

“How far are the *Discourses* an exercise in historical nostalgia?”

‘I do not know, therefore, whether I deserve to be considered among those who deceive themselves if, in these discourses of mine, I praise too lavishly the times of the ancient Romans and condemn our own.’¹ With this, Machiavelli opens the second book of the *Discourses*. Commentators have been quick to reference this as clear declaration of his purpose in composing the *Discourses* – claiming that it is an ode to a glorified Roman antiquity and an exercise steeped in mawkish nostalgia. This sort of conclusion is rather problematic, for it misses the point that Machiavelli seeks to bring across. To see Machiavelli’s work in a more inclusive light, we should consider the following questions: What is historical nostalgia? Can historical nostalgia be fairly applied to Machiavelli’s *Discourses*? Crucially, these discussions will bring us to a construction of Machiavelli as a historian through explorations of the context in which Machiavelli wrote, his conception of history and his purpose of writing. These considerations prompt a fundamental question – was Machiavelli a historian?

Before we begin our assessment of Machiavelli’s *Discourses*, it is necessary to establish what historical nostalgia entails. Historical nostalgia, most simply put, is a presentation of the past as a comfortable refuge – a yearning backward glance that offers consolation and an escape from a harsh reality. It features most strongly as a reaction to a sense of loss and is therefore particularly characteristic of societies undergoing rapid changes. Seen in concert with the background of Italian Renaissance, it is understandable why the *Discourses* was said to be an exercise in historical nostalgia. This was an age where there was a rebirth of appreciation for classical antiquity. Like many other Italians, Machiavelli saw ancient Rome as the unique model of a city-state that reached *grandezza*, an attainment of unparalleled power and greatness. Roman history was a reservoir of examples for present city-states to draw upon to replicate Rome’s success. Nostalgia was a shared emotion when people spoke fondly of a great Roman past, when contrasted with the decaying state of

¹ The *Discourses*, Preface to Book II.

politics in Italy and specifically Florence, “with traditional systems of communal government everywhere falling prey to the rise of Signori in the early fourteenth century”.² However, it is perhaps too simplistic to see the *Discourses* as Machiavelli’s mere condemnation of the corrupted politics in his city Florence and an extension of his desire to return to a past of glory and grandeur in ancient Rome, which Florence compares herself to. With this clarification, there is now a need to consider the composition of the *Discourses* in context.

Seeing the *Discourses* in the political context in which it was composed reveals that Machiavelli was discussing ideas of political immediacy. The context in which Machiavelli wrote the *Discourses*, was in the first years of the Medici family’s return – this would necessarily mean that there was contemporary popular interest in their form of governance and Machiavelli, who led an active political career took full advantage of this setting to add to the discussion of politics. He makes clear his political stance for the need to establish a good republic in Florence and reflect on the mistakes of the Florentine republic that led to its decline. With reference to the blockage of legal actions by prominent citizens in 1502, he suggests an establishment of tribunes and provisions like Rome.³ As Gilbert reminds us, “The *Discourses* were written – and must be read – in the light of the problems which disturbed and eventually destroyed the republican regime.”⁴ It is moving on from this destruction that Machiavelli envisages the formation of a true Florentine republic that is free, for when it is free it can attain grandezza.

Though not unlike his contemporaries who conceived of a free Florentine republic, Machiavelli proposed iconoclastic concepts in the *Discourses* when discussing how a republic is to be free and maintain freedom. Machiavelli’s interactions with these intellectual debates of his times again showcases his pragmatism – he was a believer of ideals, but he understood that within the dire political crisis Florence faced, there was a need to reconsider conventional pieties held during the Renaissance for applications to a harsher political reality, as Skinner suggests, for these conventions are “hitherto endorsed by the defenders of self-

² Q. Skinner, ‘Machiavelli’s Discorsi and the pre-humanist origins of republican ideas’, in G. Bock, *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge: 1990), pp. 128.

³ The *Discourses*, Book I, 50.

