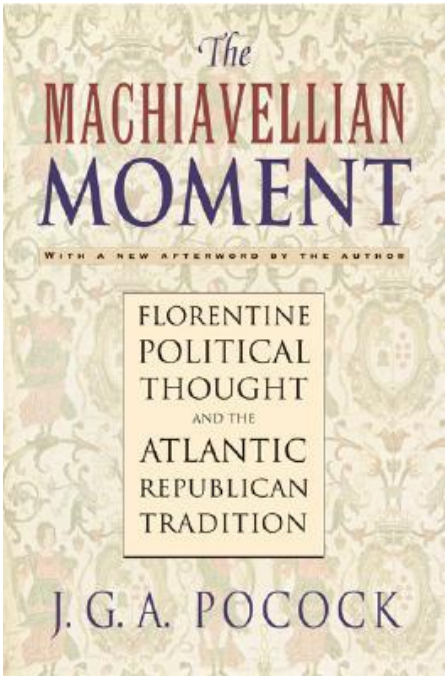

The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition

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The Machiavellian Moment is a classic study of the consequences for modern historical and social consciousness of the ideal of the classical republic revived by Machiavelli and other thinkers of Renaissance Italy. J.G.A. Pocock suggests that Machiavelli's prime emphasis was on the moment in which the republic confronts the problem of its own instability in time, and which he calls the "Machiavellian moment."

After examining this problem in the thought of Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and Giannotti, Pocock turns to the revival of republican thought in Puritan England and in Revolutionary and Federalist America. He argues that the American Revolution can be considered the last great act of civic humanism of the Renaissance. He relates the origins of modern historicism to the clash between civic, Christian, and commercial values in the thought of the eighteenth century.

The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition Details

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From Reader Review The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition for online ebook

Khitkhite Buri says

I know too much about how disputed this is now, and it's ridiculously blind about its own conservatism. Draws a tradition. Forgets property. Forgets Locke etc. But the first part of the book was goo-ood.

Peter Caron says

This is not an easy book to read. but if you are interested in the transformation of civic responsibility and Republican theory then this is a classic. The chapters on the English and American civil war and Revolution respectively are dated though there afterword addresses this to a certain extent. I did get a better understanding and appreciation for Machiavelli after reading this.

Bradley says

I must say that after reading The Machiavellian Moment I better understand Gibbon (and why Mr. P. is so obsessed with him now) and my vision of American politics is all the more acute. J. H. Hexter and Caroline Robbins et al. declared the book full of "jargon," yet the conceptual language is as useful as the language he attempts to demonstrate at work in the writings of Machiavelli, Guicciardini, King Charles I and his counselors (yeah, that's right), Harrington, Defoe, Davenant, on down to Hamilton and Jefferson.

Despite my admiration for what this Kiwi hath wrought, I will say at times the "Machiavellism" seemed a little strained, more gimmick than apt description. Yet, this results from a misapprehension of what Pocock is really about. Languages rather than discrete ideas are at work here. Language after the fashion of Joan Scott: a symbolic system of conveying meaning. The dichotomy of virtue and fortune, articulated for medieval consumption by Boethius, is inflected through successive centuries of discourse whilst retaining its fundamental character as a clash between man's desire to rule himself and the irrational stream of events that roars and threatens to destroy his fragile creation, the republic. It's not that a concept became hegemonic, but that a language persisted and was used sometimes to express notions quite different than what we might term republican. The Court and the Country spoke in roughly the same language, but drew different conclusions.

The problem is perhaps that Pocock had no idea of "discourse" available to him in 1975 and I am judging him in a context alien to his work. His method was informed by Kuhn's paradigms which explains why so many seemingly unrelated concepts e.g. apocalypse and grace could appear in a treatment of republican thinking. These were models available in the republican paradigm as a collection, or in a favorite term of his, a "constellation" of concepts.

Jonathan says

Were I placed in charge of the administration of purgatory, I would institute a rule for the purification of

scholars: they must revise their entire published *oeuvre* and resubmit it as a brochure.

After all, that's pretty much what they make us students do. Here is my first, informal attempt to do that for J.G.A. Pocock.

The Machiavellian Moment argues that a distinct thread of political thought ran from medieval Florence through Stuart and Hanoverian England to nineteenth-century America. This thread, which we may call "civic republicanism," emerged in Italy as the Renaissance humanists (a) revived knowledge of classical civilization and (b) realized that societies are located in time and thus are subject to change. As a result of this awakening, the humanists theorized that individuals must take up active civic life -- must exercise civic *virtue* -- in order to take charge of the course of history and prevent the decay of their state.

The key thinker in this Italian milieu was Niccolò Machiavelli, who went further than anyone else in secularizing politics by recognizing the destructive power of *fortune* in human history. Because fortune was so powerful (and God suddenly so absent), Machiavelli's conception of *virtù* called for a new degree of assertiveness on the part of citizens. At an extreme -- that moment when the polis broke down entirely under the strain of fortune -- *virtù* could take the form of audacity exercised by Machiavelli's infamous Prince. At all times, however, it was inextricably linked with the good of the state. "Private virtue" would be a contradiction in terms according to republican thought.

Other Italians such as Francesco Guicciardini emphasized aspects of classical politics that called for "prudence" and "mixed government." Government by a combination of different orders, they argued, was necessary in order to balance the distinctive virtues and wisdom of different segments of society.

