is entirely dependent on Fortune's caprice. He concedes that according to some 'very weighty' writers – including Plutarch and Livy – the rise to glory of the Roman people owed almost everything to Fortune. But he replies that he is 'not willing to grant this in any way' (324). He admits that the Romans enjoyed many blessings of Fortune, as well as benefiting from various afflictions which the goddess sent them 'in order to make Rome stronger and bring her to the greatness she attained' (408). But he insists – again echoing *The Prince* – that the achievement of great things is never the outcome merely of good Fortune; it is always the product of Fortune combined with the indispensable quality of *virtú*, the quality that enables us to endure our misfortunes with equanimity and at the same time attracts the goddess's favourable attentions. So he concludes that if we wish to understand what 'made possible the dominant position' to which the Roman republic rose, we must recognise that the answer lies in the fact that Rome possessed 'so much *virtú*' and managed to ensure that this crucial quality was 'kept up in that city for so many centuries' (192). It was because the Romans 'mixed with their Fortune the utmost *virtú*' that they maintained their original freedom and ultimately rose to dominate the world (326).

Turning to analyse this pivotal concept of *virtú*, Machiavelli follows precisely the lines already laid down in *The Prince*. It is true that he applies the term in such a way as to suggest one important addition to his previous account. In *The Prince* he had associated the quality exclusively with the greatest political leaders and military commanders; in the *Discourses* he explicitly insists that, if a city is to attain greatness, it is essential

that the quality should be possessed by the citizen body as a whole (498). However, when he comes to define what he means by *virtù*, he largely reiterates his earlier arguments, coolly taking for granted the startling conclusions he had already reached.

The possession of *virtù* is accordingly represented as a willingness to do whatever may be necessary for the attainment of civic glory and greatness, whether the actions involved happen to be intrinsically good or evil in character. This is first of all treated as the most important attribute of political leadership. As in *The Prince*, the point is made by way of an allusion to, and a sarcastic repudiation of, the values of Ciceronian humanism. Cicero had asserted in *Moral Obligation* that, when Romulus decided 'it was more expedient for him to reign alone' and in consequence murdered his brother, he committed a crime that cannot possibly be condoned, since his defence of his action was 'neither reasonable nor adequate at all'. Machiavelli insists on the contrary that no 'prudent intellect' will ever 'censure anyone for any unlawful action used in organising a kingdom or setting up a republic'. Citing the case of Romulus' fratricide, he contends that 'though the deed accuses him, the result should excuse him; and when it is good, like that of Romulus, it will always excuse him, because he who is violent to destroy, not he who is violent to restore, ought to be censured' (218).

The same willingness to place the good of the community above all private interests and ordinary considerations of morality is held to be no less essential in the case of rank-and-file citizens. Again Machiavelli makes the point by way of parodying the values of classical humanism. Cicero had declared in *Moral Obligation* that 'there are some acts either so repulsive or so wicked that a wise man would not commit them even to save his country'. Machiavelli retorts that 'when it is absolutely a question of the safety of one's country', it becomes the duty of every citizen to recognise that 'there must be no consideration of just or unjust, of merciful or cruel, of praise-worthy or disgraceful; instead, setting aside every scruple, one must follow to the utmost any plan that will save her life and keep her liberty' (519).

This, then, is the sign of *virtù* in rulers and citizens alike: each must be prepared 'to advance not his own interests but the general good, not his own posterity but the common fatherland' (218). This is why Machiavelli speaks of the Roman republic as a repository of 'so much *virtù*': patriotism was felt to be 'more powerful than any other consideration', as a result of which the populace became 'for four hundred years an enemy to the name of king, and a lover of the glory and the common good of its native city' (315, 450).

The contention that the key to preserving liberty lies in keeping up the quality of *virtù* in the citizen body as a whole obviously raises a further question, the most basic one of all: how can we hope to instil this quality widely enough, and maintain it for long enough, to ensure that civic glory is attained? Again Machiavelli concedes that an element of good Fortune is always involved. No city can hope to attain greatness unless it happens to be set on the right road by a great founding father, to whom 'as a daughter' it may be said to owe its birth (223). A city which has not 'chanced upon a prudent founder' will always tend to find itself 'in a somewhat unhappy position' (196). Conversely, a city which can look back to 'the *virtù* and the methods' of a great founder – as Rome looked back to Romulus – has 'chanced upon most excellent Fortune' (244).