⁴ F. Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (New York: 1984), pp. 156.

governing republics in an almost uncritical way.”⁵ Machiavelli takes the shocking position that the perpetual antagonism between the Senate and the Plebs is the ‘primary cause of Roman liberty’⁶, and it is by extension of this discord that yielded the beneficial effect of containing the ambition of the nobles by giving people a share of political power. The establishment of tribunes then, protected the Plebs and restrained the insolence of nobility to preserve Rome’s freedom. This was very much an attack on conventional wisdoms of Republican civic humanists, and while it is tempting to cast it off as Machiavelli’s clamour for attention, we should not do so; this is in fact a reflection of Machiavelli’s understanding of real applications in politics. Machiavelli knew men to be in pursuit of their own egoistic interests, ‘they are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit’⁷, this generalisation ran true of the corruptness he saw in Florence and as such institutions needed to be reformed to rein in these ambitions of men that ran amok to preserve civic freedom – as with how Rome established laws from the conflicts between the Senate and the Plebs.

Conventions need to be re-explored and reconsidered – Machiavelli saw that the dichotomy between good and evil cannot be applied in the face of politics’ complexities and fluidities. He understood that compromises sometimes need to be made and it is in defence of republican liberty that men are justified to commit evils. ‘It is truly appropriate that while the act accuses him, the result excuses him, and when the result is good, like that of Romulus, it will always excuse him, because one should reproach a man who is violent in order to ruin things, not one who is so in order to set them aright.’⁸ This was a hard lesson for Machiavelli; for he expresses regret at having served under Soderini who was unable to do evil to yield good results and hence brought ruins upon the republic.

Understanding the context which Machiavelli wrote, we can now construct an image of him as a historian – what are Machiavelli’s conceptions of history. History was a storehouse of models and guides which men can refer to and to reflect upon. Essentially,

⁵ Q. Skinner, ‘Machiavelli’s Discorsi and the pre-humanist origins of republican ideas’, in G. Bock, *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge: 1990), pp. 136.

⁶ The *Discourses*, Book I, 4.

⁷ *The Prince*, Chapter 17.

⁸ The *Discourses*, Book I, 9.

Machiavelli recognised men as drivers of history, and that by identifying and understanding the ways Romans behaved, Florentines can change the course of their city-state. The three concepts of ragione, fortuna and virtu are integral to the discussion of Machiavelli's proposal that men are shapers of history. Gilbert defines ragione as "the instrument which enabled man to steer a straight course between illusionary hopes and exaggerated fears to arrive at correct decisions."⁹ It is ragione that makes apparent that there are recurrent patterns in the way men acted and hence history is the platform by which these patterns can be understood and applied to present-day problems that plagued Florence.

Yet, it is important to note that Machiavelli knew humans did not have complete agency, for fortuna was the irrational force in politics, 'that men can side with fortune but not oppose her; they can weave her warp but they cannot tear it apart' that held sway over situations. However, unlike many others who posit that men are helpless and circumstances are hopeless when facing fortuna, Machiavelli suggests virtu as a counterweight to the non-rational forces of fortuna. Interestingly, he provides a gendered description of fortuna as a goddess in *The Prince* who men can control – 'fortuna is a woman, and it is necessary, if you wish to master her, to conquer her by force; and it can be seen that she lets herself be overcome by the bold rather than those who proceed coldly.'¹⁰ He follows up in the *Discourses*, espouses man's ability to 'regulate fortune in such a way that she will have no cause to demonstrate, with every revolution of the sun, how powerful she can be.'¹¹ In their efforts to keep virtu alive, men can turn circumstances to their advantages. It is only when men fail short of virtu, that 'fortune shows her power even more.'¹²

Inextricably linked to this conception of human agency is Machiavelli's purpose of writing history – he intends to teach political lessons 'so that the minds of the young men who will read these writings of mine can avoid the errors of the present and be prepared to imitate the past whenever fortune provides them with the proper occasion.'¹³ Machiavelli's proposition of human agency echoes Sallust's idea – that 'a kingdom that that will prove

⁹ F. Gilbert, pp. 37-38.

¹⁰ *The Prince*, Chapter 25.

¹¹ *The Discourses*, Book II, 30.

¹² *The Discourses*, Book II, 30.

