

Machiavellian Advisors: Political Leadership and the Problem of Policy Advisors

Political advisors are playing an increasingly important role in modern democracies. The rise of what appears to be a ‘third element’ in executive government has prompted various attempts to describe and understand the evolving and complex aspects of such roles. In this paper I examine Machiavelli’s evaluation of the role of advisors to see the insights he may provide for contemporary political practice. Machiavelli is instructive for a number of reasons, but above all because he claims in *The Prince* to provide a break from tradition, inaugurating a ‘modern’ perspective, thereby providing a useful way to reflect on both the traditional conceptions and the innovation he proposes for leaders to engage with advisors. The paper argues that Machiavelli anticipates and theoretically justifies the claim that due to differences in ability, interest, and the absence of a conception of the common good, there is a fundamental disjunction between the interests and abilities of leaders and advisors. This distance, according to Machiavelli, can be managed, especially by the use of institutions and other measures by leaders, but it can never be overcome. Indeed, the inescapable differences in ability, and especially their concern with their reputation, will always expose leaders to the dangers of flattery, the advisor’s powerful weapon that will always make leaders vulnerable to their able advisors. Machiavelli’s insights into the relationship between leaders and advisors therefore clearly reveals underlying and fundamental structural tensions between traditional and contemporary notions of public service and the best means to address them.

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Political advisors are playing an increasingly important role in modern democracies, prompting various attempts to describe and understand the evolving and complex aspects of their new responsibilities.¹ How policy advisors ‘whisper to princes’ forms an important part of this descriptive scholarship.² More theoretically, the scholarship has focused on two related themes. The first is an attempt to understand the diverse role of advisors, with various typologies of advisors developed as heuristics for future research.³ The second has been to evaluate the increasing importance of advisers within the larger framework of bureaucratic legitimacy and democratic governance. In this context research has focused on the potential of increasing number of advisors to politicise the bureaucracy, and the political accountability of political advisors who wield significant power.⁴ Most of this scholarship has been premised on a relatively simple principal-agency model to account for the relationship between political leaders and their advisors, with the result that less attention has been paid to the specific dynamics that shape the interactions between leaders and their advisors.⁵ What is at the heart of the relationship between leaders and advisors? Are advisors always subject to the discretion of their masters? Or is the relationship more complex and therefore fraught for both parties?

The relationship between leaders and advisors is a longstanding theme in political studies. It was a focus of classical political thought, became an important theological question and in early modernity was taken up by the *speculum principis* or ‘mirror of princes’ genre of writing that sought to advise princes on how to rule.⁶ It is within this larger tradition that one work stands out above others. Machiavelli’s *The Prince* is arguably the most well-known and provocative assessment of the relationship between leaders and advisors. In this article I examine Machiavelli’s evaluation of the importance of advisors and their potential limitations

¹ For useful overview of advisors, variously described as political staffers, exempt staff, or program managers see Craft 2015; Shaw and Eichbaum 2015. For historical accounts and international trends see Andweg (1999); Blick (2004); Eichbaum and Shaw (2010); Dahlstrom et al (2011); Yong and Hazell (2014).

² See Gains and Stoker (2011, 49). Much of this research, as Shaw and Eichbaum (2015) note, is country specific, for example, Esselment et al (2014) who compare Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK.

³ For different roles see Maley (2000) who distinguishes in the Australian context five distinctive policy roles: agenda-setting; linking ideas, interests and opportunities; mobilising; bargaining; and ‘delivering’; Burke (2005) on the ‘honest broker’ model; Gains and Stoker (2011) who see special advisors as ‘key entrepreneurial actors’; and Connaughton (2015) who lists four ‘types’ of advisors: expert, partisan, coordinator, and minder.

⁴ For an early philosophical examination of the responsibility of advisors see Thompson (1983). On the problem of expert political judgment see Tetlock (2005). For research on politicisation and presidentialisation see Baum (1982), Wicks (2003). For accountability see Walter (2006); Tiernan (2007).

⁵ See for example Esselment et al (2014) who presume a principal-agent relationship. Contrast this with the American presidential scholarship that looks at organisational forms and structures as well as character and personality e.g. Troy (2002); Tucker (1998) on Wilson; Glad and Link (1996), focusing on the Nixon advisory system; Hermann and Preston (1996) on leadership style and advisory systems.

⁶ See generally Plato *Republic*; Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus*; Aristotle’s *Politics* and *Ethics*; Plutarch’s *Moralia* and *Lives*; Augustine’s *Confessions*.

to see the insights he may provide for contemporary political practice.⁷ I do so for a number of related reasons. Perhaps the most obvious would be the recent works by political advisors that rely on Machiavelli, suggesting that contemporary political advisor's roles are best understood in Machiavellian terms.⁸ Machiavelli is also useful because he himself was an advisor, a political leader and a thinker and therefore his reflections provide a comprehensive perspective of the nature of the relationship. But above all it is because Machiavelli claims in *The Prince* to provide a break from tradition, inaugurating a 'modern' perspective. He therefore provides a useful way to reflect on both the traditional conceptions and the modern innovation on how leaders should engage with advisors.

The core argument of this article is that Machiavelli anticipates and theoretically justifies the claim that there is a fundamental disjunction between the interests and abilities of leaders and advisors, due to differences in ability, interest, and the absence of a conception of the common good or advantage. This distance can be managed, especially by the use of institutions and other measures by leaders, but it can never be overcome. Indeed, the inescapable differences in ability, and especially their concern with their reputation, will always expose leaders to the dangers of flattery, the advisor's powerful weapon that will always make leaders vulnerable to their able advisors. Machiavelli's insights into the relationship between leaders and advisors therefore clearly reveals underlying and fundamental structural tensions between traditional and contemporary notions of public service and public administration and the best means to address them.

