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CATHERINE ZUCKERT, *MACHIAVELLI'S POLITICS*,  
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It is important to point out from the start that the author of *Machiavelli's Politics*, Catherine Zuckert, borrows, in her work, heavily from the hermeneutics of philosopher Leo Strauss. Strauss' method of text interpretation, one which distinguishes between exoteric and esoteric layers of meaning, although sometimes methodologically questionable, manages in certain cases to contribute to a fuller understanding of the analyzed work. The strength of Zuckert's book is in the skillful usage of the Straussian method of reading that is complemented by a good familiarity with the historical context in question as well as with an approach which tries to take into account the totality of Machiavelli's work.

Zuckert tends to settle some of the interpretative quandaries in academia regarding Machiavelli's writings. The main problem in that field is the perceived incoherence of his quite diverse work. Zuckert tries to show how narrative methods used in many of them are related. In his historical and political works Machiavelli takes one position, then examines its critiques and alternatives, after which he comes to a provisional conclusion which he then subjects to critique. In his fictional writings,

Machiavelli presents different characters with different understandings of what is important and how something should be done in order to get good results, and then he shows which of those characters succeeds, and which fails, and why. Zuckert notes that in all of Machiavelli's works human beings are acting on the bases of their fears, hopes and passions. Machiavelli also thinks that, in their tendencies to satisfy their needs, people would end up in violent conflicts without some form of government. Zuckert is trying to show that the principles praised in his works, taken together as well as individually, present a coherent whole.

No one who reads Machiavelli can deny that he emphasizes politics more than philosophy, religion, or literary form (although these are all relevant aspects of his work). In the following study I have therefore sought to emphasize, first and foremost, what Machiavelli sought to teach his readers about politics, not merely in his immediate context, but most importantly in order to improve human life in the future. (Zuckert 2017: 24)

According to Strauss (whose opinion Zuckert shares) the value of Machiavelli

is that he is a universal political thinker: “It [his thought] concerns, and it is meant to concern, all thinking men regardless of time and place” (Strauss).

When discussing *The Prince*, Zuckert rightly presents Machiavelli’s approach to politics as completely new and revolutionary. Machiavelli is explaining to a prince in Florence how to acquire, keep, and expand power. He is not interested in describing the ways to rule from the point of justice, common good, divine right etc. Machiavelli only hints at the institutions and laws that are necessary to enable that selfish actions are directed toward common good, and not against it. In the *Discourses on Livy* he describes these institutions in more detailed way.

When discussing the *Discourses on Livy*, Zuckert is drawing a close connection between Machiavelli’s “debunking of traditional notions of virtue” from *The Prince* and his advocacy for the main task of government and its republican institutions to provide for the security of the people, their liberties, and the property of most citizens. Therefore, commentators who perceive advocacy of the amoral political analysis and tyranny in *The Prince* are wrong, as they do not see that the goal of this government, which Machiavelli supports, is the common good. More precisely, their impression is blurred by Machiavelli’s advocacy of the means that are not acceptable in the traditional moral sense.

Some commentators tried to show that *The Mandrake* is relevant when discussing Machiavelli’s topics and opinions regarding public affairs, while others think he has written this work because he was disappointed with the reception of his previous work, and wanted to have some fun with a light comedy. Flaws could be found for both of these interpretations. But, what nobody denies is that *The Mandrake* presents a retelling of the ancient story of the rape of Lucretia. Zuckert is again trying to resolve this issue by applying

the Straussian methodology, and underlines that in our analysis we should pay special attention to the differences between several versions of the story. Zuckert finds the main moral principles of *The Prince* in *The Mandrake* as well, but then again stresses that it would be wrong to conclude that Machiavelli didn’t note the difference between the private and the political sphere.

In *The Art of War*, which Zuckert discusses in *Machiavelli’s Defense*, Machiavelli presented his opinions regarding the raising and training of military. Machiavelli praised the concept of armed citizenry and the idea of employing and training the army in which soldiers are one’s own countrymen. A ruler who leads this kind of army will be the lord of country. Zuckert notes that, through the voice of Fabrizio, Machiavelli explains how all people can become soldiers and that only princes are to be blamed if soldiers are acting in an unacceptable manner.

Machiavelli’s advice to the ruler is that when diplomacy fails, they should be ready for war, as an extension of politics. Zuckert shows that Machiavelli is trying to point out that soldiers are ideal citizens because of their love for peace, and because of their stronger belief in God. Machiavelli critiques modern views that soldiers’ lives are incompatible with civil life, and traces them to Christian religion that, according to him, makes people hate the army.

Many scholars thought that the purpose of this work is to show, with examples, Machiavelli’s understanding of the role of fortune and virtue in gaining of political influence. But, Zuckert, while dealing with *The Life of Castruccio Castracani*, claims that this kind of straightforward reading is not the right choice. In reality there is a great difference between Castruccio as Machiavelli painted him and Castruccio as the historical person (he was only a petty tyrant). Machiavelli, Zuckert concludes,

did this on purpose, to be able to show that he can critique by praising.

When dealing with *Clizia* Zuckert again claims that the code for Machiavelli's messages is in a detailed comparison of the original story, the play *Casina* written by the Roman playwright Plautus, with his *Clizia*.

Here Zuckert notices that Machiavelli, unlike Aristotle, does not trace the origin of the political association to the family, which is constituted in the framework of the procreation between men and women and the master's control of the slave. Machiavelli feels that these elements cannot be a part of a stable community, as they are only expressions of *eros*, which is changeable. What is constant for human beings, according to Machiavelli, is their attachment to property, their lives, and their reputation. Therefore, those should be the constitutive elements for building a community.

Zuckert points out that Machiavelli is, in his *Florentine Histories*, warning his readers about the dangers which the community will face if it allows some popular leader to rise without contest. Machiavelli notes that the path that leads to tyranny is one in which electoral laws do not encourage competition for popular favor.

Zuckert feels that Machiavelli expresses his attitude against "sectarian partisanship," but again Machiavelli

does not think that partisan conflicts could cease to exist. Accordingly, the solution to this kind of problems are laws, which should enable that ambitious individuals can and should compete for public favor to achieve their goals, but to do it in such a manner that mutual control exists, so that civil laws are not violated. That is key for the foundation and the preservation of a free republic. According to Zuckert, Machiavelli applies this to politics because of the idea that a true republic must never depend on aristocracy or a hereditary monarch, nor on those who are rich enough so that they do not have to work because they can be independent from government.

In the conclusion, Zuckert is underlining the significance of Machiavelli's thought for modern politics. Machiavelli redefined the goal of the government and confronted political questions that we are still facing today. The author is restating Machiavelli's definition of his role: not to praise certain leaders, but to enable those who read his works to do better than the leaders he describes in his works. Zuckert agrees with Strauss' assessment that Machiavelli was "a man of the people" (Strauss) and also shares Strauss's opinion that one of Machiavelli's specifics is that, unlike later democratic theorists, he does not postulate that democratic means are always the best for achieving democratic ends.