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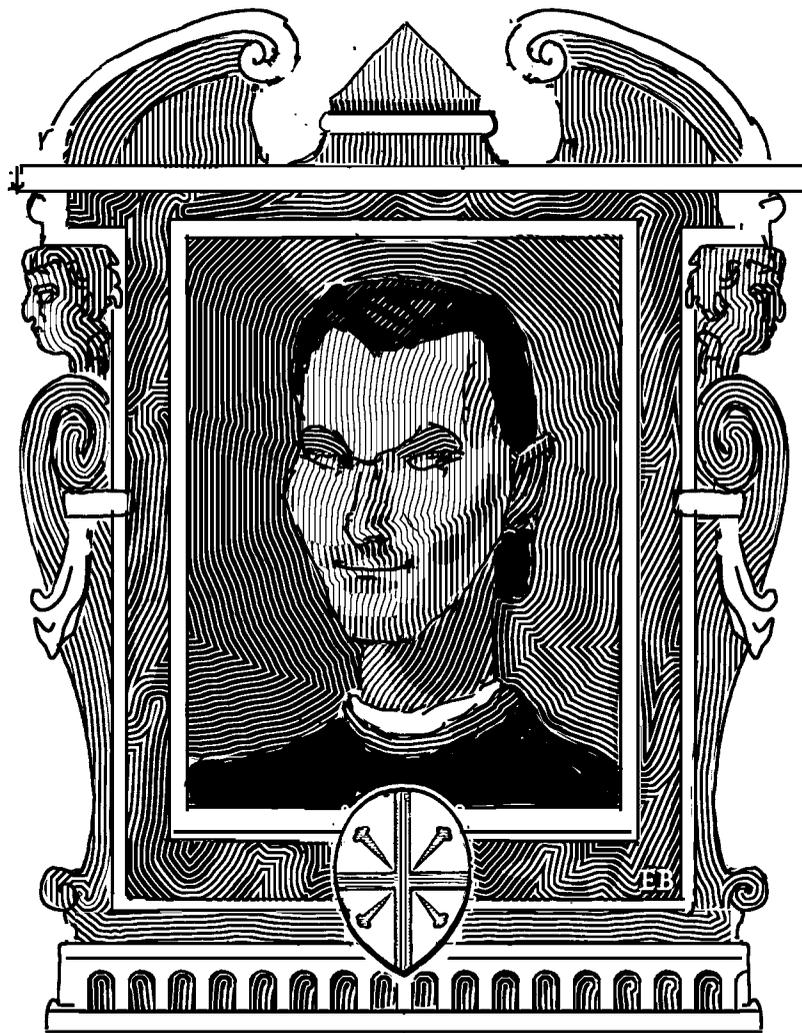
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Book Review by Harvey C. Mansfield

EVERYDAY NICCOLÒ

Machiavelli: His Life and Times, by Alexander Lee.
Picador, 768 pages, £30



A NEW BIOGRAPHY OF NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI by British historian and University of Warwick research fellow Alexander Lee is distinguished by its length and fullness, and particularly by the manner and extent of the context the author provides for his subject. On the basis of letters (which are few), ambassadorial reports (which are impersonal), and many various writings in which Machiavelli discloses (and hides) himself, a biography of his everyday life is constructed, with probable suppositions of what he “would have” said, thought, and felt. We see Machiavelli declared to be despondent, cheerful, weary, disgusted, dissatisfied, happy, etc., with virtual contextualization, as if but not actually from a computer working with Renaissance algorithms. At the same time, a very useful account of the political (more than the intellectual) events of his times is made avail-

able, so that one can see where his thoughts “might have” come from and been directed to. The result is a Machiavelli saturated with everydayness, the sort of person we can get to know without having to strain to understand.

To that end, he is referred to by his first name throughout the biography (except for its title), giving readers closer, even intimate access to the man at the bearable cost of a certain condescension from his biographer (whom I won’t call Alex). To fit into the context our Niccolò obeys the conventions of his day, so much so that he might almost be considered a conventional guy except that for some reason we still remember him after 500 years. We honor him with the designation “Machiavellian,” which means “dishonorable,” and for which he is better known than any other philosopher for his or her distinctive quality. This name is never pronounced by Lee, not even as “Niccolism,” and

the paradox it expresses is never discussed. He does mention the advances in Niccolò scholarship of the past 70 years, and gives a few names, all in the contextual school of which his book is a culmination.