In the discussion that follows I first provide the literary and political context of Machiavelli's *The Prince* to show how his personal circumstances shape the rhetorical character of *The Prince* and specifically, his discussion of the role of advisors. I then examine in detail Machiavelli's insights into the role of advisors in *The Prince*, a theme that weaves its way through the work as a whole, but is the specific focus of two chapters, Chapter XXII 'Of those Whom Princes Have as Secretaries', and Chapter XXIII, 'In What Mode Flatterers Are to Be Avoided'. Through a close reading of Chapter XXII I examine how Machiavelli addresses the question of advisors directly, showing how, without relying on concepts of public service or the common good, the relationship between prince and advisor can be made mutually beneficial through specific institutional arrangements that in many ways anticipate

⁷ References to *The Prince* are to the Mansfield (1985) translation, referred to by chapter and page. I have also consulted *Il Principe*, edited by Chabod and Firpo (1974).

⁸ This scholarship is mixed, with a number of works using Machiavelli's famous statements in *The Prince* to frame discussion: Elster (1990) see for example, Powell (2010); Dick (1999). For more theoretical works see Lord (2003); Jay (1994); McAlpine (2000); Meltsner (1990).

contemporary use of performance indicators and limited contracts. One may reasonably think this is Machiavelli's final view on this matter. Yet this sanguine view of the relationship is questioned in the next chapter ostensibly not dealing directly with the problem of advisors. In Chapter XXIII, 'In What Mode Flatterers Are to Be Avoided', Machiavelli seems to repudiate his argument in Chapter XXII by claiming that 'a prince who is not wise by himself cannot be counselled well'. In the concluding discussion I show how this contradictory position is intended to show two important aspects of the leader and advisor relationship that can provide important insights for contemporary scholarship on advisors. The first is that the inherent vulnerability of advisors means that flattery will always be a formidable weapon in the arsenal of able advisors. The second is the distinction Machiavelli makes between advisors who will provide immediate and strategic advice and the more able and ambitious who give rules to future princes. In this light, Machiavelli suggests, that even if rulers are ostensibly superior to advisors, they are fundamentally subjects of, or put into practice the instructions of those advisors who rule over them through books.

Machiavelli as Advisor and Flatter

Machiavelli writes *The Prince* soon after the fall of the Florentine Republic in 1512, when he is dismissed from office as First Secretary in the Florentine Republic and banished by the new Medici regime to San Casciano, in the countryside.⁹ As Machiavelli makes clear from the first lines of the Dedicatory Letter of *The Prince*, he is offering it as 'small gift' to 'acquire favor' from Magnificent Lorenzo de' Medici (D, 3). In doing so, he admits his neediness, due to 'a great and continuous malignity of fortune', and his hope that Lorenzo di Medici will raise him by employing him as advisor. This very personal introduction to *The Prince* reminds us that question of advisors is an especially important one for Machiavelli that he addresses in *The Prince* from two perspectives, from that of an advisor seeking office, as is evident from his Dedicatory Letter, and from the disinterested vantage point of leaders as developed throughout *The Prince*. This curiously double or reflexive nature of the book, where the advice Machiavelli offers in the body of the work will inevitably reflect on his own ambitions, determines the structure and rhetoric of *The Prince* as a whole. To gain a comprehensive understanding of Machiavelli's insights into the nature of the relationship between leaders and advisors it is therefore necessary to examine both accounts.

⁹ There is an extensive scholarship on *The Prince*. For an indicative overview see Machiavelli (1992).

The Dedicatory Letter appears to be a conventional praise of a patron or future benefactor. Yet its substance shows the significance of the relationship between advisor and leader for Machiavelli, and anticipates the important themes that he will subsequently take up in *The Prince*. Taking the perspective of a potential advisor, it immediately shows an inescapable fact about the relative disparity in power between advisors and princes. Princes are ‘high atop the mountains’, while advisors are in ‘low places’. Princes are self-sufficient, even great, while advisors are needy, hoping to please princes to acquire favour. The next notable difference, in addition to their different place in the hierarchy and imbalance in authority, is the disparity in interests of princes and advisors. Most princes tend to admire ‘horses, arms, cloth of gold, precious stones and similar ornaments worthy of their greatness’ (Ded Letter, 3). But advisors like Machiavelli value above all ‘knowledge of the actions of great men’, which can only be learned by ‘long experience with modern things and continuous reading of ancient ones’ (DL, 3). One may infer from this that Machiavelli, in possessing such knowledge is in an important respect superior to Lorenzo. Yet is it not clear that princes like Lorenzo believe they are deficient in this respect, or if they did whether they thought such deficiency mattered. Therefore there seems to be such a disparity in power, interest and ability between princes and advisors that seems unbridgeable if it were not for one notable weakness of princes. That princes want greatness and need to be constantly assured of their superiority means that they long for honour. But this desire opens them up to flattery, praises and complements that will please them but will be to the advantage of the flatterer. Flattery is therefore the greatest weakness of princes and the possibly only arsenal at the disposal of advisors that they can use to redress or repair their essential weakness. Machiavelli in the Dedicatory Letter claims that in giving a gift that pleases him rather than Lorenzo, and in not filling *The Prince* with ‘fulsome phrases nor with pompous or magnificent words’ he shows he does not flatter and therefore can be trusted. Yet in saying so he immediately reminds the prince of such a danger and makes us wonder if it is possible to distinguish between flattery and praise when the only difference between the two is the advantage of the flatterer. He also implicitly raises questions about his own intentions, and the deeper problem concerning the very possibility of a common good that unite leaders and advisors.

These reflections on the nature of princes and advisors, from the perspective of a weak yet knowledgeable advisor, introduce and frame their subsequent discussion in *The Prince*. Because *The Prince* as a whole consists of advice to future princes, in a sense the entire work is a meditation on the relationship between rulers and advisors, those who have

power and those who know. But the nerve of Machiavelli's argument regarding the role of advisors and the problem of flattery is found in two separate chapters towards the end of *The Prince*. Chapter XXII 'Of those Whom Princes Have as Secretaries', and Chapter XXIII, 'In What Mode Flatterers are to be Avoided' ostensibly address separate topics, but upon closer inspection constitute a combined and comprehensive reflection on the relationship between the prince and advisors. As such they constitute in a sense a self-sufficient essay on the theme. Yet it is only when they are read in this way, that we see that Machiavelli contradicts his own counsel in the space of a few pages, initially defending advisors, and subsequently denying their usefulness. To see the nature of this argument, and the implication of such a contradiction for our contemporary understanding of political advisors, it is necessary to pay close attention to the subtle argumentation of each chapter before finally reflecting on the work as a whole.

