

Machiavelli's Thoughts on Venice

KEVIN SLACK

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I have never known a professor more revered and beloved than Dr. Leo Paul de Alvarez. To us graduate students, he was the quintessence of ancient wisdom. This was often a source of inside jokes. When de Alvarez said "Hello, little kitty" to Rich Dougherty's self-sufficient cat at the Christmas Party, we knew that he both had knowledge of and communed with the cosmos—confirmed by the rumor that, after each class, de Alvarez stopped to pat the tree outside Braniff. Michael Harding often noted that de Alvarez relished giving one-liners (not without bits of truth) that students gobbled up with utter seriousness: "When someone asks me, 'What's new?' I tell them, 'The Incarnation'"; "Soccer is against nature because it forbids the use of one's hands." His words of wisdom were repeated and debated over \$2.50 Shiners at the Spirit Grille. We considered breaking into his office to steal his unpublished class notes, but suspected that a steel cage would drop from the ceiling. Every de Alvarez class was a symphony, meant to temper the student with logical argument—to make the activity of reasoning beautiful, even if one did not understand what was being argued. We tried to imitate de Alvarez—his love of wisdom, clarity of thought, precision in speech, and tranquil manner. And perhaps, because of his teaching, we have comprehended some things as he intended. From 2002–2006, I took, audited, or sat in all of his classes. At the beginning of each semester we rushed to see what comments he had put on our papers from the previous semester. Several times he had to look for them, but we never let him forget. In the spring of 2004 I clustered into tiny Braniff 202 with the other graduate students to hear de Alvarez's thoughts on Machiavelli. At the end of the semester, from a sincere desire not to miss a single lecture, I requested that we not have an in-class final. He granted that request and gave us a take-home final instead. After receiving our Machiavelli papers, Joe Postell and I hurried to Braniff 203 to search

KEVIN SLACK is an Associate Professor of Politics at Hillsdale College where he teaches courses on 20th and 21st century political thought, the American founding, late modern political philosophy, and American foreign policy. He received a B.A. in History from Indiana University, an M.A. in Political Science from the University of California-Davis, and an M.A. and PhD. in Political Science from the University of Dallas. Dr. Slack has written a book titled *Benjamin Franklin, Natural Right, and the Art of Virtue*.

for comments. My discouragement at not finding many remarks was replaced by elation when I found, handwritten at the end of the paper, the note, "You should consider publishing this paper." With some minor changes, that paper is printed here below.



In classical political thought, the city's end is self-sufficiency. As Aristotle writes, if "the middling sort of life is best," then "the political partnership that depends on the middling sort is best as well" (*POL* 1295a37; 1295b35).¹ But Machiavelli uses the city of Venice as a foil for the Aristotelian best regime in order to teach his readers the impossibility of the "middle way," or political self-sufficiency (*D* I.6.4).² In this essay, we will see Venice's relationship to nature, its internal order, and its foreign affairs. It is Venice's bad orders that bring about its ruin, completing Machiavelli's lesson.

VENICE AS ARISTOTLE'S BEST REGIME

We are first led to believe that Venice is Aristotle's best regime by Machiavelli's presentation of Sparta and Venice as the two alternatives to Rome. Writing that Sparta had one king, when it actually had two, Machiavelli suggests that Sparta is more than the historical Sparta, and we conclude, by comparing the Venetian political order to Aristotle's best regime, that Venice is more than the historical Venice: Sparta and Venice represent the classical ideal regimes.³ In Aristotle's teaching on political association, human beings come together because of a natural impulse; the

¹ Aristotle, *The Politics* (hereafter *POL*), tr. Carnes Lord (The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (hereafter *D*), tr. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³ Machiavelli, *D* I.6.1: "Sparta made a king, with a small Senate, who governed it." Sparta represents the universal kinship, which is based entirely upon nature; the king governs, and not the laws (*POL* 1285b35), just as the Just City in Plato's *Republic* is ruled not by law, but by the naturally superior king and his guardians. On other contemporary writers that compared Venice to the ancient ideal regime, whether mixed or aristocratic, see Felix Gilbert, "The Venetian Constitution in Florentine Political Thought," *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 468; Poggio Bracciolini, "In Praise of the Venetian Republic," *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts, Volume 2: Political Philosophy*, ed. Jill Kraye, tr. John Monfasani (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 136. For Machiavelli, the failure of Sparta and Athens, which he compares to Venice (*D* I.1.2), marks the failure of the polis and the necessary turn to empire.

