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## Angelo Codevilla: Introduction to His Translation of Machiavelli's The Prince Study Guide, 2014

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**ANGELO CODEVILLA: INTRODUCTION TO HIS  
TRANSLATION OF MACHIAVELLI'S *THE PRINCE*  
STUDY GUIDE, 2014  
Steven Alan Samson**

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

### Outline

- A. FOUNTAINHEAD OF MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT (vii-viii)
  - 1. Published in 1532
    - a. It was already dated five years after Machiavelli's death in 1527
  - 2. Levels of *The Prince*
    - a. Various ways of organizing governments
    - b. Teaching the art of government
      - 1) *Realpolitik*
      - 2) **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** called it the handbook of antimonarchists
    - c. Nature of our concepts of right and wrong
      - 1) Thrasymachus equals justice is the interest of the stronger
      - 2) Machiavelli as a teacher of evil
      - 3) His use as a compass
  - 3. Modern Government Amoralism Can Only Be Explained In Terms of Machiavelli's Ideas
- B. MACHIAVELLI'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT (viii-x)
  - 1. Invasion of Charles VIII, 1494
  - 2. Medieval Autonomy of Italian Cities
    - a. Canon lawyers and traders
  - 3. Use of Spain and France
    - a. Imperial struggle
      - 1) Venice
      - 2) Milan and Florence
      - 3) Rome
  - 4. Florentine Republic
    - a. **Girolamo Savonarola**
    - b. **Piero Soderini**
  - 4. Machiavelli's fourteen-year career as a servant
    - a. France's professional military
    - b. **Cesare Borgia**
    - c. Machiavelli's *Ordinanza*
    - d. *La Mandragola*
  - 5. Policy Prescriptions in *The Prince*
    - a. Native Armed Forces
    - b. Power is the only thing
  - 6. **Francesco Guicciardini**
    - a. Romagna
- C. PROBLEMS OF POLITICAL LIFE EQUALS WHAT MEN DO (x-xiii)
  - 1. Guidebook to Success
    - a. Defense against conspiracies
    - b. Advice to conspirators
    - c. Contradictory advice
  - 2. Henry IV and Stalin
  - 3. Founders of Regimes
    - a. Earlier works sought to improve character.

- b. Machiavelli's maxims are not so directed
  - c. He pointed readers to a new kind of government
  - 4. This Kind of Government Had Begun to Take Shape under Ferdinand and Isabella
    - a. But legal-constitutional thought was still medieval
      - 1) In theory, the primary political unit was still Christendom: Every element had its place
      - 2) Only God is sovereign
    - b. But if Machiavelli was correct, the Spanish and French Kings had not gone far enough in subduing the Church
  - 5. Machiavelli's Intellectual Influence
    - a. **Jean Bodin**: Concept of sovereignty
    - b. **Thomas Hobbes**: Why non-princes would want to live as subjects of the modern sovereign state
    - c. **Hugo Grotius**: Theory of relations between sovereign regimes
  - 6. Mitigating the Power of Absolute Rulers
    - a. Most constitutional thinkers of "the new political science" worked on the problem from Machiavelli's premise about "what men do"
      - 1) John Locke
      - 2) Montesquieu
    - b. "The artfully arranged **clash of interests**, making up for the defect of better motives, might yield pleasant living."
  - 7. Objectives, Glory, and Empire
    - a. Real rulers – those of "the family of the lion or the tribe of the eagle" (Lincoln) – cannot be constrained by anything
    - b. Nothing can constrain corrupt or vicious men
  - 8. Men's Habits May Unfit Them for Self-Government
    - a. Stephen Douglas's popular sovereignty
    - b. **Abraham Lincoln**
      - 1) The original sin of politics: "You work, I'll eat" [cf. Bastiat's legal plunder, Tulloch's rent-seeking]
      - 2) The habit of disposing of innocent human lives for convenience's sake makes men unfit to govern themselves
- D. REVOLUTIONARY INFLUENCE (xii-xv)
- 1. Heart of the matter is chapter 15
    - a. Machiavelli creates his own set of rules
  - 2. Question of truth
    - a. Socrates
    - b. Jesus
    - c. Pontius Pilate
    - d. Thrasymachus
  - 3. Subversive Idea That Something Can Be True and Right Even When It Contradicts a Nation's Laws or Jeopardizes Its Safety
    - a. Athens put Socrates to death
    - b. Rome resisted both Socratic philosophy and Christianity because their affirmation of truths that transcended power challenged its authority
    - c. Christianity and Socratic philosophy became dominant forces for 1000 years after Augustine
      - 1) Only nominalism challenged the notion that right and power are unrelated
  - 4. Machiavelli's Intellectual Rebellion [or Reaction] against the Present Religion
    - a. Values are opinions
    - b. **Effective truth of the matter** vs. imagination
      - 1) Deepest contradiction in his thought
  - 5. His Claim to Scientific Accuracy: Those Who Spurn His Counsel Must Come To Ruin
    - a. Thus he does not depart from the Christian-classical tradition in basing moral guidance on a nature that exists whether anyone likes it or not

