MACHIAVELLI’S PARADOX: TRAPPING OR TEACHING THE PRINCE

In The Discourses Machiavelli extolled the virtues of republican government, yet in The Prince he advised the ruler on how to perpetuate autocratic rule. What accounts for this paradox? Mary Dietz argues that Machiavelli sought to deceive the prince, trapping him into actions that would destroy his rule. John Langton contends, in contrast, that Machiavelli was seeking to teach the prince how to govern so that the autocratic state could evolve into a republic.

In his most substantial work, The Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius, Machiavelli defends the ideals of republican government by arguing on historical grounds that the most stable, solid, and humane states have been founded on social equality, political liberty, rule of law, popular elections, and mixed constitutions embodying a system of checks and balances. Yet in his best known book, The Prince, Machiavelli lays out an elaborate, “Machiavellian” program for acquiring and retaining autocratic power and thus seems to encourage a form of practical politics that vitiates the realization of his political values.

Students of political theory have proposed quite a few diverse solutions to this paradox. The prevailing view, it seems clear, is that Machiavelli is actually seeking in The Prince to teach an absolute ruler how to use his power to reform a corrupt and feeble state and thereby to lay the foundation for the emergence of a viable republic. In other words, according to the dominant interpretation, Machiavelli regards the absolutism he encourages in The Prince as the necessary precondition for the establishment of the kind of republicanism he endorses in The Discourses.

Mary Dietz (1986) rejects this and other available attempts to reconcile the politics of The Prince and the values of The Discourses as unpersuasive. Instead, she advances the contention that The Prince is actually a “political act,” “an act of deception,” a piece of “duplicitous advice,” designed to restore a republic in Florence by tricking a “gullible and vainglorious prince,” Lorenzo de Medici, into implementing policies that would “jeopardize his power and bring his demise” (p. 781).

This is a novel and provocative thesis, but after analysis and reflection it strikes me as implausible and misleading. It is predicated on a selective, misguided reading of the relevant texts and an inadequate construal of both Machiavelli’s fundamental values and his theoretical intentions. In exposing these flaws in Dietz’s argument, I want to suggest that a particular “nationalistic” version of the dominant view of the relationship between The Prince and The Discourses offers a much more tenable interpretation than the one she devises.

Dietz (p. 782) essentially views The Prince as a well-disguised trap. The “text itself provides areas of ‘solid ground,’ or firm advice a new prince . . . can rely

AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW
VOL. 81 NO. 4 DECEMBER 1987
upon to gain and maintain power." But hidden amid this solid counsel are "ditches and pitfalls in the form of subversive directives," concealed by "promises of power, glory and popular support." My impression, in contrast, is that The Prince is too long, too historical, too involved, indeed altogether too judicious for this to be the case. Putting it another way, why is the solid ground around the putative pitfalls so well prepared—and so extensive?

Machiavelli examines many topics in The Prince, particularly in the area of foreign affairs, which have no direct bearing on the problem of maintaining power within a state. And he does so in a rigorous, bureaucratic "issues-and-options" style. Why did he not simply relate the solid counsel in a more straightforward, uncomplicated way? Indeed, if his goal was to bring Lorenzo down, why did Machiavelli not just write a short, snappy, meretricious memorandum on how to govern Florence instead of a densely packed handbook on realpolitik (which, by the way, a gullible and vain-glorious prince would probably not peruse)? The answer, I think it is clear, is that Machiavelli's purpose was instruction, not deception. Of course, it can be retorted here that the most effective trap always looks like something else, and this explains all the well-tended "firm ground" around the pitfalls in The Prince. But are there really consciously prepared pitfalls in the text? Or, to put the question in a more manageable form, Does The Prince contain any advice not consonant with what Machiavelli teaches in The Discourses?

Dietz contends that Machiavelli puts four main suggestions in The Prince that he hopes will induce Lorenzo to dig his own political grave: (1) that he should reside in the city of Florence itself; (2) that he should strive to gain the favor of the people; (3) that he should not build any fortresses; and (4) that he should create a civilian militia or mass-based native army. Let us examine each prescription in turn to determine if it has a sinister intent.