On Secretaries

Chapter XXII 'Of those Whom Princes Have as Secretaries', starts provocatively: 'The choice of ministers is of no small importance to a prince; they are good or not according to the prudence of the prince' (P 22, 9).¹⁰ Provocatively because it establishes prudence as an essential aspect of princely or political rule, and because it suggests that the goodness or otherwise of advisors are subject to this prudence, rather than being innate to the character of the advisor. There is, it would seem, an ambiguity regarding the goodness of advisors, based not on their virtue, but on their usefulness and loyalty to the prince. Machiavelli follows this remark by appealing to the Prince's vanity: 'the first conjecture that is to be made of the brain (*cervello*) of the lord is to see the men he has around him'. Distinguishing between *sufficienti* or 'capable' and *fedili* or 'faithful' ministers, Machiavelli seems to exploit a prince's love of honor with his observation that a prince's reputation for wisdom is determined by those he has around them, and especially by his ability to recognize ability and to keep advisors faithful. The prince's inability in this respect exposes him to 'unfavourable judgment', and importantly, 'the first error he makes, he makes in this choice'. Advisors seem like the 'ornaments' that Machiavelli in the *Dedicatory Letter* said pleased princes and reflected their greatness, in this case for wisdom, but unlike these ornaments, their goodness depends on the nature of the prince.

¹⁰ On the role of advisors and the rhetoric in Machiavelli's *The Prince* see Belliotti (2009); Benner (2009, 407-50); Benner (2013, 273-282); Dietz (1986); Kain (1995); Viroli (1998, 73-113); Wheelan (2004); Whithof (1974; 1991).

Machiavelli seeks to demonstrate this argument with the example of Pandolfo Petrucci, who is described here as a prince of Siena, and his minister, Messer Antonio da Venafro. Pandolfo was judged a ‘most worthy man’ according to Machiavelli because of Venafro.¹¹ Yet this judgment is quickly challenged with Machiavelli’s account of the ‘three brains’:

And since there are three kinds of brains (*cervelli*): the one that understands by itself, another that discerns what others understand, the third that understands neither by itself nor through others; the first is most excellent, the second excellent, and the third useless – it follows, therefore, of necessity that, if Pandolfo was not in the first rank, he was in the second (P 22, 92).¹²

Following Machiavelli’s argument, we presumably know of ‘prince’ Pandolfo’s excellence because of our judgment of Venafro his advisor. Yet does this assessment also permit another possibility? Is it not possible for Venafro to be a first brain, ‘the one that understands by itself’, while Pandolfo ‘discerns what others understand’? Indeed, can the minister’s excellence say anything about the worthiness of the prince? After all, the most excellent advisor may well be minister to the third brain, the one that is useless. Machiavelli’s appeal to the prince’s vanity and pride therefore reveals a complexity in the relationship between prince and minister that was not evident in his initial formulation, when he suggested the prince recognised the ability and determined the faithfulness of the minister. It now seems possible that an excellent minister may have more influence, if not dominance.

Aware of this implication, Machiavelli now quickly seeks to comfort the potential ‘second brain’ princes. Even if such a prince does not have ‘inventiveness by himself’, as long as he has judgment to recognize the good or evil someone does and says, and extols the one while correcting the other, ‘the minister cannot hope to deceive him and remains good himself’ (P 22, 92). The problem of disparity of brains and the danger of deception can be overcome by the simple expedient of judging the goodness of deeds. These comments are intended to calm the fears of the second brain prince with a first brain minister, though in doing so the third brain prince is implicitly abandoned to the mercy of the first brain minister, unless one can argue that a bad deed is evident even to those with the meanest capacities. But clearly Machiavelli thinks this may not be sufficient, because he immediately continues, ‘But

¹¹ In the *Discourses* (III, 6) Machiavelli calls Pandolfo ‘tyrant of Siena’ (cf P 20, 85). Antonio Giordana da Venafro (1459-1530) was professor of law, Studio di Siena. There is perhaps the suggestion here that capable advisors may help in changing perceptions so that tyrants will appear legitimate rulers.

¹² Machiavelli alludes to Hesiod, *Works and Days* (lines 295ff), but Hesiod, who is ostensibly counselling his brother Perses refers to noesis rather than ‘brains’. On Machiavelli’s truncated notion of prudence see Garver (1987).

as to how a prince can know his minister, here is a mode that never fails' (P 22, 93). Yet as the tone of his discussion indicates, Machiavelli's helpful advice, which is in effect a permanent solution to the problem of the prince-minister relationship, is directed to the second brains who may now see in ministers not a means to augment their reputation for wisdom, but rather a danger to their rule. The irony is that Machiavelli's comforting advice takes the form of a 'rule', an order he will be giving to all future princes who are not inventive.