The reason why a city needs this 'first Fortune' is that the act of establishing a republic or principality can never be brought about 'through the *virtù* of the masses', because their 'diverse opinions' will always prevent them from being 'suited to organise a government' (218, 240). It follows that 'to set up a republic it is necessary to be alone' (220). Moreover, once a city has 'declined by corruption', it will similarly require 'the *virtù* of one man who is then living', and not 'the *virtù* of the masses' to restore it to greatness (240). So Machiavelli concludes that 'this we must take as a general rule: seldom or never is any republic or kingdom organised well from the beginning, or totally made over' at a later date, 'except when organised by one man' (218).

He then declares, however, that if any city is so imprudent as to rely on this initial good Fortune, it will not only cheat

itself of greatness but will very soon collapse. For while 'one alone is suited for organising' a government, no government can hope to last 'if resting on the shoulders of only one' (218). The inescapable weakness of any polity that puts its trust in 'the *virtú* of one man alone' is that 'the *virtú* departs with the life of the man, and seldom is it restored in the course of heredity' (226). What is needed, therefore, for the salvation of a kingdom or a republic is not so much 'to have a prince who will rule prudently while he lives', but rather 'to have one who will so organise it' that its subsequent fortunes come to rest instead upon 'the *virtú* of the masses' (226, 240). The deepest secret of statecraft is thus to know how this can be done.

The problem, Machiavelli goes on, is one of exceptional difficulty. For while we can expect to find a surpassing degree of *virtú* among the founding fathers of cities, we cannot expect to find the same quality occurring naturally among ordinary citizens. On the contrary, most men 'are more prone to evil than to good', and in consequence tend to ignore the interests of their community in order to act 'according to the wickedness of their spirits whenever they have free scope' (201, 218). There is thus a tendency for all cities to fall away from the pristine *virtú* of their founders and 'descend towards a worse condition' – a process Machiavelli summarizes by saying that even the finest communities are liable to become corrupt (322).

The image underlying this analysis is an Aristotelian one: the idea of the polity as a natural body which, like all sublunary creatures, is subject to being 'injured by time' (451). Machiavelli lays particular emphasis on the metaphor of the body politic at the beginning of his third Discourse. He thinks it 'clearer than light that if these bodies are not renewed they do not last', for in time their *virtú* is certain to become corrupt, and such corruption is certain to kill them if their injuries are not healed (419).

The onset of corruption is thus equated with the loss or dissipation of *virtú*, a process of degeneration which develops, according to Machiavelli, in one of two ways. A body of citizens may lose its *virtú* – and hence its concern for the common

good – by losing interest in politics altogether, becoming 'lazy and unfit for all *virtuoso* activity' (194). But the more insidious danger arises when the citizens remain active in affairs of state, but begin to promote their individual ambitions or factional loyalties at the expense of the public interest. Thus Machiavelli defines a corrupt political proposal as one 'put forward by men interested in what they can get from the public, rather than in its good' (386). He defines a corrupt constitution as one in which 'only the powerful' are able to propose measures, and do so 'not for the common liberty but for their own power' (242). And he defines a corrupt city as one in which the magistracies are no longer filled by 'those with the greatest *virtú*', but rather by those with the most power, and hence with the best prospects of serving their own selfish ends (241).

This analysis leads Machiavelli into a dilemma. On the one hand he continually stresses that 'the nature of men is ambitious and suspicious' to such a degree that most people will 'never do anything good except by necessity' (201, 257). But on the other hand he insists that, once men are allowed to 'climb from one ambition to another', this will rapidly cause their city to 'go to pieces' and forfeit any chance of becoming great (290). The reason is that, while the preservation of liberty is a necessary condition of greatness, the growth of corruption is invariably fatal to liberty. As soon as self-seeking individuals or sectarian interests begin to gain support, the people's desire to legislate 'on freedom's behalf' becomes correspondingly eroded, factions start to take over and 'tyranny quickly appears' in place of liberty (282). It follows that whenever corruption fully enters a body of citizens, they 'cannot live free even for a short time, in fact not at all' (235; cf. 240).

Machiavelli's dilemma is accordingly this: how can the body of the people – in whom the quality of *virtú* is not naturally to be found – have this quality successfully implanted in them? How can they be prevented from sliding into corruption, how can they be coerced into keeping up an interest in the common good over a sufficiently long period for civic greatness to be attained? It is with the solution to this problem that the whole of the rest of the *Discourses* is concerned,

The laws and leadership

Machiavelli believes that the dilemma he has uncovered can to some extent be circumvented rather than having to be directly overcome. For he allows that, while we can hardly expect the generality of citizens to display much natural *virtú*, it is not too much to hope that a city may from time to time have the good Fortune to find a leader whose actions, like those of a great founding father, exhibit an unforced quality of *virtú* in a high degree (420).