Residing in a Conquered City (Florence)

As Dietz points out, according to Machiavelli, if a new prince wants to effectively govern a republic he has seized or conquered, he should either "destroy it" or "reside in it" (pp. 782–83). In The Discourses Machiavelli (1950, 183–84), repeats the advice about destroying conquered cities or provinces in order to rule them securely, but he explains here that the destruction of a society in this context means the reorganization of its government, the redistribution of its population, and the restructuring of its stratification system. In other words, Machiavelli is apparently quite sincere when he advises Lorenzo that he has an option: to solidify his rule in Florence he can destroy the city or reside in it. What if Lorenzo had chosen the former option, which Machiavelli himself (1950, 184) describes as "the best means of holding a principality"? Why present an option here, thus giving Lorenzo a chance to follow a path leading away from the pitfalls? Indeed, would any of Machiavelli's other alleged pitfalls been effective, if Lorenzo had elected to "destroy" Florence?

But what about the less radical option of residence within the city as a "means of securing possession"? Is this a trap? Dietz construes the suggestion to be a ploy to induce Lorenzo to abandon his country villa and take up residence in the city, where he could be more easily found and destroyed by a vengeful Florentine people still deeply imbued with republican sentiments (p. 783). Now, this argument turns on the assumption that the mass of Florentines had not forgotten "the name of liberty"—that they were, in fact, ardent republicans, just waiting for the
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opportunity to break the shackles of princely rule. Indeed, Dietz’s whole thesis rests on the assumption that “the Florentines had become accustomed to a republic,” that “in Florence, the idea of liberty was deeply rooted in political tradition” (p. 784). Yet, she herself quotes (p. 785) a passage from Machiavelli’s History of Florence where he states that “liberty was unknown” in the city. Moreover, Machiavelli contends in The Discourses that republican values, traditions, and institutions were never strongly developed in Florence. The city had its “origin in servitude,” and then when afterwards the opportunity occurred for her to gain her liberty in a measure, she began by making a constitution that was a mixture of her old and bad institutions with new ones, and consequently could not be good. And thus she has gone on for the two hundred years of which we have any reliable account, without ever having a government that could really be called a republic. . . . And although Florence repeatedly gave ample authority, by public and free suffrage, to a few of her citizens to reform the government, yet these never organized it for the general good, but always with a view of benefiting their own party, which, instead of establishing order in the city, only tended to increase the disorders. (1950, 239–40)

The specific implication of this passage is that Machiavelli clearly does not see Florence as a hotbed of republicanism and certainly did not write The Prince under the illusion that most Florentines were chafing to regain their lost liberty. Indeed, all the evidence of The Discourses leads to the conclusion that Machiavelli regarded his countrymen as largely “corrupt” and “effeminate” (1950, 284–85, 369, 491). They were not a dangerous, rebellious mass in his estimation and the actual history of Florence after the fall of the republic in 1512 fully confirms this view.

The broader implication of Machiavelli’s assessment of his native city is that it explodes Dietz’s claim that the purpose of The Prince was to “restore” the previous Florentine republic (pp. 781, 794; see also Machiavelli 1950, 111). Machiavelli did not think the old republic was worth restoring: its constitution was not good and its citizens, elites as well as common people, generally lacked civic virtue in the sense that their propensity was to put their private interests before the general good. He wanted the city reorganized, reformed, revitalized, and this, he emphasizes, requires the labor of an absolute ruler (1950, 110–11, 138–39, 166–67d, 170–71). But even that was not sufficient, because from Machiavelli’s perspective, no Italian city-state, no matter what form of government it possessed, was really a viable geopolitical entity in a world dominated by large absolutist kingdoms. The only viable entity was the entire country of Italy, united under a strong (ultimately republican) government. As Machiavelli observed at one point in The Discourses,

A country can never be united and happy, except when it obeys wholly one government, whether a republic or a monarchy, as is the case in France and Spain; and the sole cause why Italy is not in the same condition, and is not governed by either one republic or one sovereign, is the Church. . . . The Church, then, not having been powerful enough to be able to master all Italy, nor having permitted any other power to do so, has been the cause why Italy has never been able to unite under one head, but has always remained under a number of princes and lords, which occasion her so many dissensions and so much weakness that she became a prey not only to the powerful barbarians, but of whoever chose to assail her. (1950, 151–52)