6. The Nature of Machiavelli's Revolution
  - a. He manufactures his precepts rather than discovering them in nature
  - b. First he lists traits that are "imagined" to be good or bad
  - c. Then in chapter 19 he draws up a new list of traits
  - d. Here he is more than a teacher of a list of evils
  - e. He leads modern man to grasp for the power [cf. Gen. 3:1-5] to make ["knowing" or determining for oneself] one's own good and evil for one's own sovereign convenience
7. Machiavelli's Successors
  - a. Francis Bacon: Machiavelli brought the stars down to humanity
    - 1) Myth of **Prometheus**, who stole fire from the gods
  - b. Modern system builders: Descartes, Newton, Hegel, Heidegger
    - 1) Typically, they begin by setting forth arbitrary premises that channel the entire system in the desired direction
  - c. **René Descartes**: He built a world he would know perfectly as its author
  - d. G. W. F. Hegel: Written from the perspective of the creator of the universe
  - e. **Ludwig Feuerbach**: Man projects his worthiest qualities onto a god of his own creation, thereby impoverishing himself [a bridge between Hegel's and Marx's ideas of alienation]
  - f. Karl Marx
  - g. Existentialist movement's heroic attempts to assert values on the basis of the assertion itself [voluntarism or will-ism]
- E. INFLUENCE OUR TIMES (xv-xvii)
  1. Ideas Have Lives of Their Own
    - a. Results have differed from Machiavelli's aims
  2. Ethical Relativism
    - a. **Max Weber**
      - 1) Value judgments are "demonic"
    - b. Inglorious and subhuman purposes
  3. Incompatibility of Human Interests
    - a. Machiavelli still accepted the need to adjust mutual wants and for solidarity
    - b. He wanted to see political communities
    - c. The idea of incompatibility of interests has been carried to destructive and ridiculous lengths
      - 1) **Karl Marx** assumed mutual exploitation
      - 2) Such disunity invites predators
  4. Nonjudgmentalist Relativism Is Almost Unchallenged
    - a. Natural law is considered subversive
      - 1) Only positive law (legislated) is accepted
      - 2) Law is seen as an act of the will (voluntarism)
    - b. Conformity to natural and divine law prevailed until the Second World War
    - c. Pusillanimity for petty ends prevails today
  5. Decadence: Less Warlike, More Bureaucratic
    - a. Welfare states have supplanted the family
      - 1) Inability to send armed forces in harm's way
    - b. States are made by strokes of the sword
  6. Importance of Constituting Armies and Keeping Them Faithful
    - a. Fidel Castro, *et al.*
    - b. Mikhail Gorbachev
    - c. **Rarity of military service** in the American political class
  7. Twentieth-Century Paradigms of Machiavelli's Founders
    - a. Adolf Hitler
    - b. Joseph Stalin
    - c. Mao Zedong
  8. Questions of Right and Wrong
    - a. Twentieth-century's inglorious carnage

## WORDS AND POWER

### Outline

- A. TRANSLATOR, TRAITOR (xix-xxi)
  - 1. Linguistic Ambiguity and Puns
  - 2. Machiavelli's Ability to Change the Meaning of Words
  - 3. Epistle Dedicatory to Lorenzo de' Medici
  - 4. Machiavelli's (and His Language's) Shiftiness
  - 5. Machiavelli Regards Words as Plastic
    - a. He alters meaning by changing context [cf. Lewis Carroll's Humpty-Dumpty]
  - 6. Machiavelli's Larger Ends
    - a. Codevilla's sacrifice of elegance for the sake of faithfulness to the original
    - b. Machiavelli's artful manipulation of linguistic detail
- B. MACHIAVELLI ON LANGUAGE (xxi-xxv)
  - 1. **Language as the Ultimate Weapon**
  - 2. Purpose
    - a. Aristotle: Most characteristically human tool
    - b. Machiavelli's purpose is primacy: glory and power over others [cf. Robert Ringer's *Winning through Intimidation*]
  - 3. Waves of Barbarians
    - a. Substitution of **new names**
      - 1) How captured cities ought to be treated
      - 2) Political power depends on symbols of authority
    - b. Question of **how to deal with free cities**
      - 1) Alternative to destruction: Changing the terms in which people think
  - 4. New Names Preclude the Memory of Old Things
    - a. New religious language
    - b. Banishment of certain thoughts [Orwell's memory hole, secular confessionals]
  - 5. Florentine Audience
    - a. Courtly or curial language
    - b. **Dante's** language of reason
    - c. Machiavelli's accusation against Dante of speaking the language of a rival city
  - 6. Human Affairs Are about Winning and Losing
  - 7. **Barbarian Name Changes**
    - a. Sons named after Christian saints
  - 8. Deference to the Language of Lombardy
  - 9. Machiavelli Uses Dante as a Bad Example
    - a. For Dante, the function of language is to express the nature of things
    - b. Machiavelli: Languages are particular articulations of the universal struggle for primacy
      - 1) All speech is a form of rhetoric
      - 2) He makes his case by appealing to pride and *amor proprio*
      - 3) The main point is not to describe but gain support of one's audience
  - 10. The Best Language Is the One That Gives the Greatest Value
    - a. Its value is measured in terms of its success
    - b. Dante's missed opportunity for true greatness
      - 1) His doctrine is blamed
  - 11. Dante's Blindness to the Main Fact of Life: Struggle
    - a. Success is the use of others' material in building one's own edifice
  - 12. The Greatness of Rome
    - a. The Romans were the nerve of their own army
      - 1) They managed their own subject forces only as long as these were