Such truly noble citizens are said to play an indispensable role in keeping their cities on the pathway to glory. Machiavelli argues that if such individual examples of *virtú* 'had appeared at least every ten years' in the history of Rome, 'their necessary result would have been' that the city 'would never have become corrupt' (421). He even declares that 'if a community were fortunate enough' to find a leader of this character in every generation, who 'would renovate its laws and would not merely stop it running to ruin but would pull it backwards', then the outcome would be the miracle of an 'everlasting' republic, a body politic with the ability to escape death (481).

How do such infusions of personal *virtú* contribute to a city's attainment of its highest ends? Machiavelli's attempt to answer this question occupies him throughout the whole of his third Discourse, the aim of which is to illustrate 'how the deeds of individuals increased Roman greatness, and how in that city they caused many good effects' (423).

It is evident that in pursuing this topic Machiavelli is still very close to the spirit of *The Prince*. So it is not surprising to find him inserting into this final section of the *Discourses* a considerable number of references back to his earlier work – nearly a dozen allusions in less than a hundred pages. As in *The Prince*, moreover, he lays it down that there are two distinct ways in which it is possible for a statesman or a general of surpassing *virtú* to achieve great things. The first is by way of his impact on other and lesser citizens. Machiavelli begins by suggesting that this can sometimes produce a directly inspiring

effect, since 'these men are of such reputation and their example is so powerful that good men wish to imitate them, and the wicked are ashamed to live a life contrary to theirs' (421). But his basic contention is that the *virtú* of an outstanding leader will always take the form, in part, of a capacity to imprint the same vital quality on his followers, even though they may not be naturally endowed with it at all. Discussing how this form of influence operates, Machiavelli's main suggestion – as in *The Prince* and later in Book IV of *The Art of War* – is that the most efficacious means of coercing people into behaving in a *virtuoso* fashion is by making them terrified of behaving otherwise. Thus he praises Hannibal for recognising the need to instil dread in his troops 'by his personal traits' in order to keep them 'united and quiet' (479). And he reserves his highest admiration for Manlius Torquatus, whose 'strong spirit' and proverbial severity made him 'command strong things' and enabled him to force his fellow citizens back into the condition of pristine *virtú* which they had begun to forsake (480–1).

The other way in which outstanding individuals contribute to civic glory is more immediate: Machiavelli believes that their high *virtú* serves in itself to stave off corruption and collapse. One of his chief concerns in his third Discourse is accordingly to indicate what particular aspects of *virtuoso* leadership tend most readily to bring about this beneficial result. He begins to supply his answer in chapter 23, in which he surveys the career of Camillus, 'the most prudent of all the Roman generals' (462). The qualities that made Camillus seem especially remarkable, and enabled him to achieve so many 'splendid things' were 'his care, his prudence, his great courage' and above all 'his excellent method of administering and commanding armies' (484, 498). Later Machiavelli devotes a sequence of chapters to furnishing a fuller treatment of the same theme. He first argues that great civic leaders have to know how to disarm the envious, 'for envy many times prevents men' from gaining 'the authority necessary in things of importance' (495–6). They also need to be men of high personal courage, especially if called upon to serve in a military capacity, in which case they

must be prepared – as Livy puts it – ‘to show activity in the thickest part of the battle’ (515). They must also possess deep political prudence, founded on an appreciation of ancient history as well as modern affairs (521–2). And finally they must be men of the greatest circumspection and wariness, incapable of being deceived by the strategies of their enemies (526).

Throughout this discussion it is clear that the fortunes of Machiavelli’s native city are never far from his thoughts. Whenever he cites an indispensable aspect of *virtuoso* leadership, he pauses to indicate that the decline of the Florentine republic and its ignominious collapse in 1512 were due in large part to a failure to pay sufficient attention to this crucial quality. A leader of *virtú* needs to know how to deal with the envious: but neither Savonarola nor Soderini was ‘able to overcome envy’ and in consequence ‘both of them fell’ (497). A leader of *virtú* must be prepared to study the lessons of history: but the Florentines, who could easily have ‘read or learnt the ancient habits of the barbarians’ made no attempt to do so and were easily tricked and despoiled (522). A leader of *virtú* should be a man of circumspection and prudence: but the rulers of Florence showed themselves so naïve in the face of treachery that – as in the war against Pisa – they brought the republic into complete disgrace (527). With this bitter indictment of the regime he had served, Machiavelli brings his third Discourse to an end.

If we revert to the dilemma Machiavelli began by posing, it becomes evident that the argument of his third Discourse leaves it largely unresolved. Although he has explained how it is possible for ordinary citizens to be coerced into *virtú* by the example of great leadership, he has also admitted that the appearance of great leaders is always a matter of pure good Fortune, and is thus an unreliable means of enabling a city to rise to glory and fame. So the fundamental question still remains: how can the generality of men – who will always be prone to let themselves be corrupted by ambition or laziness – have the quality of *virtú* implanted and maintained in them for long enough to ensure that civic glory is achieved?