What then is the 'mode that never fails'? The first thing to note is that the goodness of the minister is now no longer to be judged by the prudence of the advice. This has been silently dropped because of the obvious assumption regarding the differing excellences of the prince and minister. The new test concerns the faithfulness of ministers: is a minister 'thinking more of himself than of you'? The problem, it would seem, is that such a minister can never be trusted and will never be a good minister because 'he who has someone's state in his hands should never think of himself but always of the prince' (P 22, 93). This familiar problem of partiality and private interest could be simply resolved by having such ministers replaced by others who are virtuous, show integrity and look to the common good. Machiavelli's 'mode that never fails', does not even mention this possibility. On the contrary he seems to assume (or perhaps thinks it is more reliable to presume) that all ministers (or indeed everyone) are unavoidably partial and self-regarding. Hence his proposed solution to making a minister always think of the prince, that is, 'to keep him good', is not to persuade or educate but rather bestow so much honour, wealth and obligations that the minister will not desire more of these, but in realizing 'he cannot stand without the prince', he will fear changes. Goodness or faithfulness is to be achieved by concord of interest rather than an appeal to an idea or principle that transcends both prince and advisor. Machiavelli finishes this discussion (and the chapter) with the chilling observation, 'When, therefore, ministers and princes in relation to ministers are so constituted, they can trust one another; when it is otherwise, the end is always damaging for either for one or the other' (P 22, 93). Trust, it seems, is not founded upon mutual respect and confidence, or a common commitment to some higher good, but to a subtle calculation of the advantages that outweigh the costs of mutually beneficial relationships.

The theme of secretaries, which was initiated as an important question for the prince and subject to his prudent management, and promised to burnish his reputation for wisdom, is now revealed to be an intractable problem of a struggle between princes and secretaries caused by differences in interest and the excellence of their 'brains'. This problem, according

to Machiavelli, cannot reliably be resolved by a turn to a middle or common ground in wisdom, patriotism or religion to mediate and resolve the necessarily divergent ambitions of the princely and ministerial ‘brains’. Rather, the only dependable means is the institutional use of rewards and punishments, the calculated dispensation of honour, wealth and fear by the prince to make the minister ‘good’.

On Flatterers

Chapter XXII seems to be Machiavelli’s conclusive advice on how to manage secretaries. Yet the next chapter, Chapter XXIII, ‘In What Mode Flatterers Are to Be Avoided’, which is ostensibly about a different question, in effect reopens the question of advisors and indeed, seems to offer completely different counsel. Flattery is the use of complementary words to benefit the flatterer. Flatterers typically magnify, exaggerate or even fabricate an aspect of the flattered in order to please them, and thereby gain an advantage. But given flattery assumes an advantage to the flatterer, telling the truth for gain would also qualify as flattery, and indeed may be its most insidious form. Flattery therefore is to be distinguished from tact, which is a restraint in noting an aspect of someone’s character to spare them pain, and obsequiousness or servility, that flatters but with no evident benefit to the servile.¹³ The danger of flattery is an important theme in classical political thought.¹⁴ Plato rejects flattery because in appealing to the pleasure derived from the admiration of others, it undermines the promise of praise, which is the due recognition of the good. Flattery therefore distorts the recognition of the good by separating the pleasant from the good and thereby corrupting both the flatterer and the flattered.¹⁵ Similarly, Aristotle distinguishing friendliness from the extremes of obsequiousness and surliness, defines the *kolax* or flatterer as someone who aims at being pleasant in order ‘to gain some benefit for himself, in money and all that comes from money’ (NE 1127 a7; 1108a, 27-29).¹⁶ This understanding of flattery came to dominate subsequent thought. For example, when Thomas Aquinas confronts the problem of flattery, he follows in important ways the Aristotelian view of the flatterer or adulator as one who

¹³ For a general overview of flattery see Regier (2007); Eylon and Heyd (2008).

¹⁴ For one of the earliest examples see Aesop’s story of the fox who starts praising the crow’s beautiful singing, who is so flattered that it starts to sing, dropping the food from its beak that is taken by the fox. For detailed examination of the theme in classic political philosophy see Nerdahl (2011); Konstan (1996).

¹⁵ It is evident above all in oratory, according to Plato, but is similar to cosmetics, pastry cooking and sophistry, which are the false counterparts to the true arts of gymnastics, medicine and legislation. See generally Gorgias 463b ff; Phaedrus 240b-d; *Republic* 6.494d-495a; Eylon and Heyd 2008, 692-3).

¹⁶ In democracies, where the principle of equality predominates, flattery (*kolakeia*) becomes the vice of the demagogue who seeks to persuade the demos. In other regimes, especially monarchies where the court or the entourage included political advisors or counsellors, flattery exposes rulers to the dangers of the ingratiating courtier who as *parasitos*, became a threat to good rule.

praised for gain, justifying his conclusion that flattery is a venial and not a mortal sin (*Summa* II, IIa Q 115, Art. 1, 2).

Having discerned the political dangers of flattery, two different solutions were proposed to counter it. The first was education, of both rulers and the people. Rulers in particular would be taught virtues of character to make them impervious to the blandishments of flatterers, with an emphasis on philosophical inquiry, as well as historical lessons derived from lives of eminent leaders.¹⁷ The other was the attempt to show the difference between true friends and flatterers by noting the importance of *parrhesia* or ‘saying everything’, a form of honesty or candour in speech between friends. Frank advice revealed true friends, gained the ruler good counsel, while thwarting the pleasing lies and exaggerations of the flatterer.¹⁸ These teachings were especially evident in the ‘mirror to princes’ works that sought to counsel princes on good rule. Thus Machiavelli’s contemporary Erasmus in his *Of Christian Prince* (1514) devotes an entire chapter to how princes must avoid flatterers who are described as ‘the most dangerous tame animal’.¹⁹

Machiavelli introduces Chapter XXIII almost as an afterthought, prompted by the discussion in the previous chapter: ‘I do not want to leave out an important point and an error from which princes defend themselves with difficulty, unless they are very prudent or make good choices’ (P 23, 93). All princes need to ‘defend’ themselves from the ‘plague’ of flattery and flatterers that crowd the courts. The source of this problem is human nature: because ‘men take such pleasure in their own affairs’ they deceive themselves so that powerful self-love makes princes seek the pleasure of praise, while blinding them to its truth. Consequently they look needy and contemptible. Though he speaks of the ‘plague’ of flattery, Machiavelli’s focus is not on the flatterer but on the deficiencies of character in princes that makes flattery possible. Such a diagnosis would suggest the conventional remedies for such a problem, such as an education in virtue to make princes impervious to such flattery. But Machiavelli does not take this opportunity to advocate a classical conception of magnanimity to moderate the prince’s love of honor, nor does he remind the

¹⁷ See Nerdahl’s (2011) discussion of Plutarch’s *Life of Dion* and the importance of philosophy to counter the dangers of tyranny.