In seventeenth-century England, republicanism got off to an odd start. It emerged in politics when the traditional English combination of activist conservatism (based on customary liberties and political consultation) and apocalyptic religious nationalism (stemming from the Reformation) finally broke down under the weight of the monarch's obstinacy. The people had to take over as citizens in order to achieve their transcendent ideals in real time. However, the English remained relatively conservative, and their actual republic did not last long. They did, however, produce a new republican theorist, James Harrington, who Anglicized the thought of Machiavelli.

Harrington connected, more tightly than anyone before had, the bearing of arms and the ownership of land. The citizen, in Machiavellian thought, had to bear arms to defend the state; for Harrington, then, property ownership was a fundamental characteristic of the citizen. But patterns of land ownership and arms-bearing were changing, as the next generation of English republicans -- the "neo-Harringtonians" -- pointed out. A nation of "armed proprietors" no longer existed in either the Commons or the Lords. Britain was becoming a global power with a professional military force, which it maintained through abstract credit and taxes on commerce rather than through real property. The threat of *corruption*, i.e., the loss of popular *virtue*, was extreme in such a situation. Now Machiavelli's fortune had a much clearer political face -- it was the face of the professional soldier, the stock-jobber, the banker, the MP dependent on someone else's money -- the corrupt man.

Debates over public corruption dominated eighteenth-century British politics. For the most part, however, the complexity of Britain's situation kept the political pot at a high simmer rather than a boil. But in the American colonies, the republicans had fewer distractions. In a supreme act of *virtù*, they withdrew from their corrupt empire and established a new polity for themselves. In their new nation, republican language dominated political debates well into the next century, if not beyond. Americans were, above all, concerned with maintaining a polity in which individuals would act as virtuous citizens.

In other words, the American founding was not a Lockean liberal enterprise. This is Pocock's key claim, really. Instead of trying to free themselves from coercion so that they could pursue their individual

happinesses -- the traditional view, probably -- the Americans were trying to free themselves from corruption so that they could collectively pursue the public happiness.

I have at least two big problems with Pocock's big book.

First, the choice of Machiavelli as the paradigmatic republican thinker still mystifies me. I've read Pocock and I've read Quentin Skinner, and this still doesn't make much sense. There were far too many alternative figures, even in Renaissance Italy, both before and after Machiavelli. The only solid reason I can see for the choice is that Machiavelli was a more secular thinker than his peers. This, however, is a tendentious rationale. Mainstream medieval Christian thought was far more conducive to republicanism than Pocock lets on. And religious thought has been conducive to republican experiments far too often to justify Pocock's identification of the republican with the secular.

Second, and relatedly, I object to the catholicity of Pocock's republicanism. At the end of this book, I was left with the impression that we can immediately identify as "republican" all of the following: apocalypticism or secularism; imperialism or anti-imperialism; agrarianism or modern political economy; classicism or aggressive innovation; submission to the public will or defiance of it; and aristocracy or egalitarianism. At the end of the book, the only British or American thinker since 1649 who *doesn't* seem to count as a "republican" is John Locke. I know enough about John Locke's actual politics to find this result suspect.

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mwr says

If you think this is ponderous you should read his now five volume 'biography' of edward gibbon.

Hadrian says

The Machiavellian Moment remains a magisterial accomplishment in the history of political theory. This grand scale of this volume encompasses several major points in theory, and it would be impossible for me to summarize the finer points of analysis here. What I can do is draw up a list of the broader areas of discussion.

These are, in order:

-A history of the currents of political philosophy from Aristotle to the mid-1400s, with some treatments on the mixture of religious thinking in political thought as shown by Fortescue in England and the cyclical view of history developed by Polybius;
-A history of the revolutions in political thinking which enveloped Florence in the late 1400s and early 1500s which center around Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Contarini and Giannotti and the use of Rome and Venice as models for a republic;
-How these theorists of republics gained traction in England in the mid 1600s during the course of their Glorious Revolution, Civil War and the various upheavals which challenged the power of the monarchy;
-The history of English Republicanism from its first theorists (Harrington) up to the grand American experiment, with the republic now instituted on a large scale. Here, the theorists of republic become its

practitioners (Adams, Jefferson, Madison). They retooled the old ideas of classical republicanism (with the failed version of the Articles of Confederation) and moved towards the Constitution as we know it today.

The 'Machiavellian Moment' of the title is a 'paradigm shift' in political theory. Machiavelli's political theory was a move away from the impersonal forces of *fortuna* and a move towards individual agency and ability (or *virtu*). His world was the first conception of the secular, and thus laid the groundwork for the new idea of republics by establishing a civic culture.

Pocock's approach is a peculiar one, which combines aspects of both philosophy and history. His 'history' traces the development not only of individual ideas, but of the usage of certain terms and ideas, and how they connect to other ideas. It reads these ideas from a largely modern perspective, although it grants some credence to their historical context. Each paragraph interlocks with its neighbors, granting the text an unusual degree of analytic depth.

The book is broad enough in its claims that specialists will invariably find some problems. Historians of American political thought will balk at the omission of John Locke. Still, I found this book to be a challenging and rewarding look at the historical background of political philosophy.

Karl Georg says

Covers a certain thread of political thought (Man as zoon politicon; people doing politics in the polis, virtuously interacting, but always endangered by corruption; the whole thing tracing back to Aristotle and beyond) from it's (re-)emergence in the Renaissance, to how it re-surfaced in England in the 17th century, and finally contributed to shaping the constitution of the U.S.

I learned a lot, but a tough read!

Leonardo says

Historiadores contemporáneos, como J. G. A. Pocock, que enlazan el desarrollo de la Constitución de Estados Unidos y su noción de soberanía política con la tradición Maquiavélica, recorren un largo camino para comprender esta desviación del concepto de soberanía moderna.

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