Gaining Popular Support

As Dietz relates, there is probably no more frequently repeated piece of advice in The Prince than that “the ruler should always strive to gain the favor of the people” (p. 783). Machiavelli not only reiterates this advice again and again but offers apparently prudent suggestions for implementing it (1950, 64–67, 85). How can practical advice about gaining popular support be a trap? Dietz’s conjecture is that Machiavelli’s real view of the matter is just the opposite
of what he preaches in The Prince: in contrast to what he writes there, he actually believes that a dictator in Florence could best secure his position by gaining the support of the nobles, while distrustingly and, if necessary, repressing the liberty-loving people. In other words, by telling Lorenzo through The Prince to be hostile to the nobility and to cultivate the favor of the people, Machiavelli was, in Dietz's view, attempting to trick the Florentine dictator into alienating his natural allies and trusting his natural foes. Dietz supports this conjecture in large measure through a strained interpretation of a memorandum written by Machiavelli to Pope Leo X, entitled "On Reforming the State of Florence."

Yet in The Discourses Machiavelli (1950, 162) says that he regards "as unfortunate those princes" who try to control a mass of hostile subjects with "extraordinary measures," such as "cruelty." This only erodes their authority. The "best remedy" for popular hostility is not repression but "to try to secure the good will of the people." And this can be achieved by, on the one hand, massacring the nobles and, on the other hand, allowing the people "to live in security," that is, to conduct government according to the rule of law (1950, 162-63). Whom is Machiavelli trying to deceive here? Although he employs a different argument, he repeats essentially the same advice in The Prince (1950, 35-36). Are both books, then, duplicious? I think not. However Machiavellian their teachings may be, both works are sincere efforts to educate and to exhort.

Building Fortresses

In chapter 20 of The Prince, Machiavelli proffers some very equivocal advice about the practice of building fortresses. Indeed, the advice is so wishy-washy that it is difficult to imagine that it would persuade anyone to do anything. Yet Dietz detects a clever trap (pp. 787-88). She thinks this chapter is intended to convince Lorenzo not to build a fortress, because Machiavelli really believes a central citadel would make the dictator less vulnerable to a republican insurrection. But is this, in fact, really Machiavelli's true belief? Dietz herself acknowledges in a footnote that in The Discourses Machiavelli unequivocally denounces the practice of erecting fortresses (p. 797). She does not, however, discuss his three main grounds for this advice. First, Machiavelli claims, fortresses are "useless" because they induce the foolish presumption on a prince's part that he can systematically abuse his subjects and yet control them with force. In the long run this generates tremendous hostility, and no citadel can permanently protect a ruler from an aroused populace. Second, fortresses are "injurious" because they foster the conviction that a large, well-trained army is unnecessary; whereas, as Machiavelli observes (1950, 369), fortresses cannot preserve states without good armies and they are unnecessary for states with them.

In light of this analysis, I cannot see how Dietz manages to convince herself that Machiavelli's advice on fortresses is a trap. But perhaps he is being duplicious in The Discourses as well when he avers, "A good and wise prince . . . will never build fortresses, so that they may place their reliance upon the good will of their subjects, and not upon the strength of the citadels" (1950, 364).

Creating a Citizen Militia

A new ruler, indeed any wise ruler, Machiavelli strenuously argues in The Prince, should always have his subjects armed and trained for combat, and he should never rely on mercenary or auxili-
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ary troops (1950, 44–46, 48, 51–52, 77–78). For Dietz, this piece of advice is perhaps Machiavelli’s most treacherous pitfall: “The new prince who arms his subjects may . . . easily make himself a mark for overthrow by creating the very instrument of his own destruction, namely, a civilian militia” (p. 786). Now obviously, arming and training a substantial body of citizens may “facilitate plots, incite insurrection, and inspire rebels.” But what leads Dietz to maintain that this is what Machiavelli actually hoped would follow from his advice? She seems to offer two arguments. On the one hand, she intimates that Machiavelli had a high estimation for the republican commitments and revolutionary potential of his countrymen (pp. 786–87); but this, as I have tried to demonstrate, does not appear to be the case. On the other hand, she implies that Machiavelli knew that few successful dictators or princes had actually armed their subjects, and that, in fact, Lorenzo’s own grandfather, Lorenzo the Magnificent, had actually disarmed the citizens of Florence in order to secure his dictatorial position. Nothing more graphically reveals Dietz’s careless reading of the relevant texts and her misconstrual of Machiavelli’s values than this argument.