- united for the purpose of conquest
- b. Dante denied Florence its due
13. Machiavelli Is the Purposeful Master of His Own Art [of War]
- a. He disorders far larger legions to get them to fight on his side
- C. STRATEGIC USE OF LANGUAGE IN *THE PRINCE* (xxv-xviii)
1. *The Prince* Changes the **Terms of Political Discourse**
- a. Actions are treated as merely (either) useful or counterproductive
- b. Unwary readers accept this new ethical framework [cf. art of insinuation as displayed by the serpent in Gen. 3:1-5; cf. Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* and B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*]
2. It Is Useful to Know How to Dominate Because the Strong and Wily Inevitably Dominate the Weak and Unwary
- a. Machiavelli skirts the question of why anyone should want to dominate
- b. Explicit argument is less effective in moving men than other means [cf. the propagandist Edward Bernays]
- b. Machiavelli believes men are moved by the "**lively reasons**" of their appetites rather than by abstract reasons
- 1) Passions are what is truest about men
3. Thoughts Must Be Measured by How Effectively They Stir Desires and Fears That Result in Successful, Self-Serving Action
- a. Thoughts that hinder such action must be suppressed lest they result in defeat
- b. But, paradoxically, thoughts may not be combated by action alone; they are vulnerable only to their own kind [again, cf. Gen. 3:1-5]
- 1) They can be vanquished only by opponents that can infiltrate their camps [cf. such tactics as disinformation and fifth columns; Ion Pacepa and Ronald Rychlak on *glasnost* in *Disinformation*]
- c. Self-consciously **polemical thoughts** will defeat the unsuspecting [cf. David Kupelian, *The Marketing of Evil*]
4. How Machiavelli Treats God's Will Regarding Political Matters in Chapter 6
- a. Moses Had a Great Tutor
- b. Others Did the Same Things [innocence by association]
- c. **Hiero of Syracuse** [Plato's *Seventh Letter*]
5. Comparison of Hiero with David in Chapter 13
- a. Preference for one's own arms
- 1) Machiavelli's point: "The cardinal, yea, even the divine rule of politics is to avail one's self of one's self for one's own purposes"
6. Use of Techniques We Now Associate with **Advertising** [cf. Edward Bernays]
- a. The purpose of tales of gore and treachery
- b. Machiavelli did not mean to argue so much as to act
- 1) He never argues explicitly that earthly suffering and death are the worst fates; he simply omits any discussion of the possibility that they are not
- 2) In the conflict between fear and the desire for primacy, the penalty for this sort of unreasonableness is death: In modern parlance, "Just do it!"
7. *The Prince* Is about the Advancement of Such Themes
- a. The politically pornographic recipes serve to **reorient political morality**
- b. Machiavelli consciously renounced the classical-Christian tradition
- c. He says nothing about the inherent worth or worthiness of actions
- 1) "As for intentions, he assumes that men are more or less intelligent but equally selfish" [cf. Hobbes]
- d. We can only know the consequences, such as success
- e. The reader acquires new mental habits from this reorientation
- f. The reader (and Machiavelli) thus has succeeded in changing political reality [and politics comes to be regarded as disreputable]
8. **Francis Bacon**
- a. Philosophical judgment
- b. Machiavelli's triumph

- 1) He manipulated words to imply an “ought” that is cut to Machiavellian specifications [cf. *Through the Looking Glass*, chapter 6: “When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, `it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.”]
- c. Bacon’s statement applies to latter-day **positivists** [scientific materialists] who look to the average
- d. Machiavelli described what he considered exemplary [cf. Girard on mimetic modeling]

## Review

Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
 Cesare Borgia  
 Thomas Hobbes  
 Abraham Lincoln  
 René Descartes  
 Karl Marx  
 How to deal with free cities  
 terms of political discourse  
 Hiero of Syracuse  
 Francis Bacon

Girolamo Savonarola  
 Francesco Giucciardini  
 Hugo Grotius  
 effective truth of the matter  
 Ludwig Feuerbach  
 rarity of military service  
 Dante  
 lively reasons  
 advertising  
 positivists

Piero Soderini  
 Jean Bodin  
 clash of interests  
 Prometheus  
 Max Weber  
 language as the ultimate weapon  
 barbarian name changes  
 polemical thoughts  
 reorient political morality