city is created by human art, and it is founded out of love.⁴ Venice celebrated its own founder, St. Mark, as it acquired the reputation of the ideal republican city in the fifteenth century. In a "return to [its ancient] beginnings," the "figure of the patron saint . . . merged with that of the lawgiver."⁵ In the preface to his translation of Plato's *Laws*, George of Trebizond claimed that, as the "men of the higher nobility" who founded Venice "read and understood Plato," Plato was its true lawgiver.⁶

While the virtue of the city is educated by its laws, its location is a matter of fortune. The free way of life is a life of virtue, not bound by necessity, and therefore the city that is blessed with a good location is a city one would pray for (*POL* 1325b37). According to Aristotle, "It is clear that everyone would praise the territory that is the most self-sufficient. That which bears every sort of thing is of necessity such, for self-sufficiency is having everything available and being in need of nothing" (*POL* 1326b28). Venice has such a location, with access to land and sea. Cassiodorus, prefect under the Ostrogoth king Theodoric, describes Venice's relationship with the sea in 523:

Venice on the south touches Ravenna and the Po; on the east it enjoys the prospect of the Ionian shore, where the tide in its flow and in its ebb alternately veils and uncovers the face of Nature. Here you live like seabirds. Your houses are like the Cyclades, scattered over a watery expanse. To the waves of the ocean you do not hesitate to oppose a frail barrier of dykes, flanked by fascines of interlaced vine-stems. Your population knows but one means of subsistence—its fisheries. There the poor man and his rich neighbour live in equality. One kind of nutriment is common to all: one kind of dwelling shelters all.⁷

The city upon the water harmonizes the two elements of water and earth. While its location by the sea poses dangers to the self-sufficient life, the prudent legislator can overcome these obstacles, and "it is better both with

⁴ Aristotle, *POL* 1253a29, 1278b15–30.

⁵ Gilbert, "The Venetian Constitution," 465; on St. Mark and Venice's founding, see John Julius Norwich, *A History of Venice* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 28–36.

⁶ George of Trebizond, "Preface to His Translation of Plato's *Laws*," *Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, 129–30.

⁷ W. Carew Hazlitt, *The Venetian Republic: Its Rise, its Growth, and its Fall, 421–1797*, 2 vols. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1900), 1:11, adding, "You do not quarrel about your Penates."

a view to safety and with a view to having a ready supply of necessary things for the city and the territory to have a share of the sea" (*POL* 1327a18). Trade supplies it with material necessities, and it is a more formidable military opponent, for it can fight on both water and land (*POL* 1327a25, 41).

Situated in the perfect natural environment, the city by the sea is best if it is ordered toward self-sufficiency. Aristotle teaches, "The city is not a partnership in a location and for the sake of not committing injustice against each other and of transacting business . . . but [the city is] the partnership in living well both of households and families for the sake of a complete and self-sufficient life" (*POL* 1280b30). The self-sufficient city is built upon goodwill, or "like-mindedness" (*NE* 1155a22; 1167b3).⁸ If the self-sufficient life is a life in accordance with virtue, which is a sort of mean, then the middling regime that is concerned with virtue is best, for it obeys reason (*POL* 1295a35, 1280b6, 1295b3). "Joined together often in councils to decide about the city," Machiavelli writes, Venetian law decided citizenship and rule with a view to what "would be sufficient for a political way of life" (*D I.6.1*). The Venetian partnership transcends the low, or self-preservation, and aspires to goodwill.

The enemy of like-mindedness is faction, which is caused by the presence of the rich and the poor.⁹ The rich have contempt for the poor, and the poor envy the rich, while those who are equal are not envious of one another (*NE* 1167b13; *POL* 1295b21, 30, a6). The source of faction is a disproportion that divides the city, and the regime that consists of a large middling element escapes this disproportion, providing for greater stability (*POL* 1296a7–13, 1302a13). Where there are divisions or an insufficient amount of goods, tyranny arises from oligarchy or democracy, "Thus it is the greatest good fortune for those who are engaged in politics to have a middling and sufficient property" (*POL* 1295b39). Like the best regime, Venice's constitution orders and maintains this proportion.¹⁰ It establishes a body of lawmakers, which always remains in the hands of

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *NE*), tr. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002).