It is at this juncture that Machiavelli begins to move deci-

sively beyond the confines of his political vision in *The Prince*. The key to solving the problem, he maintains, is to ensure that the citizens are ‘well-ordered’ – that they are organised in such a way as to compel them to acquire *virtú* and uphold their liberties. This solution is immediately proposed in the opening chapter of the first Discourse. If we wish to understand how it came about that ‘so much *virtú* was kept up’ in Rome ‘for so many centuries’, what we need to investigate is ‘how she was organised’ (192). The next chapter reiterates the same point. To see how the city of Rome succeeded in reaching ‘the straight road’ that led her ‘to a perfect and true end’, we need above all to study her *ordini* – her institutions, her constitutional arrangements, her methods of ordering and organising her citizens (196).

The most obvious question this requires us to address, according to Machiavelli, is what institutions a city needs to develop in order to avoid the growth of corruption in its ‘inside’ affairs – by which he means its political and constitutional arrangements (195, 295). He accordingly devotes the greater part of his first Discourse to considering this theme, taking his main illustrations from the early history of Rome, and continually emphasising ‘how well the institutions of that city were adapted to making it great’ (271).

He singles out two essential methods of organising home affairs in such a way as to instil the quality of *virtú* in the whole body of the citizens. He begins by arguing – in chapters 11 to 15 – that among the most important institutions of any city are those concerned with upholding religious worship and ensuring that it is ‘well used’ (234). He even declares that ‘the observance of religious teaching’ is of such paramount importance that it serves in itself to bring about ‘the greatness of republics’ (225). Conversely, he thinks that ‘one can have no better indication’ of a country’s corruption and ruin than ‘to see divine worship little valued’ (226).

The Romans understood perfectly how to make use of religion in order to promote the well-being of their republic. King Numa, Romulus’ immediate successor, in particular recognised that the establishment of a civic cult was ‘altogether

necessary if he wished to maintain a civilised community' (224). By contrast, the rulers of modern Italy have disastrously failed to grasp the relevance of this point. Although the city of Rome is still the nominal centre of Christianity, the ironic truth is that 'through the bad example' of the Roman Church, 'this land has lost all piety and all religion' (228). The outcome of this scandal is that the Italians, through being the least religious people in Europe, have become the most corrupt. As a direct consequence, they have lost their liberties, forgotten how to defend themselves, and allowed their country to become 'the prey not merely of powerful barbarians but of whoever assails her' (229).

The secret known to the ancient Romans – and forgotten in the modern world – is that the institutions of religion can be made to play a role analogous to that of outstanding individuals in helping to promote the cause of civic greatness. Religion can be used, that is, to inspire – and if necessary to terrorise – the ordinary populace in such a way as to induce them to prefer the good of their community to all other goods. Machiavelli's principal account of how the Romans encouraged such patriotism is presented in his discussion of auspices. Before they went into battle, Roman generals always took care to announce that the omens were favourable. This prompted their troops to fight in the confident belief that they were sure of victory, a confidence which in turn made them act with so much *virtù* that they almost always won the day (233). Characteristically, however, Machiavelli is more impressed by the way the Romans used their religion to arouse terror in the body of the people, thereby inciting them to behave with a degree of *virtù* they would never otherwise have attained. He offers the most dramatic instance in chapter 11. 'After Hannibal defeated the Romans at Cannae, many citizens met together who, despairing of their native land, agreed to abandon Italy'. When Scipio heard of this, he met them 'with his naked sword in his hand' and forced them to swear a solemn oath binding them to stand their ground. The effect of this was to coerce them into *virtù*: although their 'love of their country and its laws' had not persuaded them to remain in Italy, they

were successfully kept there by the fear of blasphemously violating their word (224).

The idea that a God-fearing community will naturally reap the reward of civic glory was a familiar one to Machiavelli's contemporaries. As he himself observes, this had been the promise underlying Savonarola's campaign in Florence during the 1490s, in the course of which he had persuaded the Florentines 'that he spoke with God' and that God's message to the city was that He would restore it to its former greatness as soon as it returned to its original piety (226). However, Machiavelli's own views about the value of religion involve him in departing from this orthodox treatment of the topic in two fundamental respects. He first of all differs from the Savonarolans in his reasons for wishing to uphold the religious basis of political life. He is not in the least interested in the question of religious truth. He is solely interested in the role played by religious sentiment 'in inspiring the people, in keeping men good, in making the wicked ashamed', and he judges the value of different religions entirely by their capacity to promote these useful effects (224). So he not only concludes that the leaders of any community have a duty to 'accept and magnify' anything that 'comes up in favour of religion'; he insists that they must always do so 'even though they think it false' (227).