WITH HIS BIOGRAPHY HE CLARIFIES the full meaning of contextualism in a way that the scholars he names do not. Lee shows that full membership in a context requires that the candidate—in this case, Niccolò—doesn’t stand out or isn’t unconventional in any way, important or not, so that he can be understood entirely by what isn’t distinctive about him. He is not allowed to be eccentric, as when he insists in a letter on “the food that is mine alone.” That interesting remark, referring to the books he reads, is cited by Lee but, again, not discussed. Anyone can read ancient books. Why does Machiavelli call them



his food, and why does he make such a contrast between that food and the vulgar folk with whom he consorts most of the day? Here is an opening not taken by the author to a region beyond the everyday context. But then, perhaps it can be explained contextually as evidence of Machiavelli's humanist education, common in Florence at the time. Or did Machiavelli, with an admittedly "superb mind," lift himself above the common in humanist education?

In this biography Machiavelli is not considered "great," nor is he ever called that. His writings are hardly praised by Lee, with the exception of his *Istorie Fiorentine* (strangely never given its proper English translation, *Florentine Histories*). *The Prince*, the most famous writing ever composed on politics by itself, is treated almost with contempt. The common scholarly notion (not without evidence), that it was written to curry favor with the Medici family, is carried to the logical extreme of saying, when it failed to get him a job, that Machiavelli was disgusted with having "wasted his time" writing it. He did not say this, but those words can reasonably be put in the everyday Niccolò's mouth. Normally, when a biographer writes on someone considered great, the reader wants to know when that greatness first became manifest and how it appeared in the subject's distinctive ways. In this case, and in accord with the logic of contextualism, all such admiring interest in the reader is suppressed and redirected to whatever can be identified, after due scholarship, as commonplace. The scholar's work is done only when he has most conscientiously found nothing of interest.

WHAT, THEN, DOES MACHIAVELLI amount to? Is there anything to be learned from him? Lee concludes his book: "this most political of men had reason to rue the day he had entered politics." He also says that Niccolò was "catastrophically short-sighted." But to present him in a context is necessarily to treat him as short-sighted. Perhaps one can instead enter politics as an author, a prince of the highest kind that Machiavelli describes. Leo Strauss is not among the scholars Lee names as influential for him, although Strauss's *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958) is within Lee's 70-year horizon. Strauss agreed that every great thinker had a context, but it was a context he made for himself, one that did not submit him to the fate of being commonplace like everyone else. Machiavelli had such a context, a plan of his own that was far from short-sighted. It allowed him to join in the politics of his day, but in a more hidden way to look forward to a new politics with a new—that is, Machiavellian—foundation not possible to establish in his own time.

What does Machiavelli say about his greatness? One would not expect someone to say "I am a great man"; it's hardly tactful. But he does make a claim on his own behalf, a statement of his ambition hidden in plain view. The first word of his *Discourses on Livy* is "I" and the last word is "greatest." In between is not the word "am" but all the many other words of that book demonstrating with unconventional tact his claimed greatness. I should add that this particular observation is not made by Strauss and that "greatest" occurs in the phrase "Fabius Maximus" as *Massimo*, Italian for greatest. One might overlook the coupling it offers to the first word. But then Fabius Maximus may stand for someone other than Fabius Maximus as well, a not infrequent practice of Machiavelli's. He used characters from ancient Rome and appropriated the text of a historian of ancient Rome, Titus Livy, to his own purpose in a context of his own creation and contrary to the conventions of a modern historian. Fabius was called "the Delayer," a man with patience who could see far ahead.

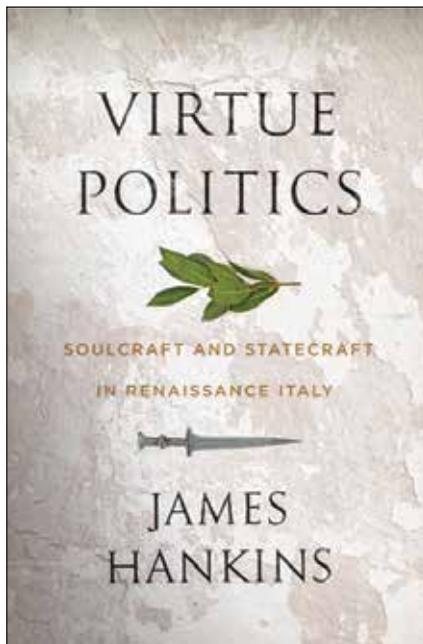
ONE COULD WRITE AN ALTERNATIVE biography to this one, bringing out Machiavelli's mostly hidden ambition, for which one would need a philosopher's imagination rather than a contextual historian's. This would begin by identifying Machiavelli as a philosopher, and philosophy as essentially subversive, and thus philosophy as typically in good part hidden, particularly one as revolutionary as Machiavelli's. It would be mainly based on his two masterworks, *The Prince* and the *Discourses on Livy*, the only writings of his in which he declares at the beginning that they contain everything he knows. All his other works, including many minor, occasional writings that Lee's biography commendably considers but then contextualizes, would be seen in the light of these two major works, the lesser in the light of the greater (which is the principle of anti-contextualism). It is true that Machiavelli was, for a philosopher, much more vitally concerned with the politics of Florence and Italy, hence necessarily short-sighted. His philosophy wanted philosophy to be more political than it had been, more "effectual." Whatever he may have borrowed from Lucretius, his principle was not the Epicurean "live unnoticed." Lee's biography is not wrong to take Machiavelli's politics as its theme, but those politics were not only or mainly short-sighted. They had in view an ambition to change the way all people thought and consequently how they lived, a truly fundamental improvement, part remedy for the ills of mankind and part progress for its betterment. Love of one's own city or one's