⁹ Aristotle, *POL* 1301a38, cf. Plato, *The Republic*, tr. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 545d.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *POL* 1302b39; Machiavelli, *D I.55.6*: "Thus he constitutes a republic where a great equality exists or has been made, and on the contrary orders a principality where there is great inequality; otherwise he will produce a thing without proportion and hardly lasting."

the nobility, to deliberate on the common advantage. Machiavelli writes, "Venice did not divide the government by names, but under one appellation all those who can hold administration are called gentleman" (*D I.6.1*):

This mode [of rule by a few] could arise and be maintained without tumult because when it arose whoever then inhabited Venice was put in the government, so that nobody could complain; those who came later to inhabit it, finding the state steady and closed off, had neither cause nor occasion to make a tumult. The cause was not there because nothing had been taken from them; the occasion was not there because whoever ruled held them in check and did not put them to work in things in which they could seize authority.

Contemporary writers called Venice an aristocracy.¹¹ Poggio Bracciolini wrote, "As Aristotle says, there are various sorts of constitution, of which two in particular stand out from the rest, namely monarchy and aristocracy, or what we call government by the best . . . Such a constitution . . . has only ever been found in Venice."¹² Francesco Negri and Marco Antonio Sabellico praised Venice for its ideal government, an aristocracy, whose "eternal harmony enabled it to withstand all the attacks of impetuous fortune."¹³

A center of trade tends to accumulate a large population of foreigners. Overpopulation endangers self-sufficiency because the city can become too large for the political way of life (*POL 1326b8*). Aristotle teaches that "there is a certain measure of size in a city"; if the population of a city grows too large, it will lose its proportion and be "wholly robbed of its nature" (*POL 1326a35–40*; cf. Plato, *Republic*, 423b). To maintain a political partnership and preserve its character, as well as to prevent faction and overpopulation, Venetian law limited the number of citizens and closed off participation in rule to newcomers. Machiavelli writes:

¹¹ Gilbert, "The Venetian Constitution," 468–72; Pier Paolo Vergerio, "The Venetian Republic," tr. Ronald G. Witt, in *Cambridge Translations*, 118: "The Venetian Republic is ruled by a government composed of the best men, the type of regime that the Greeks call an 'aristocracy.'"

¹² Bracciolini, "In Praise of the Venetian Republic," 136.

¹³ Gilbert, "The Venetian Constitution," 471n3, 471n5.

When it appeared to [the Venetians] that there were as many as would be sufficient for a political way of life, they closed to all others who might come newly to inhabit there the way enabling them to join in the government. . . . Those who came later to inhabit Venice were not many, nor of such number that there was a disproportion between whoever governed them and those who were governed; for the number of gentleman is either equal or superior to them (*D I.6.1*).

Venice's foreign relations, based upon alliances, trade, and financial power, remind us of Plato's just city. A moderate city is well defended, yet it is not to be feared or worth the cost of invasion. Plato suggests that a unified city uses money as a weapon in foreign affairs, exploiting the divisions that weaken other cities.¹⁴

The city by the sea must be ordered so that its end is not commercialism (*POL 1327a27*). A multitude of merchants cannot be governed, and the commercial end is not a human end (*POL 1257a1–5*). But even if the city does possess a center of commerce, Aristotle writes that separate ports, which can be home to merchants or sailors, are valuable because they can be sectioned off with walls—the “seafaring mass. . . should be no part of the city” (*POL 1327b7*). “Anything harmful can be guarded against easily by means of laws that stipulate and define which sorts of persons should and which should not have dealings with one another” (*POL 1327a37*). Venetian law accordingly prevents the baser sorts of persons from ruling by placing authority into the hands of the nobles.

Venice educates ambitious men according to the classical model. It instructs them and channels their desires according to the natural end of the city and man. These nobles, writes Machiavelli, are the “guard for freedom”:

For those who have prudently constituted a republic, among the most necessary things ordered by them has been to constitute a guard for freedom, and according as this is well placed, that free way of life lasts more or less. Because in every republic there are great and popular men, it has been doubted in which hands it is better to place the said guard.