Machiavelli's other departure from orthodoxy is connected with this pragmatic approach. He declares that, judged by these standards, the ancient religion of the Romans is much to be preferred to the Christian faith. There is no reason why Christianity should not have been interpreted 'according to *virtù*' and employed for 'the betterment and the defence' of Christian communities. But in fact it has been interpreted in such a way as to undermine the qualities needed for a free and vigorous civic life. It has 'glorified humble and contemplative men'; it has 'set up as the greatest good humility, abjectness and contempt for human things'; it has placed no value 'in grandeur of mind, in strength of body' or in any of the other attributes of *virtuoso* citizenship. By imposing this other-worldly image of human excellence, it has not merely failed to promote civic

glory; it has actually helped to bring about the decline and fall of great nations by corrupting their communal life. As Machiavelli concludes – with an irony worthy of Gibbon – the price we have paid for the fact that Christianity ‘shows us the truth and the true way’ is that it ‘has made the world weak and turned it over as prey to wicked men’ (331).

Machiavelli devotes the rest of his first Discourse to arguing that there is a second and even more effective means of inducing people to acquire *virtú*: by using the coercive powers of the law in such a way as to force them to place the good of their community above all selfish interests. The point is first made in broad terms in the opening chapters of the book. All the finest examples of civic *virtú* are said to ‘have their origin in good education’, which in turn has its origin ‘in good laws’ (203). If we ask how some cities manage to keep up their *virtú* over exceptionally long periods, the basic answer in every case is that ‘the laws make them good’ (201). The pivotal place of this contention in Machiavelli’s general argument is later made explicit at the beginning of the third Discourse: if a city is to ‘take on new life’ and advance along the pathway to glory, this can only be achieved ‘either by the *virtú* of a man or by the *virtú* of a law’ (419–20).

Given this belief, we can see why Machiavelli attaches so much importance to the founding fathers of cities. They are in a unique position to act as lawgivers, and thus to supply their communities from the outset with the best means of ensuring that *virtú* is promoted and corruption overcome. The most impressive instance of this achievement is said to be that of Lycurgus, the original founder of Sparta. He devised a code of laws so perfect that the city was able to ‘live safely under them’ for ‘more than eight hundred years without debasing them’ and without at any point forfeiting its liberty (196, 199). Scarcely less remarkable is the achievement of Romulus and Numa, the first kings of Rome. By means of the many good laws they enacted, the city had the quality of *virtú* ‘forced upon her’ with such decisiveness that even ‘the greatness of her empire could not for many centuries corrupt her’, and she remained ‘full of a

virtú as great as that by which any city or republic was ever distinguished’ (195, 200).

This brings us, according to Machiavelli, to one of the most instructive lessons we can hope to learn from the study of history. The greatest lawgivers, he has shown, are those who have understood most clearly how to use the law in order to advance the cause of civic greatness. It follows that, if we investigate the details of their constitutional codes, we may be able to uncover the secret of their success, thereby making the wisdom of the ancients directly available to the rulers of the modern world.

After conducting this investigation, Machiavelli concludes that the crucial insight common to all the wisest legislators of antiquity can be very simply expressed. They all perceived that the three ‘pure’ constitutional forms – monarchy, aristocracy, democracy – are inherently unstable, and tend to generate a cycle of corruption and decay; and they correctly inferred that the key to imposing *virtú* by the force of law must therefore lie in establishing a mixed constitution, one in which the instabilities of the pure forms are corrected while their strengths are combined. As always, Rome furnishes the clearest example: it was because she managed to evolve a ‘mixed government’ that she finally rose to become ‘a perfect republic’ (200).

It was of course a commonplace of Roman political theory to defend the special merits of mixed constitutions. The argument is central to Polybius’s *History*, recurs in several of Cicero’s political treatises, and subsequently found favour with most of the leading humanists of fifteenth-century Florence. However, when we come to Machiavelli’s reasons for believing that a mixed constitution is best-suited for promoting *virtú* and upholding liberty, we encounter a dramatic divergence from the conventional humanist point of view.

His argument starts out from the axiom that ‘in every republic there are two opposed factions, that of the people and that of the rich’ (203). He thinks it obvious that, if the constitution is so arranged that one or other of these groups is allowed complete control, the republic will be ‘easily corrupted’ (196). If someone from the party of the rich takes over as prince, there will be an immediate danger of tyranny; if the rich set up an

aristocratic form of government, they will be prone to rule in their own interests; if there is a democracy, the same will be true of the common people. In every case the general good will become subordinated to factional loyalties, with the result that the *virtù* and in consequence the liberty of the republic will very soon be lost (197-8, 203-4).