¹³ *The Discourses*, Preface to Book II.

strong if you conduct yourself well, but weak if you behave badly.’¹⁴ His purpose then, is to urge good conduct and behaviour – to uphold individual virtue and consequently virtue of the masses and republic. Echoing the traditional republican belief in the prioritisation of common good, Machiavelli affirms that ‘it is not the private good but the common good that makes cities great. And without any doubt, this common good is pursued only in a republic, because everything that meets its needs is carried out’.¹⁵ Machiavelli remains that the only way to ensure the promotion of common good is to maintain a republican form of governance – this is the key lesson he seeks to drive across in the wake of Medici’s return, against the backdrop when a style of governance was not yet determined. Seen in this light, Machiavelli can most certainly be called a historian of government – he believes that there are rules in politics that men should abide by, through exercises of customs and laws, it is men that dictate the health of republics and ultimately, the achievement of civic grandezza.

Yet, in his assertion of the need to have customs and laws govern the prioritisation of common good over private ambitions, Machiavelli was not proposing a static model. He continually reemphasises that innovations and changes are necessary to keep virtues alive and to steer away from corruption. This comes through strongly in his proclamation that ‘institutions and laws established in a republic at the time of its birth, when men were good, are no longer suitable later’ and as such ‘if Rome wished to remain free amid the corruption that just as the city had created new laws in the course of its existence, it should also have created new institutions, because different institutions and ways of life must be established for a subject who is evil rather than good’.¹⁶ Machiavelli understood that the founding and maintenance of a healthy republic needed constant revisions by lawgivers – these hint at his belief in process and directly refutes the hypothesis that Machiavelli indulged in historical nostalgia, for he did not advocate for a singular and backward movement. His advocacy of ancient Roman republic as a model for Florence is yet another testament to his belief that there was a fundamental place for change in his times. Explicitly, this tells us that historical nostalgia – expressed when the situation is hopeless, is inapplicable to the *Discourses* for

¹⁴ Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 10.7.

¹⁵ The *Discourses*, Book II. 2

¹⁶ The *Discourses* Book I, 18.

Machiavelli, as Gilbert argues, “was unwilling to give up hope that Florence might be able to follow in the steps of Rome”¹⁷ despite how grave the situation was.

This brings us to a final and most fundamental question: Was Machiavelli a historian? Machiavelli was first and foremost a politician and he saw that as his greatest purpose. Through his writings of history, he sought political truths in achieving his ultimate purpose – to set the situation in Florence aright. If Machiavelli could pursue politics, he would not history but in his circumstances, he needed to adapt; these reflections on history will serve his purpose of engaging in Florence’s political affairs. Perhaps he was always aware that in these bleakest times, Florence, owing to circumstances and inherent differences, cannot avoid decline and cannot repeat Rome’s success, but he held onto the hope that these circumstances are subjected to change. Machiavelli did not start out to be a historian, but he fulfilled his purpose as a historian – to prompt reflections on the crucial questions that plagued his age. Astutely summarised by Gilbert, in Machiavelli’s the *Discourses*, “there are insights which disclose an apposite truth, there are passages which touch us like an electric shock.”¹⁸ In context he was a historian who took to the principles – docere, movere and delectare.

In conclusion, at first glance, the *Discourses* appears to be an exercise in historical nostalgia because of Machiavelli’s lamentations of the ruins of Florentine republic. However, if one commits to understanding Machiavelli’s purpose in writing – the *Discourses* was composed with love and illuminates his fierce commitment to set Florence aright, since he was not able to do so in his career. Machiavelli certainly did not bask in the saccharine memory of Rome; he urges Florentines to take actions of reforms and keep virtue alive. This motivation is perhaps never made more explicit than in Machiavelli’s advice to Florentines on reining in fortuna – ‘They must never give up, for without knowing her goals as she moves along paths both crossed and unknown, men always have to hope, and with hope, they should never give up, no matter what the situation or the difficulty in which they find themselves.’¹⁹ And it is only with this unwavering hope, that his city Florence can move forward.

¹⁷ F. Gilbert, pp. 186.

¹⁸ F. Gilbert, pp. 200.

¹⁹ The *Discourses*, Book II, 29.

Works consulted:

1. The *Discourses*, trans. by J. C. Bondanella and P. Bondanella (New York: 1997)
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4. Q. Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: 2000)
5. F. Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth Century Florence* (New York: 1984)