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 423a.

With the Lacedemonians, and in our times with the Venetians, it has been put in the hands of the nobles (*D I.5.1*).

Political power satisfies the nobles' ambition and prevents them from being reduced to a "certain desperation" (*D I.5.2*). It also puts an end to the divisions, or "infinite dissensions and scandals," of the plebs. Venice is ruled by gentlemen who receive honor for ruling, and their education frees them from the desires of the many. According to Aristotle:

... [T]he nature of desire is without limit, and it is with a view to satisfying this that the many live. To rule such persons, then, [requires] not so much leveling property as providing that those who are respectable by nature will be the sort who have no wish to aggrandize themselves, while the mean will not be able to, which will be the case if they are kept inferior but are done no injustice (*POL 1267b3–8*).

Yet the gentlemen of Venice are also a middling element, not an aristocratic class that rules from a castle: "But that name of gentlemen among them is a name of dignity and reputation, without being founded upon any of those things that make them be called gentlemen in other cities" (*D I.55.6*).

Machiavelli presents us with a Venice that employs two of the three Aristotelian remedies for injustice (*POL 1267a3–15*). Freed from necessity, the Venetians are materially and financially well off. There is enjoyment beyond the necessary, such as properly channeled honor in place of domination. The desire for pleasure unaccompanied by pain is to be found in the life of leisure; however, we read nothing of philosophy in Venice. Machiavelli only tells us that the Venetian gentlemen are not men of leisure because they are not agrarian (*D I.55.6*)—a significant omission, as we will see.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE SELF-SUFFICIENT REGIME

Machiavelli, then, presents Venice as Aristotle's best regime, and he uses Venice to demonstrate its impossibility. Venice attempts to order itself toward self-sufficiency, the life of liberty and independence from other states.¹⁵ But in contrast to Aristotle's political association, Machiavelli's Venice arises out of fear of the state of nature. It is founded with the

¹⁵ Gilbert, "The Venetian Constitution," 466.

“coming of new barbarians after the decline of the Roman Empire” (*D* I.1.2). The inhabitants of Italy flee in “terror” from the Huns into the swamps around Rialto (*FH* 40).¹⁶ The political association itself is a product of chance, not nature. “In the beginning,” when population was sparse, men

... lived dispersed for a time like beasts; then, as generations multiplied, they gathered together, and to be able to defend themselves better, they began to look to whoever among them was more robust and of greater heart, and they made him a head, as it were, and obeyed him. From this arose the knowledge of things honest and good, differing from the pernicious and bad (*D* I.2.3).¹⁷

It is only when men are “constrained by necessity” and fight against nature for their own preservation that cities thrive (*FH* 41, *D* I.1.4). Venice was allowed to rise not because of its strong origins, but because of a vacuum of power, a deal made between Pepin, King of France, and the Greek emperor, that allowed the city to remain free (*FH* 41). Its founders were not noble—the nobility consisted of those who had arrived first (*D* I.6.1). Driven by the needs of “other men,” Venice turned to commerce (*FH* 41). It is through labor, and not by divine providence, that the disorders of nature may be compensated for by art and industry: “[Men] cleanse the earth by cultivation and purge the air with fires, things that nature could never provide. This is demonstrated by the city of Venice, put in a swampy and diseased place; nonetheless, the many inhabitants who gathered there at a stroke rendered it healthy” (*FH* 52–3).

Venice’s relation to the sea is important for understanding Machiavelli’s scheme of the cosmos. Fortune is the cause of Venice’s greatness. The Venetians, first driven into the inhospitable marshes, are protected by the sea from the harshness of necessity:

It turned out happily for them because of the long idleness that the site gave them, since the sea had no exit and the peoples who were afflicting

¹⁶ Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* (hereafter *FH*), tr. Laura F. Banfield and Harvey C. Mansfield (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

¹⁷ Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s New Modes and Orders* (The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 34–6, notes that Machiavelli rejects both the Christian teaching of divine origin and the ancients’ conception of nature—humans live “dispersed” and not “together” as Polybius says.

Italy had no ships to be able to plague them: so any small beginning would have enabled them to come to the greatness they have (*D I.1.2*).