own country was part of that improvement—but which, Florence or Italy?

Here I insert a suggestion for the contextualists. One reason for Machiavelli's preoccupation with the Medici—rightly called "currying favor" by Lee and many others—may have been his interest in getting his two masterworks published. Their publication was necessary to his grand ambition, but their content required that this be done only after his death, when he was no longer in jeopardy but also not in control. Hence the value to him of the commission he received from Cardinal Giulio Medici to write the *Florentine Histories* and the favorable reception from him on its publication after he had become Pope Clement VII. These advantages gave him legitimacy, if not an imprimatur, that—"might have"—greatly assisted publication for the two major works under another Medici pope after his death. My suggestion is speculation, as little is known of how this vital matter of publication, not mentioned by Lee, was accomplished.

IT WOULD EASE THE CASE FOR MACHIAVELLI'S greatness if it were generally accepted that philosophers had a tradition of being able to address a future philosophic audience and a contemporaneous political or non-philosophic audience at the same time and in the same words. The first audience would pick up on "I...the greatest" and the second would not. Unfortunately, but understandably, that is not our situation, and those who learn from Strauss cannot assume that a general audience, however characterized, will concede this vital point. So it becomes necessary to introduce Machiavelli's hidden ambition from features of his thought that all can see if not immediately appreciate.

It is first obvious that Machiavelli is an open critic of Christianity, like no one else in the humanist tradition or in the Renaissance. In three passages of the *Discourses* he asserts not only that the Church is corrupt because of the dishonesty of its prelates, who "do not fear the punishment that they do not see and do not believe"—i.e., they are atheists. This Lee sees but palliates. But also the Christian religion makes men "esteem less the honor of the world" to the advantage of the other world. Machiavelli also speaks of Christianity as "having shown the truth and the true way," a phrase that might have led Lee to say that he was a "sincere believer." But an opinion can show the truth and the true way without being those things, which was precisely the case of Christianity according to Machiavelli. Christianity showed how to run the world—by pretending not to—and this was the truth Machiavelli appropriated from it. Here again he



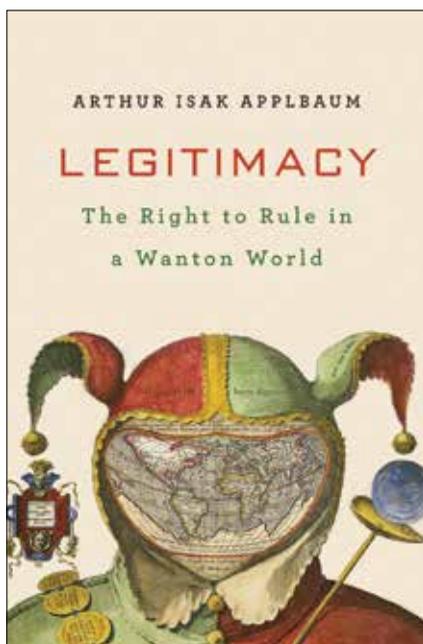
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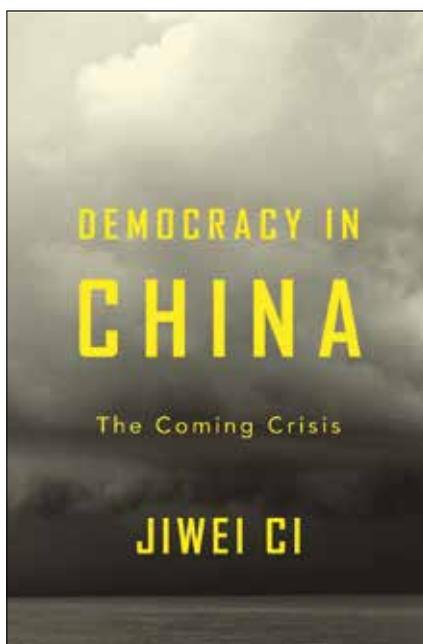


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is hiding the truth in plain sight. The words “sincere believer” entail the possibility that he was an insincere believer, which I affirm is the case. Insincere belief in Christianity was true for many humanist philosophers, because they lacked the wish or the boldness to attack Christianity as Machiavelli did.