According to Dietz, “when Machiavelli discusses such virtuous new princes as Francesco Sforza . . . or Cesare Borgia . . . he makes no mention of their having armed their subjects, doubtless because they did not. His bold claim that ‘history is full of such examples’ [of new princes who armed their subjects] is followed by no examples at all” (p. 786). But in point of fact, Machiavelli cites many examples, including the case of Cesare Borgia himself! As he explicitly points out (1950, 51), Borgia found his mercenary troops “uncertain to handle, unfaithful and dangerous.” He therefore “suppressed them and relied on his own men . . . [Thereafter,] his reputation . . . constantly increased, and he was never so highly esteemed as when every one saw that he was the sole master of his own forces.” Perhaps even more damaging to Dietz’s argument, in chapter 21 of The Prince, a mere three pages after the point where Machiavelli claims that “history is full of examples” of new sovereigns arming their subjects, he discusses the case of his contemporary, “Ferdinand, King of Aragon, the present King of Spain.” As Machiavelli observes (1950, 81–82), “Ferdinand . . . may almost be termed a new prince because from a weak king he has become for fame and glory the first king in Christendom, and if you regard his actions you will find them all very great and some of them extraordinary . . . He was able with the money from the Church and the people to maintain his armies, and by that long war [with the Moors] to lay the foundations for his military power, which afterwards made him famous.” For Machiavelli, this is a particularly instructive example, because Ferdinand did for Spain exactly what Machiavelli exhorts some “redeemer” to do for Italy in the famous last chapter of The Prince.

Although it now seems almost superfluous to say it, The Discourses is actually full of examples of absolute rulers who created popularly based armies—Tullus, Pelopidas, Epaminondas, the “current King of England” (1950, 175–76). In encouraging Lorenzo to establish a civilian militia, Machiavelli was hardly attempting to deceive and ruin the Florentine dictator; instead he was articulating one of his deepest convictions, namely, that “princes and republics of modern times as have no national troops for defense or attack ought well to be ashamed of it; for . . . if there are no soldiers where there are men, it is not owing to any natural or local defect, but solely to the fault of the prince” (1950, 175).

Dietz tries to make her argument about the duplicitous character of Machiavelli’s advice by focusing exclusively on ques-
tions of domestic politics and internal power. But both The Prince and The Discourses address as well the other dimension of realpolitik, international affairs. And on this subject if there is one message which Machiavelli wants to drive home, it is the utter folly of being without a strong, indigenous army in a world filled with violent and voracious states. Again and again in The Discourses, Machiavelli describes Florence as “feeble,” and she flounders in this execrable condition precisely because, having few troops of her own, she relies heavily on cowardly mercenaries (1950, 212–14, 285, 317, 369, 385, 491). When Lorenzo the Magnificent disarmed the Florentine people, he committed, from Machiavelli’s perspective, a heinous political crime. Creating and maintaining a civilian militia poses risks to a prince’s regime, but being without such a force guarantees his country’s degradation, subjugation, and inevitable obliteration.

Political Values, Theoretical Intentions

Dietz’s thesis rests substantially on the assumption that Machiavelli’s only deep values are “republicanism and liberty” (p. 794). But Machiavelli was also a passionate nationalist. Indeed, if the last chapter of The Prince is a sincere cry for risorgimento and not, as Dietz suggests, one more piece of “bait” to trap a vain-glorious Lorenzo de Medici (p. 796), then it seems clear that the national unification, security, and glory of Italy were among Machiavelli’s most cherished values. The destruction of Lorenzo and the restoration of a small, feeble, corrupt, and badly organized Florentine republic could do nothing for the achievement of these nationalistic aspirations. The establishment of a viable Italian state could, however, set the stage for the reintroduction and evolution of republican institutions. If this was Machiavelli’s view and if he shared it with friends and associates, then it is no wonder that he was not given a governmental position in the (ultimately weak and short-lived) Florentine republic that emerged in 1527 after 15 years of Medici rule. The problem was not so much that Machiavelli had sought a position with Lorenzo but that he had become, in terms of his partisan commitments, an Italian nationalist rather than merely a Florentine republican.

In Machiavelli’s estimation, the first step in the process of creating a national state in Italy had to be the emergence of some autocratic leader who possessed the knowledge—and the motivation—to accomplish in Italy what Ferdinand had achieved in Spain.

