The Machiavelli effect

by Paul A. Rahe

A review of Machiavelli's Effectual Truth by Harvey C. Mansfield
Machiavelli’s Effectual Truth
Creating the Modern World
Harvey Mansfield is a wonder. In the course of a long and distinguished career as a political scientist, he translated Machiavelli’s Prince. He co-translated that figure’s Florentine Histories and his Discourses on Livy as well as Tocqueville’s Democracy in America. He edited a one-volume selection of the correspondence of Edmund Burke. He published books on Tocqueville and on party government as it is conceptualized in the writings of Burke and Bolingbroke. He devoted volumes to subjects as varied as manliness, the spirit of liberalism, America’s constitutional soul, and what undergraduates need to know about the study of political philosophy. He penned a lengthy commentary on Machiavelli’s Discourses on Livy and wrote a monograph on the executive power as discussed in Machiavelli and his successors.

When, twenty-eight years ago on the eve of his sixty-fifth birthday, Mansfield ushered into print a collection of the essays he had written on the Florentine, one might have been forgiven for thinking that this was his valedictory contribution to the republic of letters. One would certainly not have supposed that in his ninety-second year he would bring forth yet another such volume—but here we have it, in *Machiavelli’s Effectual Truth: Creating the Modern World*. It has been well worth the wait.

These two collections have something in common and should perhaps be read in tandem. Each boasts a title that is deliberately ambiguous. When one works one’s way through *Machiavelli’s Virtue*, the first of these two volumes, one quickly becomes aware that Mansfield has in mind not only the conception of *virtù* articulated in the Florentine’s works. He is also asking his readers to assess the man’s peculiar excellence. The like is true of the volume under review here.

Mansfield is interested not only in what Machiavelli had in mind when he coined the word *effettuale* and deployed it in the fifteenth chapter of *The Prince*, juxtaposing “the effectual truth of the thing” (*la verità effettuale della cosa*) with “the imagination of it”; when he dismissed as irrelevant “imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth”; and when he suggested that “a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good.” He is also interested in Machiavelli’s achievement—the *verità effettuale* of his life and of the works that he penned. In short, he wants to see the man hoist by his own petard—judged by the standard he set up for weighing the significance of everything—and he shows us that this is what Machiavelli himself both expected and desired.

Mansfield and Machiavelli resemble one another in one particular. There is something boyish, something positively mischievous, something delightful and audacious about their prose, and they are both graced with wit. Mansfield had a good time in fashioning the essays collected in this volume, and those who have the patience to work their way through them will have a good time, too. All that it takes is time, determination, a taste for transgression, and a sense of humor. (Nor
should readers be dissuaded by the hardcover edition’s hefty price tag; the paperback costs only $34.99.)

This is not an ordinary scholarly volume. There is nothing in it that smacks of the pedant. More often than not, Mansfield does not even bother to prove his point. In some passages, he even warns his readers that the point is beyond proof. In others, he asks them to compare one passage with another, and he suggests that there is more to what Machiavelli is attempting to convey than immediately meets the eye. Those who cannot imagine that a writer of yesteryear could pull one’s leg will hate this book.

When, for example, the Florentine tells his readers that Christianity “has shown the truth and the true way,” scholars bereft of literary instincts are apt to suppose that, for all of the criticism that he directs at what he sometimes pointedly calls “the present religion,” Machiavelli is a believer. Mansfield suggests the contrary—that “the truth and the true way” intended by the Florentine has to do with technique. On this reading, Christianity “has shown the truth and the true way”—but only in the sense that, by dint of its success, it has disclosed “the effectual truth” of political life by revealing just how effective spiritual warfare by way of propaganda can be. On this reading, Jesus Christ was not a prophet unarmed—not in the most important regard.

To grasp what Mansfield is up to, one must first read The Prince (with special attention paid to chapters 6 and 15), then read and reread the preface of Machiavelli’s Discourses on Livy, chapter 2 of the second part of that work, and the first chapter of its third part. In the end, everything turns on whether the “new orders and modes” said in the sixth chapter of The Prince to have been articulated by the “new” princes most to be admired are akin to the “new modes and orders” that Machiavelli claims, in the preface to his Discourses on Livy, to have discovered himself. If they are akin, one must accept that the Florentine thinks of himself as a new prince of sorts and that he regards himself as a prophet on the model of Jesus Christ . . . armed only with a book (but well-armed nonetheless). Mansfield’s audacity consists in this: he merely asks that one reread The Prince and the preface to the Discourses on Livy with such a possibility in mind, and then he encourages one to read on through the rest of these two works in the same fashion.