¹⁸ On the conception of Parrhesia in Greek thought see Landauer (2012). On its positive aspect in modern democracies see Foucault (2001).

¹⁹ The main emphasis is on education of the prince, with special attention paid to the selection of nurses, companions, attendants and tutors. Dangers of flattery implicit in portraits, statues, inscriptions and honorary titles are also noted by Erasmus. Young princes are to be taught to think of the welfare of the people and not to believe that they can do anything they want. An education in philosophy and especially the reading of books (because they are honest and candid and therefore do not flatter) are recommended to develop character and judgment (Erasmus 1997, 54-65).

prince that pride is a sin and humility or meekness one of the foremost Christian virtues. The reason is twofold. By the time we have reached chapters XXI and XXIII Machiavelli has already provided an education that in effect ‘departs from the orders of others’ as he claimed in Chapter XV. This includes a teaching on how ‘to be able not to be good’, (P 15, 61); on being liberal by spending other people’s money (P 16, 62); on the safety of being feared rather than loved (P 17, 65); on how to appear, rather than be ‘all mercy, all faith, all honesty, all humanity, all religion’ and use laws as weapons (P 18, 69-70). In particular, as the discussion in Chapter XIX ‘Of Avoiding Contempt and Hatred’, and Chapter XXI ‘What a Prince Should Do to be Held in Esteem’ indicate, Machiavelli seeks to rehabilitate honor from the ignominy it has endured under ‘our religion’.²⁰ For these reasons, he denies any role to the classical or pious education in virtue: ‘For there is no other way to guard oneself from flattery unless men understand that they do not offend you in telling the truth’ (P 23, 94). With this remark Machiavelli appears to endorse the other well-known solution, *parrhesia* or frankness, as the only means of countering flattery. Yet as we will see, the subsequent discussion reveals formidable problems with this solution to the extent that one is left with the impression that there may be no solution to the problem of flattery.

The main difficulty with such truth-telling is that if everyone tells you the truth, ‘they lack reverence for you’. The danger is that the prince will look contemptible in seeking honest advice. But why would seeking the truth from advisors lead to lack of respect? Is it because open discussion presumes a form of parity between interlocutors and therefore unavoidably depreciates the authority of the prince? Perhaps because it is public acknowledgment by the prince of a deficiency (he does not know or lacks judgment) so that regular deference to the opinion of advisors would perhaps confirm to everyone that the real rulers are those who know and advise? Honesty and truth-telling may overcome flattery, but seemingly at the expense of the dignity and therefore authority of the prince.

Having noted the significant obstacles associated with what Machiavelli stresses is the *only* solution to the problem of flattery, he proposes a ‘third mode’ ostensibly an attempt to retain truth-telling while remedying its potential threat to the dignity of the prince. Addressing the ‘prudent’ prince, this mode starts by dividing people into two groups, the ‘wise men in his state’ and the ‘others’. Only the wise should be given freedom to speak the truth to the prince, but even in this case, not about everything – only about those matters that the prince has asked about and nothing else. Yet even this restriction on the wise is removed:

²⁰ See *Discourses* (II, 2, 131). We should recall that in the chapter preceding discussion of secretaries (Chapter XXI ‘What a Prince Should Do To Be Held in Esteem’), Machiavelli encourages esteem rather than humility.

‘But he should ask them about everything and listen to their opinions; then he should decide by himself, in his own mode; and with these councils and with each member of them he should behave in such a mode that everyone knows that the more freely he speaks, the more he will be accepted’ (P 23, 94). As for the ‘others’, the advice is simple: ‘he should not want to hear anyone’, and once having decided he should be ‘obstinate in his decisions’. Where this mode is not adopted, according to Machiavelli, the prince is exploited by flatterers or in changing views constantly is seen to be indecisive and therefore contemptible. With this advice we see that one major source of being contemptible is indecisiveness, due no doubt to the different advice a prince will receive. The price of frankness is contradictory advice, to be remedied by seeking advice only from the wise, and then by deliberating not in their company. To demonstrate this case, Machiavelli refers to Emperor Maximilian. Before turning to this example to see how it supports Machiavelli’s claim, it is necessary to see the consistency of this ‘third mode’ with the advice he had given in the previous chapter on secretaries. In the emphasis on wisdom, this approach certainly reinforces what Machiavelli had said previously about the necessity of prudence in politics, moving away from the other test, whether a minister is thinking of the prince or his own welfare. Indeed, it seems to go further in advocating a sort of deliberative council of the wise at the apex of political judgment. But the solution he proposes seems to neglect altogether the problem of the ‘three brains’ and the tension between prince and advisor he identified in the previous chapter and the solution he proposed in terms of making advisors ‘good’ by combination of reward and fear. Why should a ‘first brain’ prince be counselled, even by the ‘wise’? Is there not a danger in the second, or even the third ‘useless’ brains in being advised, and therefore controlled by the wise? Who exactly are the ‘wise’ – after all, is there not an extraordinary range in human excellence, from the philosophically profound, to the practically prudent? Finally, what about the problem of self-regard that distorts the prince’s judgment and makes possible the plague of flatter? Will the prince’s opinion of who is wise be inevitably distorted by this passion? If so, doesn’t this third mode simply ignore the problem of flattery?