But this is only one aspect of what Machiavelli wants. In The Discourses (1950, 116–17, 129–30, 166), he discloses his conviction that the Roman republic stands as the historical model of what a state should be. What Machiavelli ultimately hopes to foster through his writings is the rebirth in Renaissance Italy of the Roman republic in some modernized form. Viewed from this perspective, The Prince and The Discourses are easily reconciled. After a ruler had carried out the “moral” and practical program outlined in The Prince—that is, after he had secured control over a particular city-state, developed a strong, popularly based army, driven “barbarian” forces from Italy, and extended his control over the country—he could turn to The Discourses, perhaps near the end of his reign and under Machiavelli’s own personal guidance, to learn how to give his new political creation the republican institutions and culture which would make it stable, long-lived and humane, thus ensuring its greatness and the prince’s (and Machiavelli’s) ultimate glory (see Machiavelli 1950, 145).

Whether Machiavelli actually believed that Lorenzo de Medici was up to this
stupendous task, there is no question that he hoped he might be and that he would hire Machiavelli as chief consultant for the project. It is not too farfetched to say that Machiavelli wanted to do for Lorenzo what Count Cavour did for King Victor Emmanuel II in the late 1850s. In sum, Machiavelli was not trying to deceive and ruin Lorenzo; he was trying to educate him about the opportunity for, the demands of, and the glory to be gained from, the unification and political regeneration of Italy. This, of course, is not a novel thesis, but it has the merit of being much more plausible than the argument concocted by Dietz.

In criticizing the kind of reconciliation of The Prince and The Discourses proposed here, Dietz suggests that Machiavelli was too politically astute to entertain the naïve belief that the "heroic politics" of a full-fledged, Machiavellian ruler would "somehow ‘give away’ to mass politics, that the death of the prince [would] lead to the rise of the republic" (p. 780). But a moment's reflection on what we know about the broad trajectory of European political evolution will show that this view, far from being naïve, is incredibly prescient. Absolutism served as the precondition for the establishment of the modern nation-state, which in turn permitted the rise of mass politics. Indeed, this is what eventually happened in Italy. Alas for Machiavelli, he was 350 years ahead of his time.

JOHN LANGTON

Westminster College

Perhaps, as Garret Mattingly once remarked, the puzzle of Machiavelli's Prince "has taken up more time and energy than it deserves" (Plumb 1961, 190). Nevertheless, Machiavelli remains a theorist ripe for controversy, and The Prince continues to fascinate and invite competing interpretations. In response to my interpretation of The Prince as an act of political deception whose advice is intended to trap and destroy Lorenzo de Medici, John Langton resurrects the staple view of the nineteenth century. The Prince, he states, is a cry for national self-determination, and Machiavelli himself is an Italian nationalist, rather than an ardent republican. His familiar interpretation rests upon two general claims: first, that The Prince is a sincere and straightforward "handbook on realpolitik," written in a "rigorous, bureaucratic, ‘issues-and-options’ style," and second, that Machiavelli intended the "heroic politics" of the (nationalist) prince would give way (under Machiavelli’s guidance) to the republican politics of the Discourses.

Since I addressed the second argument at some length in my article and since nothing new has been added to it by Langton, I will not reiterate my criticism of the "from-heroic-to-mass-politics" view here. Suffice it to say that I still find unconvincing the notion that Machiavelli believed that a Medici prince, once secure, would selflessly endow his regime with republican ordini, thereby hastening his own political demise. Langton's first claim, however—that The Prince contains honest nationalist advice—challenges my interpretation more directly. Let me turn to our particular disagreements over Machiavelli’s "advice," after resituating the general problem historically.

Florentine Republicanism

At the center of my interpretation of The Prince as an act of political deception stand two key arguments: a historical one, that Florentine republicanism was a living reality when Machiavelli wrote his treatise, and a biographical one, that Machiavelli remained a republican not just from 1498 to 1512 but throughout his life. The latter argument gives him the impetus to plot against the Medici autocrat; the former gives him reason to
believe that the political environment would be hospitable to an overthrow if only the conditions to hasten such an event were in place. Langton casts doubt on both of these arguments by contending that after 1512 Florence was hardly a "hotbed of republicanism" and perhaps not accurately viewed as a city deeply rooted in republican traditions at all. Furthermore, Machiavelli himself "did not think that the old republic was worth restoring"; instead, he thought Florence would be better served by an absolute ruler who would "reorganize, reform, and revitalize" it in order to unify Italy. Thus, on two counts—for the city and for Machiavelli himself—republicanism becomes a dead letter, and "nationalism" rises in its stead.

These are indeed bold claims. As Langton notes, by questioning the republican tradition in Florence and Machiavelli's political preferences, he challenges the very context upon which my interpretation depends. But is he correct?