In Aristotle's *Politics*, earth and water are part of a grand order. Venice, however, is a fluke, a pile of rubbish that emerges from the chaos of rivers. The islets are the product of a random geographic occurrence that provides a haven for the fearful Italian exiles. Venice is the *terra firma* that arises of chance, an island amidst flux. The Venetians respond to this flux by becoming formless. Accordingly, their laws also are the product of chance. "This mode was given it by chance more than by the prudence of him who gave them laws"; Venice's "longer life," it seems, may also be attributed to chance and not to excellent orders (*D I.6.1, 5.2*). Like the Athenians, the Venetians' relationship to the sea is characterized by their innovation. The Venetians prize youth, Machiavelli notes, and "always appoint the youngest to speak first in their councils and assemblies" (*AW III.5*).¹⁸ They build in harmony with nature, constructing dykes and dams that give them subsistence in the marsh. They develop superior ships and discover faster trade routes.

Importantly, this innovation is dependency for Machiavelli. The Venetians only respond to nature—they do not contend with her. They have neither foresight nor good orders. Venice is not the "defenses and embankments" that harness the river of fortune (*P 147*), but rather a buoy that floats above the surface of the water. Virtue is prudence that allows one to make good orders (*P 32*; cf. *AW II.313*), but the Venetians possessed great vice. Forgetting their beginnings, they made no orders to recreate necessity; they invested all of their arms at sea, not on land. This investment "cut off their legs for leaping into heaven and expanding" (*AW I.182*). Venice's reliance upon nature makes it idle and effeminate (*D I.6.4*). It studies nature rather than how to defeat her.

Machiavelli uses his example of Venice, which is "excellent among modern republics" (*D I.34.3*) to teach the impossibility of the middling regime, or self-sufficient city.¹⁹ Every state must either expand or decline:

¹⁸ Machiavelli, *The Art of War* (hereafter *AW*), tr. Christopher Lynch (The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Machiavelli, *FH 3*, lists Venice second in states after the pontiffs.

Without doubt I believe that if the thing could be held balanced in this mode, it would be the true political way of life and the true quiet of a city. But since all things of men are in motion and cannot stay steady, they must either rise or fall; and to many things that reason does not bring you, necessity brings you (*D I.6.4*).

Machiavelli lists the order of ancient colonial expansion “among the other great and marvelous orders of the ancient republics and principalities that in our times have been eliminated” (*FH 52*). He adds, “For no single thing is more worthy of an excellent prince and of a well-ordered republic, nor more useful to a province, than building new towns where men can settle for the convenience of defense or cultivation.” The population of the city is continually expanding and removing itself into conquered or uninhabited lands, rendering conquered countries more secure, and keeping the inhabitants of a province properly distributed. Security is then attained with expansion, both internally and externally. Disproportion in the city, such as massive urban populations, is the work of nature that must be remedied by human industry. Else, “one part becomes deserted from too few inhabitants, another part poor from too many” (*FH 52*). But among modern “princes there is no appetite for true glory and in republics no order that deserves to be praised” (*FH 53*). Therefore Venice expands commercially, for releasing the acquisitive element, through trade agreements rather than conquest, is the means of expansion for the regime ordered to self-sufficiency.²⁰

However, financial expansion can never be isolated from territorial expansion, for at the heart of the division of man is an unequal distribution of nature, over which men will fight. What the Venetians consider the free life is really moved by their “ambition” and “lust for domination” (*P 16, FH 41*). Accordingly, a powerful navy accompanied Venice’s commercial success—the Venetians “acted securely and gloriously as long as they made war themselves,” when fighting with their own gentry and plebs (*P 74*). Venice’s policy revolved around controlling the trade routes to the Black Sea region, and it expanded territorially to

²⁰ On overland routes and the spice trade, see Frederic C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 225–39, 285–94. In 1104 Venice constructed the Arsenal, providing jobs for its citizens and ships for its navy. After aiding in the sack of Constantinople in 1204, Venice controlled the spice trade between East and West, and it prospered in banking and the production of textiles, silk, glass, and ships.