The solution, Machiavelli argues, is to frame the laws relating to the constitution in such a way as to engineer a tensely-balanced equilibrium between these opposed social forces, one in which all the parties remain involved in the business of government, and each 'keeps watch over the other' in order to forestall both 'the rich men's arrogance' and 'the people's licence' (199). As the rival groups jealously scrutinise each other for any signs of a move to take over supreme power, the resolution of the pressures thus engendered will mean that only those 'laws and institutions' which are 'conducive to public liberty' will actually be passed. Although motivated entirely by their selfish interests, the factions will thus be guided, as if by an invisible hand, to promote the public interest in all their legislative acts: 'all the laws made in favour of liberty' will 'result from their discord' (203).

This praise of dissension horrified Machiavelli's contemporaries. Guicciardini spoke for them all when he replied in his *Considerations on the Discourses* that 'to praise disunity is like praising a sick man's disease because of the virtues of the remedy applied to it'. Machiavelli's argument ran counter to the whole tradition of republican thought in Florence, a tradition in which the belief that all discord must be outlawed as factious, together with the belief that faction constitutes the deadliest threat to civic liberty, had been emphasised ever since the end of the thirteenth century, when Remigio, Latini, Compagni and above all Dante had issued fierce denunciations of their fellow-citizens for endangering their liberties by refusing to live in peace. To insist, therefore, on the astounding judgement that – as Machiavelli expresses it – the disorders of Rome 'deserve the highest praise' was to repudiate one of the most cherished assumptions of Florentine humanism.

Machiavelli is unrepentant, however, in his attack on this orthodox belief. He explicitly mentions 'the opinion of the many' who hold that the continual clashes between the plebs and nobles in Rome left the city 'so full of confusion' that only 'good Fortune and military *virtù*' prevented it from tearing itself to pieces. But he still insists that those who condemn Rome's disorders are failing to recognise that they served to prevent the triumph of sectarian interests, and are thus 'finding fault with what as a first cause kept Rome free' (202). So he concludes that, even if the dissensions were evil in themselves, they were nevertheless 'an evil necessary to the attainment of Roman greatness' (211).

The prevention of corruption

Machiavelli goes on to argue that although a mixed constitution is necessary, it is by no means sufficient, to ensure that liberty is preserved. The reason is that – as he warns yet again – most people remain more committed to their own ambitions than to the public interest, and 'never do anything good except by necessity' (201). The outcome is a perpetual tendency for over-mighty citizens and powerful interest-groups to alter the balance of the constitution in favour of their own selfish and factional ends, thereby introducing the seeds of corruption into the body politic and endangering its liberty.

To meet this ineradicable threat, Machiavelli has one further constitutional proposal to advance: he maintains that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. It is essential in the first place to learn the danger-signals – to recognise the means by which an individual citizen or a political party may be able 'to get more power than is safe' (265). Next, it is essential to develop a special set of laws and institutions for dealing with such emergencies. A republic, as Machiavelli puts it, 'ought to have among its *ordini* this: that the citizens are to be watched so that they cannot under cover of good do evil and so that they gain only such popularity as advances and does not harm liberty' (291). Finally, it is then essential for everyone 'to keep their eyes open', holding themselves in readiness not only to

identify such corrupting tendencies, but also to employ the force of the law in order to stamp them out as soon as – or even before – they begin to become a menace (266).

Machiavelli couples this analysis with the suggestion that there is one further constitutional lesson of major significance to be learnt from the early history of Rome. Since Rome preserved its freedom for more than four hundred years, it seems that its citizens must have correctly identified the most serious threats to their liberties, and gone on to evolve the right *ordini* for dealing with them. It follows that, if we wish to understand such dangers and their remedies, it will be advantageous for us to turn once more to the history of the Roman republic, seeking to profit from her ancient wisdom and apply it to the modern world.

As the example of Rome shows, the initial danger that any mixed constitution needs to face will always stem from those who benefited from the previous regime. In Machiavelli's terms, this is the threat posed by 'the sons of Brutus', a problem he first mentions in chapter 16 and later underlines at the beginning of his third Discourse. Junius Brutus freed Rome from the tyranny of Tarquinius Superbus, the last of her kings; but Brutus' own sons were among those who had 'profited from the tyrannical government' (235). The establishment of 'the people's liberty' thus seemed to them no better than slavery. As a result, they 'were led to conspire against their native city by no other reason than that they could not profit unlawfully under the consuls as they had under the kings' (236).