As we know from the discoveries of a generation of scholars, from Hans Baron and J. R. Hale, to Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock, Florentine thinkers in the fifteenth century developed a political theory celebrating the republican ideals of liberty, civic equality, and an arms-bearing citizenry (Baron 1961; Hale 1977; Pocock 1975; Skinner 1978). At the very least then, Florence seems to have been a "hotbed" of republican ideas. Moreover, thanks to the labors of recent historians, we know that Florence was also a city of strong civic republican practices—of "substantial and lasting" opposition to the Medici stretching back to their first regime in 1434, and of constitutionalist traditions espousing equality before the law, elections by lot, and freedom of speech (Brucker 1969; Hale 1977; Najemy 1982; Rubinstein 1968; Schevill 1936).

Langton comments upon none of this previous scholarship (not even to reject it). What he does declare is that "the actual history of Florence after the fall of the republic fully confirms" that the Florentines were disinclined to attempt to regain their liberty. But to what "actual history" does he refer? The newly restored republic of 1527 may indeed have been "weak and short lived," but it was nevertheless born of a popular rebellion against the Medici lords, fully in keeping with a tradition of republican fervor and citizen opposition between 1434 and 1458 and again in 1466, 1478, and 1494, the year of Piero de Medici's overthrow. Hale, Rubinstein, and Schevill ably trace the story of popular unrest in the city after the return of Lorenzo. And if the Florentine propensity to revolt requires any further confirmation, we also have Machiavelli's own words. In advising Pope Leo X on "reforming" Florence, Machiavelli emphasizes the volatility of the city after 1512, warning that

the whole general mass of Citizens . . . are never satisfied—and whoever believes otherwise is not wise—unless you restore, or promise to restore to them their Authority . . .

The general mass of Florentine Citizens will never be satisfied except the (Council) Chamber be reopened. . . . Therefore it is the better proceeding that You open it with secure methods and means, and that You take away from whoever was your enemy, the opportunity to reopen it against your will and with the destruction and ruin of your friends. (quoted in Pansini 1969, 635)

The picture Machiavelli paints for Pope Leo reveals a citizenry that cannot cast aside the memory of its ancient liberty. It does not portray, as Langton would have it, a populace immune to the promise of a republic and incapable of reclaiming its republican traditions. What Langton asserts, then, simply flies in the face of historical, textual, and political evidence.

Langton also emphasizes, and with reason, the critical attitude Machiavelli adopted toward his native city as well as his frequent attacks upon its factionalism, its political corruption, and its failure to achieve a stable government akin to the
one he so admired in ancient Republican Rome and envied in Venice. Certainly no one, least of all Machiavelli, ever claimed that Florence was the pristine image of republicanism; the city was at best characterized by constant fluctuations between autocratic and republican rule. But do Machiavelli's realist appraisals mean, as Langton claims, that he had no interest in restoring the republic and instead welcomed the arrival of a state-building prince? I find no evidence of it.

In the first place, Machiavelli's criticism may be taken at face value—as evidence of his refusal to bow to idealistic visions and his awareness of what the Florentines were up against with regard to their political survival. Without question, as he acknowledges in his History of Florence and in reference to the Pazzi conspiracy, there were times in which "liberty was unknown" in Florence. The period of 1478—when the Medicean reaction against the republican revival of 1466 was in full swing—was certainly one such period. Likewise, Machiavelli was, without question, worried about the (in)ability of those cities "born in servitude" to effect successful republican regimes. But nowhere—including in the passage Langton takes as evidence of Machiavelli's disdain for republicanism in Florence—does he say that Florence would be better off governed by an absolute prince with nationalist aspirations. As Hale has observed, neither Machiavelli nor his contemporaries were asking themselves, "Should Florence be governed by a republican constitution or by an absolute prince?" Rather, Machiavelli's concern was with the question, "What qualities should our republic show the outside world, and how can our sick state have its vital tone restored?" (Hale 1961, 181). Thus, Machiavelli does not think, pace Langton, that once destroyed, a republic is best not recovered but rather that once destroyed (or overthrown), a republic faces its greatest difficulty and politics its most important challenge—the restoration of its liberty and civic virtù.