Padua, Vicenza, Treviso, Verona, Bergamo, Brescia, and many cities in Romagna, along with "many ports in Greece and Syria," both to safeguard critical passes in the Alps essential to the shipbuilding industry and to protect its trade with the Ottoman Empire (*FH* 41). It was plagued by hostilities with Genoa, and its policy of expansion courted conflict with Hungary. The need to secure fiscal investments includes engagements in foreign affairs, and Venice did not have the order to expand.

Therefore, since one cannot, as I believe, balance this thing, nor maintain this middle way exactly, in ordering a republic there is need to think of the more honorable part and to order it so that if indeed necessity brings it to expand, it can conserve what it has seized (*D* I.6.4).

Only seeking a commercial empire, Venice did not seek to conquer and colonize, but instead built forts to protect both its political way of life and its trade, arming its extremities and moving on. In not extending its order of arms to land, Venice erred. Machiavelli writes, "The Venetians, as they turned to the land, threw aside the arms that had made them glorious on the seas and, following the custom of the other Italians, administered their armies under the government of others" (*FH* 50; *P* 74). He compares Venice to an abortion that could have been a perfect birth (*AW* VII.241–2).

THE FALL OF VENICE

Like the Aristotelian best regime, Venice trusts to virtue for strength, unaware that it rests upon fortune. Classical philosophers believed that the unified middling regime would be best in warfare.²¹ A life of leisure and education would produce the finest gentleman army, which would outmatch any larger army of the vulgar. Venice mistakenly believes that it can secure its state by means of its virtue, not realizing that courage is the result of good orders (*AW* II.140). When Machiavelli refers to the Italian "custom," he means employing mercenaries and "men-at-arms," which reflect an aristocratic order of cavalry and fortified towns, not a

²¹ Aristotle, *POL* 1326a23; Plato, *Republic*, 422b–c; 423a; on the Florentine nobility's desire to imitate Venice's ancient order, see Gilbert, "The Venetian Constitution," 475–500; Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 44–7.

republican order that arms its own citizens (*P* 75, *AW* II.78).²² Gentlemanship leads to envy and stagnation in the Venetian army; love of nobility and reputation blinds it in its deliberations. When the Venetian “captains, superintendents, or commissioners have to set up one artillery piece, they wish to understand and give good counsel about it” (*D* II.33.1). Venice’s praise of the noble, and consequently its inability to believe in the vulgar, causes it to fight ineffectually (*D* I.36).

Venetian orders against territorial expansion cause a great rift between the nobles and the growing population. The nobles cannot maintain the political way of life, or rule by persuasion, yet they fail to understand how to rule the people by necessity, or rule by ordering tumults “to vent its animus” (*D* I.6.1, 7.1–3).²³ The nobles treat the people as unequal (*D* II.30.2). James Madison noted that Venice became a regime where “absolute power over the great body of the people is exercised in the most absolute manner by a small body of hereditary nobles.”²⁴ When it does expand internally, the nobles can no longer trust the vulgar. Machiavelli writes that they disarm the republic either out of lack of confidence for waging war on land or “so that one of their citizens would not become tyrant” (*AW* I.185); they use “the arms of others so as not to have to obey one of their own citizens” (*AW* I.159). Instead of welcoming virtuous men and honoring those who are excellent (*P* 135), Venice hires virtuous condottieri like Carmignuola, whom it then fears (*P* 74).²⁵ The turning point came when Venice placed its army under the command of condottiere Francesco Gonzaga II, Marquis of Mantua, at the Battle of Fornovo (1495).²⁶ Machiavelli writes, “If the Venetians had been wise in this [arming their own citizens] as in all their other orders, they would

²² Venice loses the battle of Caravaggio because it seeks to hold a fortress that it deems indispensable to its cause, and its army is consequently routed by the Milanese. “The castle was, however, considered of such paramount importance, that the Venetian Senate, though naturally timid, and averse to all hazardous undertakings, chose rather to risk everything than allow it to fall into the hands of the enemy” (*FH* 248–9).

²³ The Venetians had “neither cause nor occasion to make a tumult” (*D* I.6.1).

²⁴ James Madison, “Federalist No. 39,” *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Charles R. Kesler (New York: Signet Classics, 2003), 236–7; see Lane, *Venice*, 252–8.