With these thoughts in mind we turn to Machiavelli’s ‘modern’ example, that of Emperor Maximilian. In doing so, however, we are struck by Machiavelli’s passing remark that everything Machiavelli knows about Maximilian he has gained from Father Luca, ‘a man of the present emperor Maximilian’. Whatever the subsequent discussion of the emperor, this comment starkly confirms the problem of a secretary or advisor who is at best indiscreet, at worst treacherous in revealing the strengths and weaknesses of the Emperor’s character. It reminds us, in other words, of the problem of faithful advisors that was raised in the previous

chapter on secretaries and apparently forgotten in this discussion of flattery. As for the emperor himself, Machiavelli sees him as someone who opposes his ‘third mode’ and in his ineffectiveness, proof of the need for the specific form of frank deliberation Machiavelli counsels. Maximilian, because he is a secretive man, ‘does not communicate his plans to anyone, nor seek their views’. Consequently, in implementing them, they are contradicted by those around him, who dissuade him from his plans because he is an ‘agreeable person’. As a result, ‘the things he does on one day he destroys on another, that no one ever understands what he wants or plans to do, and that one cannot found oneself on his decisions’ (P 23, 94-95). On one level the example supports Machiavelli’s ‘third mode’ because in the extremes of taking no advice and then listening to all, Maximilian becomes indecisive in his decisions and looks contemptible before his court. Yet in other respects the example seems to undermine Machiavelli’s ‘third mode’. There is no indication that Maximilian’s initial judgment is unsound, even though it was formed without discussion or advice of anyone. Rather, the problems arose later, when he sought to implement his plans. If Maximilian could implement his judgment unwaveringly, by not being agreeable and accommodating, or by not taking counsel in implementation, then it may be possible for him to be decisive. Since it is unlikely for him to change his character, perhaps he is better off, contrary to Machiavelli’s advice, to reject counsel altogether in implementation (as he did in formulation) to avoid the charge of vacillation. Maximilian’s example therefore seems to suggest that both flattery and contempt can be overcome by taking no counsel and relying on one’s own judgment. Yet this solution also seems to be exposed to a grave problem. It is true that there are questions regarding Maximilian’s prudence. The choice of the unreliable Father Luca tells against his judgment, if we are to rely on Machiavelli’s first measure of the prince’s excellence. He also seems to lack the ability to discern good and bad counsel when it is time to implement his decision. But above all, Maximilian seems to raise a more complex question regarding the importance of character in shaping judgment. His agreeable nature – his desire to be liked – seems to undermine his judgment. It would seem that Maximilian’s secretiveness and agreeable nature – and not his judgment – is the root cause of his failure. Is prudence a hostage to character and disposition? Put somewhat differently, to what extent is the question of ‘brains’ and the exercise of prudence subject to the prince’s and the secretaries nature? To what extent is Machiavelli’s ‘third mode’, relying on prudence and frankness, subject to chance and particular circumstances?²¹

²¹ See, for example, Machiavelli’s famous discussion of Fortuna in *The Prince* (P 24), who favours the ‘young’

After the ambiguous example of Maximilian, Machiavelli seemingly summarises and restates his ‘third mode’ suggestion. But the restatement is a reformulation since it abandons important aspects of the third mode. It is as if the example of Maximilian has forced Machiavelli to move away from his former position. In his summary, Machiavelli states that the prince should always take counsel but only when he wants it, and ‘he should discourage everyone from counselling him about anything unless he asks it of them’. Yet he should be a ‘a very broad questioner’ and a ‘patient listener to the truth’, going so far as to say ‘he should become angry when he learns that anyone has any hesitation in speaking to him’ (P 23, 95). The distinction between the ‘wise men’ and others is now abandoned. The prince will now take counsel from everyone, the only limit being that he will initiate the discussion. It is as if Machiavelli wants to change the nature of the prince himself, after all, isn’t ‘a very broad questioner’ and a ‘patient listener to the truth’ a practical definition of a philosopher? Does this mean that the ‘third mode’ presupposes a ‘first brain’ or a ‘philosopher-prince’? Perhaps it is not accidental that we have raised these questions. Machiavelli follows his summary or review with what appears to be a new theme. Yet it soon becomes evident that this discussion goes to the core of the questions we have posed:

And since many esteem that any prince who establishes an opinion of himself as prudent is so considered not because of his nature but because of the good counsel he has around him, without doubt they are deceived. For this is a general rule that never fails: that a prince who is not wise by himself cannot be counselled well, unless indeed by chance he should submit himself to one person alone to govern him in everything, who is a very prudent man (P 23, 95).

Of course it was Machiavelli who had proposed at the very beginning of Chapter XXII, ‘Of Those Whom Princes Have as Secretaries’ that ‘the first conjecture that is to be made of the brain of the lord is to see the men he has around him’ (P22, 92). It is difficult to account for such a repudiation of his initial formulation within the space of three pages.²² Was he simply appealing to the vanity of princes to direct their attention on the question of secretaries? The subsequent discussion focused on the various ways of managing the relationship between princes and secretaries, ranging from taking counsel as in the case of Pandolfo, to the mode that never fails in judging the counsellor (‘is he thinking of himself more than you?’), to how to keep them ‘good’ (the judicious use of reward and punishment, and not appealing to the common good), and in the chapter on flattery, on the ‘third mode’, taking counsel from the

because they are more impetuous.

²² It is remarkable that the Machiavelli scholarship does not seem to have recognised and therefore explained this apparent contradiction.

wise, and finally, counsel from anyone as long as the prince does the asking. Now it seems that this entire discussion has ended in a complete repudiation of its starting point and its replacement with ‘a new rule that never fails’: ‘a prince who is not wise by himself cannot be counselled well’. It is in particular the inability to overcome the problems with truth-telling, the only means of countering flattery that seem to decide the issue. *Parrhesia* may solve the plague of flattery but at the price of undermining the authority of princes by elevating counsellors, by instituting a diversity of contradictory advice, and by not overcoming the character of the prince (who may be prudent but too needy for the affection of others). Indeed, the rule that never fails, ‘a prince who is not wise by himself cannot be counselled well’, seems to question the usefulness of advisors altogether – why would a wise prince seek counsel at all, except in the most trivial sense of being provided with facts and detailed circumstances?