Of course, Mansfield is not the first to have suggested such a reading of these texts. As he himself makes abundantly clear, that honor belongs to Leo Strauss, who made this argument in his Thoughts on Machiavelli. What distinguishes Mansfield’s account from that of Strauss is the emphasis he places on the word effettuale. It was a new word in Machiavelli’s time, and it was quickly picked up—most tellingly, in the King James version of the New Testament where it is deployed again and again. The word’s virtue, as Machiavelli would have it, is not only that it redirects attention away from “what should be done” to “what is done.” It also forces one to attend to what is effective.

As Mansfield observes, when Machiavelli singles out necessity as a constraint on statesmanship, he is not simply suggesting that, in the political sphere, circumstances arise—war, for example—in which one must do what is otherwise forbidden. Classical and Christian political thinking
encompassed this possibility. What Machiavelli is saying is something much, much harsher and much more subversive. The fifteenth chapter of *The Prince* does not describe how princes and others should treat enemies. Its focus is on their relations “with subjects and with friends.” The effectual truth of Machiavelli’s account of human relations is Hobbes’s war of all against all. The only difference is that Hobbes conceives of the social contract as a means of escape and that, had Machiavelli been confronted with Hobbes’s argument, he would have laughed out loud. His position is that what Aristotle and others called “friendship” is a snare and a delusion, that Christianity is an elaborate and very effective con worthy of imitation, and that there is no escape from what Hobbes terms “the state of nature.” What Hobbes says regarding the human condition before the emergence of civil society—that in it there is no justice and that “force and fraud” are therein “the cardinal virtues”—is true, in Machiavelli’s opinion, thereafter as well.

Mansfield’s Machiavelli harbors for weakness nothing but contempt. As “a form of education,” he explains, the Christian religion “makes us esteem less the honor of the world.” Thanks to the “ambitious idleness” (*ambizioso ozio*) of its clergymen, it confers “more glory on men who are humble and contemplative than on those who are active.” It lodges “the greatest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt for human things,” and it renders “the world weak” and gives “it in prey to wicked men, who can manage it securely, seeing that the collectivity [*università*] of men, in order to go to paradise, think more of enduring their thrashings than of avenging them.”

The Florentine’s aim is to restore “the honor of the world.” To this end, he embraces violence, cruelty, and war and suggests that this *modus operandi* is compatible with a Christianity liberated, under his influence, “from the cowardice of those who have interpreted our religion according to leisure and idleness [*ozio*] and not according to *virtù*.”

There are those—and they are numerous—who cannot stomach the idea that a thinker as incisive and entertaining as Machiavelli could be as committed to violence and cruelty as appears to be the case, and they attempt to turn him into an Italian patriot, a democrat, a proto-liberal, or a humanitarian of one sort or another. One of Mansfield’s great virtues is his refusal to give way to this temptation. He acknowledges that the author of *The Prince* is given to exaggeration—that he takes pleasure in shocking his readers. But he resists the inclination to moralize the man who was in later generations thought to have supplied the devil with his moniker “Old Nick.” There is nothing soft, gentle, or yielding about Mansfield’s Machiavelli. The Florentine’s occasional reference to “the common good” he rightly treats as trickery comparable to the assertion that Christianity “has shown the truth and the true way.” The “common good” in question is either the theft and redistribution of other peoples’ lands or “the common good of each”—which is to say, it is an individual good that other individuals also receive. The political community, for Mansfield’s Machiavelli, is no more communitarian than a band of thieves. “To want to acquire,” as the author of *The Prince* puts it, is “a very natural and ordinary thing.”

In the preface to his *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli compares himself with Christopher Columbus and his fellow Florentine Amerigo Vespucci. Therein, when he claims that he has discovered “new
modes and orders,” he adds that he has charted a path hitherto “untrodden by anyone.” In this connection, Machiavelli attributes to himself an impresa, an enterprise. That he will not be able to carry this impresa to its conclusion he readily acknowledges. Others, he predicts, will complete the work.