²⁵ On Carmignuola’s prudence, *AW* II.252; not knowing how to caress virtuous men, Venice could only extinguish them (*P* 14).

²⁶ The divided Venetian senate ordered the marquis to proceed with caution; at the crucial moment in the battle, the unreliable Stradioti mercenaries abandoned their position to plunder the French baggage train.

have made a new monarchy in the world. So much more do they merit blame, since they had been armed by their first lawgivers" (*AW* I.178–9). Lacking arms, they cannot temporize when faced with threats, and this is the cause of their ruin.²⁷

Venice relies upon foreign arms and money, but neither suffices to secure its state. Showing great "disorder," the Venetians buy many lands, but "the things they acquire with gold they do not know how to defend with steel" (*D* II.30.2). Machiavelli writes, "When the Venetians a few years ago had their treasury still full of treasure, since they could not be defended by that, they lost all their state" (*D* II.10.1). Hiring mercenaries, the Venetians acquire an empire without forces; they cannot be liberal to others by the use of their own arms (*D* I.53.1, *FH* 200). They are impoverished and weakened by war rather than strengthened (*D* II.19.2). Ambitious to acquire half of Lombardy, Venice twice joined with France against Milan—a ruinous alliance that left Milan in French hands as a base for further Italian acquisitions and the eventual partition of Italy (*P* 135, 16).²⁸

Taking a cautious middle way in foreign affairs, Venice tries to maintain a balance of power, purposefully creating factions within its cities and abroad, even when all Italy conspired against it in the 1508 League of Cambrai (*P* 127–8, *FH* 248–9, 42, 189, *D* III.1.1).²⁹ At the Battle of Agnadello (Vailà), it sent two condottieri of the Orsini, "lesser princes" (*FH* 50), to manage its army in the field, and, fearing defeat by its foreign captains, cautiously ordered them not to engage.³⁰ At the crucial moment, Niccolò di Pitigliano refused to aid Bartolomeo d'Alviano, whose force was cut down; hearing of the slaughter, most of Pitigliano's force deserted. Because the Venetians relied upon foreign arms, or fortune, "they lost in one day what they had acquired with such trouble in eight hundred years" (*P* 52, *FH* 42). After Agnadello, Venice, having failed to arm the heart, turned to the defensive preparation of its fortifications and garrisons (*D*

²⁷ On temporizing, Machiavelli, *D* I.37, III.11.2; de Alvarez, *P* 9n5.

²⁸ The French and Spanish divided their control over Italy in the 1504 Treaty of Lyon.

²⁹ On this policy of division, see Lane, *Venice*, 253; faction here means abandoning the "civil way of life" of "public forces and orders" and inviting "private forces" and "foreign forces" (*D* I.7.2–3) to involve each humor in the other's interest.

³⁰ On caution and trusting condottieri, see *P* 74, *FH* 158, 160; on Agnadello, the divided condottieri, and Venice's spiritual crisis, see Norwich, *History of Venice*, 396–402.

II.30.3,4; *P* 60).³¹ Importantly, Machiavelli says that Agnadello was only a “half-defeat”; full defeat came from a spiritual crisis—an “abjectness of spirit.” This “cowardice of spirit” was “caused by the quality of [the Venetians’] orders,” thus they lost “state and spirit in a stroke” (*D* III.31.3). Indeed, they “came to so much insolence that they called the king of France the son of San Marco.” Thus Venice, imitating Aristotle’s best regime, was never free—its deliberation and orders were enslaved to the whims of fortune and the virtue of others.

THE NEW EDUCATION

We conclude with Machiavelli’s rejection of classical education. In this spiritual war, Venice loses its state because of cowardice, which is caused by a lack of good orders, which is caused by a lack of good education: “For becoming insolent in good fortune and abject in bad arises from your mode of proceeding and from the education in which you are raised” (*D* III.31.3). Good education is an education in knowing how to read, for “men are born, live, and die always in one and the same order” (*D* I.12.5; III.43.1, *P* 89). One cannot order good arms unless he has a proper education in universal human things—only then can he counsel in war (*D* II.11.2). Without education, the Venetians had no such counsel and relied upon others (*P* 75). Machiavelli writes that “every point in reading history” proves that the “foundation of all states is a good military, and that where this does not exist there can be neither good laws nor any other good thing.” One also learns that “the military cannot be good unless it is trained, and that it cannot be trained unless it is composed of your subjects” (*D* III.31.3). Understanding the spiritual war, the prince will “ennoble the fatherland” by creating a new civic religion, ordering those weak in the Christian faith to a new piety (*D* III.36.2).³² He is educated, above all, in war against fortune, or God (*P* 88–9, 146–7).³³ Abandoning the contemplation of nature, the prudent one studies how to overcome her. Thus, the ultimate failure of the best regime is that those who favor it,