LEE DOES NOT POINT OUT THIS MOST OBVIOUS unconventionality of his thought, a leap out of his context. He is not alone in this. It is strange but true that the contextualist view of Machiavelli makes little of the main feature of his context according to him: the oppressive domination of Christianity and the Church in his time. This was his enemy, the “larger bird” above the lesser birds of prey that he spoke of in the *Discourses*. Machiavelli initiated the broad movement of thought that after much combat and travail has ended in the overconfident secularism of our time, causing us to forget its authors and the dangers they faced. The contextualists are settled in our context, whose successful power they illustrate better than understand. Their careful studies—and Lee’s book is both careful itself and uses the care of others—mostly avoid the religious issue that should be their main care.

Lee also underestimates Machiavelli’s appreciation of Girolamo Savonarola, whom Machiavelli takes for his example of an unsuccessful unarmed prophet (overlooking a very much more obvious case of a successful one). He admires Savonarola’s learning and borrows some of his rhetorical devices and methods of Biblical interpretation. He was certainly not fazed by the “lies” he readily discerned in the Dominican friar’s sermons. He himself, he said in a moment of candor, was a “doctor of the art” of lying: “For some time now I have never said what I believe or never believed what I said, and if indeed I do sometimes tell the truth, I hide it behind so many lies that it is hard to find.” This revealing remark calls peremptorily for attention. What is the art of lying and why is it needed? It deserves to be chewed on by the contextualist school, but it did not find a place in Lee’s compendious biography.

Another startling feature in Machiavelli’s thought, very noticeable but not noticed, is the emphasis on novelty, the “new prince” in *The Prince* and “new modes and orders” in the *Discourses*. In the very letter in which he announces that he has “composed” (i.e., completed) a “little work” (*uno opusculo*) on princes, he says it should be especially welcome to a new prince. No other political thinker in the humanist or Renaissance period lays such emphasis on the new prince or new modes of government. None other declares as does Machiavelli prominently in *The Prince* that he “departs from the orders

of others,” claiming novelty for himself. Could a philosopher, indeed he himself, be considered a new prince? To be new, in fact “altogether new,” appears to be a declaration of freedom from a context. If he had mentioned this possibility, Lee might have been tempted to take it seriously as a claim to greatness.

A THIRD FEATURE OF HIS THOUGHT leading to a judgment of his greatness is the phrase from the same paragraph in *The Prince* as the one discussed above, stating his intention to go to the “effectual truth of the thing” rather than to the imagination of it. The “effectual truth” (*verità effettuale*) occurs just this once in all of Machiavelli’s writings and nowhere else in the Renaissance. The word *effettuale* is apparently his invention, taken from Latin according to Gabriele Pedullà, and the combination “effectual truth” has no precedent. The phrase is very little discussed by Machiavelli scholars. Why? Because it has no “source” they can discuss. A new kind of truth! How can that be interesting? Saying this once, Machiavelli calls attention to it. A word to the wise is sufficient, but to contextualist scholars the lack of repetition deprives it of context and renders it a slip of the tongue. In so much company Lee can be forgiven this oversight of his, but it remains nonetheless as an opportunity to glimpse the depth and reach of Machiavelli’s greatness.

If all the arguments I have given here for that greatness fail, yet let there be a little respect, please, for the man who said he wrote *sanza alcuno rispetto*—to show modern men what they were going to believe. As it stands, Alexander Lee’s *Machiavelli: His Life and Times* is impressively well-suited to a reader who can be satisfied with a view of the man quite diminished. It is true that Machiavelli spent much of his life in the cockpit of politics, thus occupied with the short term. It is a permanent feature of every political context that it must be in great part short-sighted, even when fundamental, founding change is in store. In acquainting himself with this fact, Machiavelli learned how to advise and how much or how little advice can accomplish. He saw how he must begin the necessary change of opinion and wrote his books accordingly. His books spoke to his own time, but one must say with emphasis were meant for the long term. His life was lived not for the sake of his own time or for his next life but for his progeny in later times, “the common good of each”—a new audience he was creating for his new politics.

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