Most scholars give this preface a pass. Their Machiavelli is an ordinary humanist, distinguished from his fellows only by his literary gifts and his predilection for boasting. Mansfield, by way of contrast, takes the Florentine at his word—in part because, as he demonstrates, Francis Bacon and Montesquieu did just that. It is his contention that, with the phrase la verità effettuale della cosa, Machiavelli really did effect a revolution—that he laid the foundation both for modern science, with its single-minded focus on what Aristotle’s followers called efficient causation, and for the Enlightenment, prepared by Hobbes and Locke and taken up by the likes of David Hume, Montesquieu, and Adam Smith.

At the end of the fifteenth chapter of his Prince, Machiavelli suggests that the virtues and vices examined by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas—the qualities, as they and he put it, for which men are praised and blamed—should not be judged for their intrinsic worth. Nor should they be assessed in light of their putative value in the eyes of an imaginary god. Instead, they should be regarded as poses to be adopted or avoided solely with an eye to their contribution to la securtà e il bene essere suo—i.e., to one’s own security and well-being. In Mansfield’s opinion, it was Machiavelli’s shocking critique of the Aristotelian and the Christian teachings concerning moral virtue that inspired the profound reorientation of learning and of politics championed by Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Montesquieu, and Smith.

Those familiar with the line of argument presented by the essays collected in this volume should probably read them in the order in which they are presented. Those to whom Mansfield’s account is unfamiliar and may seem far-fetched, if not preposterous, might profit from beginning with the appendix, wherein Mansfield takes on those who regard Machiavelli as a man of his time. They should then turn to the essay in which he compares Machiavelli with his Florentine predecessor Leonardo Bruni—for it is in the latter piece that he outlines in some detail the thinking of Aristotle and makes clear the character of Machiavelli’s radical break with classical political philosophy and the humanism of his own time. The remaining essays can then be read in the order in which they appear. In the first four, Mansfield lays bare the character of Machiavelli’s impresa and shows the manner in which, like David in his confrontation with Goliath, he pursues victory by taking up the arms of his foe. In the last two essays, mindful that Machiavelli’s aim was the conquest of fortuna, Mansfield examines the man’s own fortuna as an author, the verità effettuale of his literary endeavor: its impact on subsequent thinkers.

This examination is incomplete. What is said is meant to be suggestive. In it, Mansfield looks at two of the Florentine’s heirs, Montesquieu and Tocqueville. To the former, he devotes a chapter of ninety-seven pages in the form of a commentary on the man’s Spirit of the Laws. This chapter is much shorter and much more narrowly focused than the book-length commentary he devoted to
Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*. Otherwise, it is similar. To read it with profit, one must review the material in Montesquieu about to be discussed, then read Mansfield’s discussion with the entirety of Montesquieu’s great tome ready to hand, and then reread the pertinent chapter in Montesquieu.

Mansfield’s interpretation of Montesquieu is no less speculative and audacious than his account of Machiavelli’s thinking. There will be some who find it outlandish. But, in one important particular, it may prove to be uncontroversial. For Mansfield demonstrates that, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu accepts Machiavelli’s challenge to restrict one’s purview to the verità effettuale; that he follows Hobbes and Locke in deploying this weapon against Machiavelli himself; and that he carries their project further by putting commerce at the center of modern life. If the standards by which everything is to be judged is the individual’s securtà e bene essere and man really is by nature an acquisitive animal, then the mode of acquisition favored by Machiavelli, war and conquest, can hardly be preferred to technological progress and commerce.

The last chapter in the volume is brief. It was drafted by Mansfield’s late wife Delba Winthrop and recast by him. Its focus is Tocqueville, who mentions Machiavelli in *Democracy in America* only once. It is a fitting conclusion to this book nonetheless. For in that monumental study, as Winthrop and Mansfield demonstrate, Tocqueville traces the effectual truth of the revolution that Machiavelli initiated and shows that it backfired on its instigator.

Machiavelli was an admirer of spiritedness. The Florentine wanted his readers to study and practice the art of war. He charged Christianity with rendering men weak and slavish. But, by debunking moral virtue and every species of highmindedness, by repudiating otherworldliness, by elevating acquisition, and by reorienting politics towards individual security and well-being in this world, he prepared the way for a new and, to Tocqueville’s way of thinking, far more debilitating species of weakness and slavishness. The Frenchman’s fear was that, under the tutelage of a polity devoted to promoting security, well-being, and the acquisition of property, the citizens would be nothing more than “a herd of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd.” And the remedy he suggested included a revival of highmindedness and of the otherworldly Christianity that Machiavelli had spurned and sought to replace.


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