³¹ M.E. Mallett and J.R. Hale, *The Military Organization of a Renaissance State: Venice, c. 1400–1617* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 5.

³² Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 102, 172: Machiavelli notes “the end of this matter,” meaning faithful Christians, and the prince must impress his form into “lukewarm Christians” that “esteem the fatherland more than the soul”; on Protest against the Church by an appeal to conscience, see 193–4.

³³ Strauss, 198–9.

not knowing how to read, do not know the order of things: "But the weakness of men at present, caused by their weak education and their slight knowledge of things, makes them judge ancient judgments in part inhuman, in part impossible" (*D* III.27.2).

The new science will be an education in war, acquired in the hunt, for Machiavelli's perpetual republic is a human creation against nature (*D* III.39.1, *P* 88). This is, then, the true lesson of the impossibility of the self-sufficient regime: when Machiavelli writes of "no middle way," he means the impossibility of the self-sufficient soul, which relies upon sight, not touch (*D* 1.6.4, *P* 109). All men are acquisitive (*P* 17, 7n7), including the prince who "acquires the world," or as Leo Paul de Alvarez writes, "impose[s] an order where there is none" (*P* xvi, 90n1). Philosophy is always political—not because it questions the opinions of the regime—but because of the acquisitive and "envious nature" (*D* 1.Preface) of *all* men, who can never divorce themselves from their own. Hence Machiavelli's dialogue in the *Prince* is not about justice, but about the proper military method of taking a hill (*P* 89–90). The "wiser physician" is the one who knows how to acquire his principate by these "new acts of foresight" (*D* III.49.1). The prince would then be the greatest of tyrants, a political figure who rules from the grave.³⁴ To do this he must give the matter, his readers, new modes and orders: namely, to make those who claim contentedly to study eternal things discontent.³⁵ The ambition of such a man must be monumental, and his love of knowledge is the effectual means to immortality (*P* 93). We could oppose this to the classical presentation of the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, who participates in that which is eternal through contemplation, not politics.

War is natural for Aristotle, but it must not be the focus of education. The city does not exist for war or self-preservation (*POL* 1325a7). Action does not have to be efficacious; it can be for its own sake. Therefore the only free life is the philosophical life of self-sufficient activity (*POL* 1325b16). For the city to provide the completion of the human end, it too must aim at self-sufficiency (*POL* 1325b29). Aristotle summarizes the opposing belief, that of Machiavelli: those who consider

³⁴ Mansfield, *Machiavelli's Virtue* (The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 125: Machiavelli made himself a prince by writing books, to found a "perpetual republic" (*D* xli–ii, III.22.3).

³⁵ Leo Paul de Alvarez, *The Machiavellian Enterprise* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1999), 106–7.

the political life simply, meaning the life of mastery, to be “the most choiceworthy life” argue that “it is impossible for one who acts in nothing to act well” (*POL* 1325a21). Machiavelli’s omission of Venice’s solution to the desire for pleasure unaccompanied by pain is a fundamental critique of the best regime: one cannot order a republic “where there are very many gentlemen” (*D* I.55.4–5). A republic must draw leisured gentlemen away from the life of private friendship or contemplation in the academy. The fundamental question is then what type of education Machiavelli suggests will replace the “weak education” (*D* III.27.2), that of virtue for its own sake. He writes in the preface to the *Art of War*: “Judging by what I have seen and read that it is not impossible to bring [the military] back to ancient modes and give it some form of past virtue, I decided, so as not to pass these my idle times without doing anything, to write what I understand about the art of war for the satisfaction of those who are lovers of ancient actions” (*AW* P.10). Machiavelli redefines leisure, for the leisurely life must be efficacious, and education must become useful.