It is true that Machiavelli acknowledges an exception to this rule: ‘unless indeed by chance he should submit himself to one person alone to govern him in everything, who is a very prudent man’. Yet this exception proves to be fatal for the prince: ‘In this case he could well be [counselled well], but it would not last long because the governor would in a short time take away his state’ (P 23, 95). With this observation, Machiavelli outlines how this situation cannot be remedied. A prince who is not wise, according to Machiavelli, cannot usefully take counsel from many, assuming that one can have many ‘very prudent’ because such a prince will ‘never have united counsel, nor know by himself how to unite them’. Moreover, each counsellor will ‘think of his own interest’ and the prince will be unable to ‘know how to correct them or understand them’. The reason for this is ‘men will always turn out bad for you unless they have been made good by necessity’. Thus Machiavelli denies the possibility of disinterested, ‘scientific’ or even public spirited advice – all, and perhaps especially the ‘very prudent’ – cannot help but seek rule and authority. Machiavelli concludes the chapter with a position that denies what he asserted in his chapter on secretaries that initiated his assessment of how princes should deal with advisors: ‘So one concludes that good counsel, from wherever it comes, must arise from the prudence of the prince, and not the prudence of the prince from good counsel’ (P 23, 95).

Machiavelli’s Contradictory Advice

What Machiavellian lessons can we derive from our detailed engagement with his discussion of the role of advisors and especially on how to deal with the potential dangers of flattery? Machiavelli in important ways seems to anticipate and provide the theoretical justification for

the modern initiatives that both seek political advisors, while wishing to constrain and limit their power. He also shows the limits of political advice and deliberation. But what are we to make of the perplexing contradiction in his account, where he seems to endorse advisors as useful and important, while in the very next chapter he sees them as useless and even dangerous. Perhaps Machiavelli simply makes a mistake? Yet the subtlety of his writing and the proximity of the contradictory counsel suggests that such an apparent incongruity is intended and has a didactic purpose. I suggest that in presenting such a contradictory account, and making us think about resolving these tensions, Machiavelli seeks to present a twofold lesson – a practical demonstration of the power of flattery and the incapacity of truth-telling to counter it; and the real meaning of his fundamental distinction between ordinary and exceptional or ‘first brain’ advisors.

That most, if not all readers of Machiavelli have not seen the contradictory position he adopts in the space of a few pages is testimony to his view that either leaders are simply deficient or ‘third brains’ or that their vanity or lack of ability will mean they will hear the advice they want, rather than the advice they are offered. In the context of the specific chapters we’ve examined, leaders who will take the trouble to read these passages will always assume they are first brains, disregarding Machiavelli’s view that at best they are ‘second’ brains who understand the first, but much more likely they are the ‘infinite’ others who are useless. They will therefore never take seriously or disregard the dangers advisors may present. Machiavellian thereby shows how *parrhesia* or truthfulness makes little difference if one can skilfully tell the offending truth in a way that vanity will interpret it as justified praise. We can see this more clearly if we return to our discussion of the Dedicatory Letter, where Machiavelli shows in practice how he will tell the truth denigrating Lorenzo while appearing to praise him. As we have seen, though adopting the tone of praise and flattery typical of such dedications Machiavelli avows that the work does not flatter. But how can he please the prince to ‘acquire favour’ while telling the truth? It is not just the subtle ambiguity of claims such as ‘I judge this work undeserving of our presence’ or even ‘no greater gift could be made by me than to give you the capacity to be able to understand’. Machiavelli’s true assessment of Lorenzo becomes clear when we return to his flattering portrayal of Lorenzo’s superiority high on a mountain, while Machiavelli is in low places. Machiavelli uses the simile of Renaissance landscape painting to defend his apparent presumptuousness in giving rules to princes – those who sketch landscapes will be in plains to consider the nature of mountains, and high atop mountains to consider low places, so ‘to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be prince, and to know well the nature of

princes one need to be of the people'. The implicit truth should Lorenzo wish to see it, is the observation that Lorenzo does not know the nature of princes. But it seems that Lorenzo does not know the nature of the people either, because he is unaware of Machiavelli's plight: 'And if your Magnificence will at some time turn your eyes from the summit of height to the low places, you will learn how undeservedly endure a great and continuous malignity of fortune'. Lorenzo knows neither the high, nor the low – in short, he knows nothing. What such a disinterested reading of the Dedicatory Letter reveals is Machiavelli's amusing demonstration of how he can appear to flatter, and indeed seems to be willing to use it to his advantage, while also telling the harsh truth, albeit in such a way that only those readers who are attentive to his advice and counsel will understand.

In the chapters on secretaries and flattery he explains the source of this ability – our innate ability or the nature of our 'brains' and the pleasure we take in our own affairs tends to make us deceive ourselves. In the two chapters we have examined, Machiavelli makes the strongest case for the primacy of prudence in political rule, and therefore both the necessity and unavoidable limitations of advisors. Advisors tend to think of themselves, they will use flattery and if they are truly talented, they will seek to rule. His concluding remark suggests that prudent princes do not need counsellors. Yet it is equally possible that princes who read these pages will not see or will ignore this honest assessment, because they think they are prudent or 'first brains', who want prudent advisors only because they want a reputation for wisdom. This discussion and its seemingly contradictory advice, is Machiavelli's amusing demonstration of why flattery, in capable hands, is immune to *parrhesia* or truth-telling; indeed, flattery makes us blind to a directly contradictory statements made in a space of three pages. This Machiavellian critique of *parrehsia* therefore poses profound challenge to all those contemporary scholars who think debate, deliberation and discussion in groups yields good judgment. It does so not only in the name of flattery, but also with its attendant problems of multiple and contradictory voices, partiality or lack of common interest, and the extent to which counsel undermines the dignity and therefore authority of leaders.²³

The contradiction in Machiavelli's counsel regarding the usefulness yet dangers of advisors and especially the pernicious nature of flattery may also be resolved on another level, once we recognise that Machiavelli has two types of advisors in mind. If most people ('infinite'), and especially those leaders who inherit their office have a 'third' or useless brains, then it would seem that there is no way – whether institutional or in terms of frankness

²³ On the original foundations of deliberative democracy see Habermas (1985). On 'groupthink' see Kowert (2002); Janis (1982).