As he writes of Rome in the Discourses, "in a great republic there are constantly evils occurring requiring remedies which must be efficacious in proportion to the importance of the occasion" (1950, 538). Much the same could be said of Florence, a far less glorious republic to be sure, but a republic nonetheless and in need of "efficacious remedies" to restore it to health. This is the issue that Machiavelli, as political theorist, political actor, and Florentine patriot, faces head on with historical creativity in the Discourses, with detailed advice about the restoration of republican ordini in "Reforming the State of Florence," and with craft and cunning in The Prince.

**Pitfalls in The Prince**

The force of Langton's criticism turns upon a general thesis about Machiavelli and Florentine republicanism that lacks biographical, historical, and textual support. I will return to this in closing. But now, what of his specific counters to the "pitfalls" I uncover in The Prince, especially regarding the Medici residence, the civilian militia, and the building of fortresses? I am afraid that none of Langton's counters succeed, much less do they require abandoning an interpretation of Machiavelli's pieces of advice as traps for the Medici prince.

On the issue of residence, Machiavelli advises Lorenzo either to destroy the city or reside in it. The first choice, far from leading away from the "pitfall," actually draws the prince toward it. The destruction of Florence, as Machiavelli knows, is an outrageous suggestion and a practical impossibility. It renders the truly dangerous second choice—residing in the city—as the only attractive alternative. Thus, Machiavelli would give Lorenzo the illusion of choice even as he narrows the
prince's range of possibilities. This is how Machiavelli usually conceives of the complex world of choices and deceptions; consider also Ligurio's ploys in Mandragola, where he often plays an outrageous choice off against one that seems reasonable to old Nicia but one which will actually compromise him.

As to the danger of residing in the city, we might recall that the history of republican upheavals in Florence was in part one of the people's taking and retaking the Palazzo Medici, which was vulnerable to mass action in a way the Medici villas in the Tuscan hills were not. Perhaps Machiavelli fondly remembered the ouster of Piero in 1494, when a vengeful Florentine populace drove the family from the palazzo, dragged Donatello's Judith from the family gardens, and set it up before the palace of the Signoria with a new inscription warning would-be tyrants and praising civic liberty. Such an event—of practical political as well as symbolic importance—could not have occurred had the Medici prince been fortified beyond the city walls. As Machiavelli understood, to oust a prince a people must have not only the spirit but also the opportunity to get at him.

The matter of Machiavelli's advice concerning "whom to arm" is even more important. I argue that in advising Lorenzo in chapter 20 to "keep his subjects armed" and make "partisans" of them, Machiavelli sets still another trap. He lays the groundwork for a new Florentine civilian militia that could contribute mightily to the destruction of the Medici regime. To convince Lorenzo that new princes regularly arm their subjects, Machiavelli appeals to history but he (uncharacteristically) offers no historical examples at all to illustrate the aptness of his advice. Thus, he presents the warrant of history to Lorenzo, but the warrant is in fact a sham, for the advisor knows that the practice he describes as routine for new princes is rare.

Langton, however, claims that Machiavelli offers at least two examples (in chaps. 5 and 21) of new princes who armed their subjects. In Cesare Borgia and Ferdinand of Spain, Machiavelli allegedly provides models whom Lorenzo can use for the course of action outlined in chapter 20. Leaving aside the obvious question—if Borgia and Ferdinand were such good examples, why did Machiavelli not mention them in Chapter 207—let us turn instead to a more vital question: are Borgia and Ferdinand, in fact, examples of new princes who "always had their subjects armed?" On this score, I would suggest that it is Langton who advances the "careless reading." His misreading hinges on what should be the obvious difference between a "civilian militia" of the kind Machiavelli recommends to Lorenzo, and a "private army" or "national troops" which he credits Borgia and Ferdinand, respectively, with establishing. To put this otherwise, Machiavelli surely appreciates that in the Romagna (the greatest source of mercenaries) Borgia relies upon "his own men" and that in Spain Ferdinand taxed the people to build up his military might. As a result, neither was beholden to foreign soldiers. But nowhere does Machiavelli equate their actions with the creation of an arms-bearing citizenry. And it is the latter that he counsels Lorenzo to create in chapter 20, when in essence he advises the rearming of a formerly republican city. Thus, the examples of Borgia and Ferdinand are neither apt nor relevant in this context. In fact, the example of Borgia could be counterproductive, so Machiavelli does not mention him, just as he does not mention il Magnifico, Lorenzo's grandfather, who disarmed the Florentines and was the most successful of all the Medici lords.