Against this type of risk 'there is no more powerful remedy, none more effective nor more certain nor more necessary, than to kill the sons of Brutus' (236). Machiavelli admits that it may appear cruel – and he adds in his iciest tones that it is certainly 'an instance striking among recorded events' – that Brutus should have been willing to 'sit on the judgement seat and not merely condemn his sons to death but be present at their deaths' (424). But he insists that such severity is in fact indispensable. 'For he who seizes a tyranny and does not kill Brutus, and he who sets a state free and does not kill Brutus's sons, maintains himself but a little while' (425).

A further threat to political stability arises from the notorious propensity of self-governing republics to slander and exhibit ingratitude towards their leading citizens. Machiavelli first alludes to this deficiency in chapter 29, where he argues that one of the gravest errors any city is liable to commit 'in keeping herself free' is that of doing 'injury to citizens whom she should reward'. This is a particularly dangerous disease to leave untreated, since those who suffer such injustices are generally in a strong position to strike back, thereby bringing their city 'all the quicker to tyranny – as happened to Rome with Caesar, who by force took for himself what ingratitude denied him' (259).

The only possible remedy is to institute a special *ordine* designed to discourage the envious and the ungrateful from undermining the reputations of prominent people. The best method of doing this is 'to give enough openings for bringing charges'. Any citizen who feels he has been slandered must be able, 'without any fear or without any hesitation', to demand that his accuser should appear in court in order to provide a proper substantiation of his claims. If it then emerges, once a formal accusation 'has been made and well investigated', that the charges cannot be upheld, the law must provide for the slanderer to be severely punished (215–16).

Finally, Machiavelli discusses what he takes to be the most serious danger to the balance of a mixed constitution, the danger that an ambitious citizen may attempt to form a party based on loyalty to himself instead of to the common good. He begins to analyse this source of instability in chapter 34, after which he devotes most of the remainder of the first Discourse to considering how such corruption tends to arise, and what type of *ordini* are needed to ensure that this gateway to tyranny is kept closed.

One way of encouraging the growth of faction is by allowing the prolongation of military commands. Machiavelli even implies that it was 'the power citizens gained' in this way, more than anything else, that eventually 'made Rome a slave' (267). The reason why it is always 'to the detriment of liberty' when such 'free authority is given for a long time' is that absolute

authority always corrupts the people by turning them into its 'friends and partisans' (270, 280). This is what happened in Rome's armies under the late republic. 'When a citizen was for a long time commander of an army, he gained its support and made it his partisan', so that the army 'in time forgot the Senate and considered him its head' (486). Then it only needed Sulla, Marius and later Caesar to seek out 'soldiers who, in opposition to the public good, would follow them' for the balance of the constitution to be tilted so violently that tyranny quickly supervened (282, 486).

The proper response to this menace is not to take fright at the very idea of dictatorial authority, since this may sometimes be vitally needed in cases of national emergency (268-9). Rather the answer should be to ensure, by means of the right *ordini*, that such powers are not abused. This can be achieved in two main ways: by requiring that all absolute commands be 'set up for a limited term but not for life'; and by ensuring that their exercise is restricted in such a way that they are only able 'to dispose of that affair that caused them to be set up'. As long as these *ordini* are observed, there is no danger that absolute power will corrupt absolutely and 'weaken the government' (268).

The other principal source of faction is the malign influence exercised by those with extensive personal wealth. The rich are always in a position to do favours to other citizens, such as 'lending them money, marrying off their daughters, protecting them from the magistrates' and in general conferring benefits of various kinds. Patronage of this nature is extremely sinister, since it tends to 'make men partisans of their benefactors' at the cost of the public interest. This in turn serves to 'give the man they follow courage to think he can corrupt the public and violate the laws' (493). Hence Machiavelli's insistence that 'corruption and slight aptitude for free life spring from inequality in a city'; hence too his frequently reiterated warning that 'the ambition of the rich, if by various means and in various ways a city does not crush it, is what quickly brings her to ruin' (240, 274).

The only way out of this predicament is for 'well-ordered republics' to 'keep their treasuries rich and their citizens poor'

(272). Machiavelli is somewhat vague about the type of *ordini* needed to bring this about, but he is eloquent about the benefits to be expected from such a policy. If the law is used to 'keep the citizens poor', this will effectively prevent them – even when they are 'without goodness and wisdom' – from being able to 'corrupt themselves or others with riches' (469). If at the same time the city's coffers remain full, the government will be able to outbid the rich in any 'scheme of befriending the people', since it will always be possible to offer greater rewards for public than for private services (300). Machiavelli accordingly concludes that 'the most useful thing a free community can bring about is to keep its members poor' (486). He ends his discussion on a grandly rhetorical note by adding that he could 'show with a long speech that poverty produces much better fruits than riches', if 'the writings of other men had not many times made the subject splendid' (488).