– to protect these princes from the uselessness of other third brains, or the predations of first and second brains advisors. The case of the second brains is more complicated. As we have seen, flattery cannot be overcome by the traditional solution of truthfulness and Machiavelli doesn't even consider the other remedies of friendship or education. Consequently, the only reliable means for second brain princes to employ advisors with safety is by the institutional conjoining of the interest and welfare of the prince with that of the advisor. This may not always yield the best outcome, but it will overcome some of the dangers of flattery (advisors will be less tempted to use it as a tool to gain personal advantages) and ensure that there is consistency in the formulation and execution of policy. Such a solution may be Machiavelli's practical advice to most princes. It should therefore not surprise us that this is exactly what New Public Management advocated as the means to ensure that civil servants were amenable to the will of their elected political masters.²⁴ Yet such an institutional attempt to combine disparate interests and wills does not address the problem of the 'first brain'. Indeed, Machiavelli appears to suggest that there is no obvious way of protecting oneself from a first brain advisor so that these individuals should either be avoided, or be acknowledged and deferred to as true princes and rulers. But who exactly are these excellent 'first brains' and how can we recognise them? In *The Prince* Machiavelli praises as Moses, Cyrus, Romulus and Theseus as admirable leaders who became princes by their virtue and not fortune (P 6, 22). He also notes that leaders imitate others, so that 'Alexander the Great imitated Achilles, Caesar, Alexander; Scipio, Cyrus'. But it soon becomes clear that such imitation is not of leaders, but what others have written about these leaders:

And whoever reads the life of Cyrus written by Xenophon will then recognize in the life of Scipio how much glory that imitation brought him, how much in chastity, affability, humanity, and liberality Scipio conformed to what had been written of Cyrus by Xenophon (P 14, 60 cf P 17, 68).

When Scipio imitated Cyrus, he was in effect doing Xenophon's bidding, just as Achilles, who was in effect a creation of Homer, became a model for Alexander, who in turn was copied by Caesar. Machiavelli here indicates how Homer and Xenophon are the 'first brains' who have influenced the lives of some of the most famous leaders. And they have done so not through direct political action, but by writing books that become influential models and instructive works of education for future princes. These then are the 'first brains' who in ruling indirectly, govern the prince 'in everything' and in effect are the true princes.

²⁴ On new public management see Osborne (2010). On use of limited contracts and remuneration see, for example, the UK Cabinet Office (2005; 2010) on model contracts and code of conduct for Cabinet advisors.

Machiavelli, in his famous account in Chapter 15 of how he will ‘write something useful to whoever understands it’, ‘departs from the orders of others’ who write about ‘imagined republics and principalities’ to claim to teach a wholly new teaching: ‘Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity’ (P 15, 61). The first brains, such as Homer and Xenophon, as well as those who write about ‘imaginary republics’ such as Plato and Augustin, are the true political masters who rule over all other brains through their books and ideas. In this sense, all second brains are servants and soldiers of first brains in their overarching struggle over the highest principles. In contemporary terms, political leaders who are not themselves ‘first brains’ will always be implementing some ‘ideology’ that they have acquired from their readings.²⁵ Machiavelli’s comments on first brains are therefore a reminder of the other type of advisor, not the second brain that will provide immediate and strategic advice, but those who provide a comprehensive account of politics and thereby what it means to rule, not for now, but for all time.

On Rules that Never Fail

What is Machiavelli’s advice for contemporary political leaders and their advisors? Machiavelli thinks prudence or judgment – what he ambiguously calls ‘brains’ – is essential for political practice. But the diversity of these ‘brains’, ranging from those who know to those who do not understand and therefore are ‘useless’, and the extent to which these abilities do not coincide with the authority and office, creates for Machiavelli the need for political advisors.²⁶ Yet as he shows, there is no natural basis for a unity of interest between leaders and advisors, so that there will always be a core tension between the two. It therefore seems that Machiavelli has a contradictory teaching regarding leaders and advisors, suggesting that the relationship can be reconciled for the benefit of both, or that it is inherently unstable, so that either a leader does not need an advisor, or if he does, he will become subservient to him. This seemingly contradictory formulation can be resolved if one takes into account the nature of the leader and the advisor. Accordingly, in some cases,

²⁵ On the importance of ‘intellectuals’ in the American context see for example Tevi (2002). Ideology is itself a ‘Marxist’ understanding of the dominance of ideas, so that the prevalence of its use in effect underlines the power or influence of ‘Marxism’. In Keynes’s well-known formulation that endorses Machiavelli’s view, ‘The ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist’ (Keynes 1936, 383-4).

²⁶ See generally Baackman (1997); Balot and Trochimchuk (2012).

depending on the judgment of leaders and advisors, Machiavelli thinks this tension can be overcome institutionally, so that advisors are ‘made good’ by uniting their interests with those of the prince. But he also shows that the disparity of power makes flattery a useful weapon, one that cannot be overcome, either institutionally, or through the traditional remedy of *parrhesia* if used by the capable advisor. Indeed, Machiavelli demonstrates how in some exceptional or unusual cases, leaders can even become the executors of the will and judgment of advisors, who are in effect hidden rulers. In his account of advisors and flattery Machiavelli therefore anticipates a number of modern initiatives regarding leaders and advisors. These include the modern managerial techniques, such as use of limited term contracts, performance measures and bonuses to ensure the loyalty of modern advisors; the inherent problems of honesty and truth-telling in small groups and the unavoidable problem of pleasing and flattery that results in ‘groupthink’, and finally the powerful influence of teachers of princes who are influential and therefore shape the judgment and ambition of leaders.

What we learn from Machiavelli’s counsel on the importance of advisors and flattery is not the simple caricature of ‘Machiavellian politics’ that he promoted with his pungent and aphoristic ‘rules that never fail’, but a more subtle account that shows the importance of ideas in politics and therefore the need for advisors for princes, but above all the fundamental tensions, if not discord, that exists between the one who wields political power and the one who knows how to use it.

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