These examples are important. Nevertheless, I think that by seizing upon them, Langton ultimately dodges the most important question of all. Regardless of whether Borgia or Ferdinand fit the bill, is
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Machiavelli’s advice on arming one’s subjects helpful counsel for a Medici in Florence? Langton himself concedes that “creating and maintaining a civilian militia poses risks to a prince’s regime.” Precisely so! But in admitting as much he simply begs the crucial question; he does not resolve it, nor does he persuasively challenge the contextual and historical evidence I present in order to reveal Machiavelli’s deception.

To counter my interpretation of Machiavelli’s advice on fortresses, Langton turns to the Discourses, and notes that there, too, Machiavelli is chary of fortress building and urges that the prince rely instead upon the good will of his subjects. He seems to imply that on matters where there is no contradiction between The Prince and Machiavelli’s other writings (especially the Discourses) there must be no deception at work in The Prince. I see no reason to accept such an interpretation, unless one assumes (as I do not) that everything Machiavelli expresses elsewhere can be read as the “truths” that expose the “lies” of The Prince. If, however, this is Langton’s presumption, he needs to be more consistent in his application of it, and acknowledge not only those passages that seem to point to a sameness in Machiavelli’s advice, but also account for those passages where striking contradictions appear. He makes no attempt, for example, to explain the advice against fortress building in The Prince in terms of Machiavelli’s letter to Guicciardini, where Machiavelli equates the successful Medicean conquest of Florence precisely with the building of a fortezza. Nor—to take another example of importance in my essay but unacknowledged by Langton—does he confront the counsel against liberality in The Prince with Machiavelli’s treatment of it in the History of Florence as a valuable Medicean tactic to maintain power. Nor does Langton try to explain how Machiavelli’s dictate to Lorenzo to “build upon the people” and be wary of the nobility squares with his straightforward comment to Pope Leo that a prince in Florence “despoiled of Nobility cannot sustain the burden of the Principality,” and thus must create a “middle group” between himself and the general public (Pansini 1969, 620). By simply asserting that the latter is a “strained interpretation,” Langton again sidesteps the intriguing and difficult issues. He certainly offers no explanation for them.

Pitfalls aside, Langton’s interpretation fails finally to confront the methodological premise behind my reading of The Prince—that genuinely historical study is the indispensable precondition for interpreting political texts of the past. Other than a few (unsubstantiated) assertions about Florentine republicanism, Langton offers no historical reading of Machiavelli’s treatise and uses descriptions the author could not in principle have accepted as his. So, for example, we are given the nineteenth-century language of “nationalist aspirations” or the twentieth-century conception of a “viable geopolitical entity.” Furthermore, Langton would have us accept an ahistorical description of The Prince and the Discourses as works of political literature. As noted, he describes the former as written in a “bureaucratic ‘issues-and-options’ style,” and rhetorically he asks why, if my interpretation is correct, did Machiavelli not simply write a “short, snappy, meretricious memorandum?” But these are anachronisms. The bureaucratic memorandum and the “white paper” were not literary options in the fifteenth century, and within the existing genre of the Mirror of Princes tracts The Prince is remarkably short and snappy.

In his conclusion, Langton shifts from an ahistorical to a suprahistorical interpretation of Machiavelli’s intentions. He praises the Florentine republican for having the prescience to anticipate nothing less than “the political evolution” of Europe down through the nineteenth cen-
tury. Among its lesser faults, this credits Machiavelli with a vision of political creation as a linear progress, a view he did not hold nor could have held. To the contrary, his own clearly expressed vision of the cyclical movement of glory, decay, and regeneration, or *anacyclosis*, has more to do with the *revolution* of order and disorder than with the *evolution* of “mass” from “absolutist” politics (D’Amico 1984, 132). Even more troubling, however, is Langton’s evident willingness to subscribe to an overly simplified view of European history—only to reconstitute Machiavelli’s contribution both to it and to political thought more generally as a grand moment in the telos of the modern nation-state. Writing history backwards, Langton would have us understand Machiavelli as “350 years ahead of his time”! Commentators may well take issue with this or that interpretation of *The Prince*, including the “politics of deception” I find there. But I would like to suggest that we can make headway in our controversies over the meaning of Machiavelli’s little treatise only if we return it to the period in which it was written and examine Machiavelli’s intentions within his own time, not ahead of it.

MARY G. DIETZ

*University of Minnesota*

**References**