By the time we reach this point in Machiavelli's analysis, we can readily see that – as in his third Discourse – there is a continuing preoccupation with the fortunes of his native city lying beneath the surface of his general argument. He first of all reminds us that, if a city is to preserve its liberty, it is essential that its constitution should embody some provision against the prevalent vice of slandering and mistrusting prominent citizens. He then points out that this 'has always been badly arranged in our city of Florence'. Anyone who 'reads the history of this city will see how many slanders have at all times been uttered against citizens who have been employed in its important affairs'. The outcome has been 'countless troubles', all of which have helped to undermine the city's liberties, and all of which could easily have been avoided if only 'an arrangement for bringing charges against citizens and punishing slanderers' had at some time been worked out (216).

Florence took a further step towards slavery when she failed to prevent Cosimo de' Medici from building up a party devoted to the advancement of his family's selfish interests. Machiavelli has shown what strategy a city needs to adopt if a leading citizen tries to corrupt the people with his wealth: it needs to outbid him by making it more profitable to serve the common

good. As it was, Cosimo's rivals instead chose to drive him from Florence, thereby provoking so much resentment among his followers that they eventually 'called him back and made him prince of the republic – a rank to which without that open opposition he never could have risen' (266, 300).

Florence's one remaining chance to secure her liberties came in 1494, when the Medici were again forced into exile and the republic was fully restored. At this point, however, the city's new leaders, under the direction of Piero Soderini, made the most fatal mistake of all by failing to adopt a policy which, Machiavelli has argued, is absolutely indispensable whenever such a change of regime takes place. Anyone who has 'read ancient history' knows that once a move has been made 'from tyranny into republic', it is essential for 'the sons of Brutus' to be killed (424–5). But Soderini 'believed that with patience and goodness he could overcome the longing of Brutus' sons to get back under another government', since he believed that 'he could extinguish evil factions' without bloodshed and 'dispose of some men's hostility' with rewards (425). The outcome of this shocking naïvety was that the sons of Brutus – that is, the partisans of the Medici – survived to destroy him and restore the Medicean tyranny after the débâcle of 1512.

Soderini failed to put into practice the central precept of Machiavellian statecraft. He scrupled to do evil that good might come of it, and in consequence refused to crush his adversaries because he recognised that he would need to seize illegal powers in order to do it. What he failed to recognise was the folly of yielding to such scruples when the city's liberties were genuinely at stake. He should have seen that 'his works and his intentions would be judged by their outcome', and realised that 'if Fortune and life were with him he could convince everybody that what he did was for the preservation of his native city and not for his own ambition' (425). As it was, the consequences of his 'not having the wisdom to be Brutus-like' were as disastrous as possible. He not only lost 'his position and his reputation'; he also lost his city and its liberties, and delivered his fellow-citizens over to 'become slaves' (425, 461). As in his third Discourse, Machiavelli's argument thus cul-

minates in a violent denunciation of the leader and the government he himself had served.

The quest for empire

At the beginning of his second Discourse, Machiavelli reveals that his discussion of *ordini* is still only half-completed. He has so far claimed that, if a city is to achieve greatness, it needs to develop the right laws and institutions for ensuring that its citizens behave with the highest *virtù* in the conduct of their 'inside' affairs. He now indicates that it is no less essential to establish a further set of *ordini* designed to encourage the citizens to behave with a like *virtù* in their 'outside' affairs – by which he means their military and diplomatic relations with other kingdoms and republics (339). The exposition of this further argument occupies him throughout the central section of his book.

The need for these additional laws and institutions arises from the fact that all republics and principalities exist in a state of hostile competition with each other. Men are never 'content to live on their own resources'; they are always 'inclined to try to govern others' (194). This makes it 'impossible for a republic to succeed in standing still and enjoying its liberties' (379). Any city attempting to follow such an eirenic course of action will quickly fall victim to the incessant flux of political life, in which everyone's fortunes always 'rise up or sink down' without ever being able to 'remain fixed' (210). The only solution is to treat attack as the best form of defence, adopting a policy of expansion in order to ensure that one's native city 'can both defend herself from those who assail her and crush whoever opposes himself to her greatness' (194). The pursuit of dominion abroad is thus held to be a precondition of liberty at home.

As before, Machiavelli turns for the corroboration of these general claims to the early history of Rome. He declares in his opening chapter that 'there has never been another republic' with so many of the right *ordini* for expansion and conquest (324). Rome owed these arrangements to Romulus, her first lawgiver, who acted with so much foresight that the city was able from the outset to develop an 'unusual and immense *virtù*'