

# *Strauss and Voegelin on Machiavelli and Modernity*

*Glenn N. Schram*

MACHIAVELLI IS generally thought to have been the first great modern political philosopher. The two major twentieth-century critics of modern political thought from a classical perspective were Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin. It ought, therefore, to be valuable to examine the criticisms which Strauss and Voegelin made of modernity and the extent to which they applied their criticisms to Machiavelli. The examination ought to be particularly informative because the subject of Machiavelli came up in what was, to my knowledge, the closest thing to an exchange between Strauss and Voegelin which ever occurred—namely, Voegelin's review of Strauss's *On Tyranny* and Strauss's "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," in which Strauss replied to Voegelin's criticism, as well as to that of Alexandre Kojève.<sup>1</sup>

Voegelin was reluctant to use theological language. It may be said, however, that he considered the besetting sin of modernity to be Gnosticism. As he conceived of it, Gnosticism is metastatic in that it seeks to remake man according to one or another formula for moral perfection. It is also chiliastic in that it tries to bring about conditions comparable to those of the millennium as described in Revelation 20, wherein there is no evil. For the Gnostic, history is redemptive. He seeks, in effect, to eliminate original sin; at the same time the attempt to recreate man involves him in the sin of pride.<sup>2</sup> Voegelin did not hold all modern political thinkers to be Gnostics. He excluded Bodin, for example.<sup>3</sup> But he ascribed Gnosticism to most of the modern political thinkers about whom he wrote in the 1940s and subsequently.

Strauss's views on modernity are harder to reduce to a common denominator than are Voegelin's. Strauss did say that, whereas classical political thought saw the formation of character as the proper aim of politics, modern political thinkers in general adopted lower goals—goals which, they believed, were more likely to be attained. The common denominator of modern political thought was thus its rejection of classical political thought for what seemed to be more realistic thinking.<sup>4</sup> Strauss also said that "the fundamental modern project" was "man's conquest of nature for the sake of the relief of man's estate;"<sup>5</sup> or, as he also put it:

According to the modern project, philosophy or science was no longer to be understood as essentially contemplative and proud but as active and charitable; it was to be in the service of the relief of man's estate; it was to be cultivated for the sake of human power; it was to enable man to become the master and owner of nature through the intellectual conquest of nature.<sup>6</sup>

These aims were not shared, however, by all modern political thinkers; Rousseau, for example, was "the first modern critic of the fundamental modern project."<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere Strauss made some of the points already noted but offered a more differentiated account of modern political thought. He spoke of the "notion of philosophy according to which its purpose is to relieve man's estate or to increase man's power or to guide man toward the rational society, the bond and the end of which is enlightened self-interest or that comfortable self-preservation of each of its members."<sup>8</sup> In the part about the rational society he evoked memories of Hobbes

and Locke, as he also did when he wrote: "Very briefly, we can say that the modern project was distinguished from the earlier view by the fact that it implied that the improvement of society depends decisively on institutions, political or economic, as distinguished from the formation of character."<sup>9</sup> That Strauss had Hobbes, Locke, and their successors in mind here is shown by his reference two pages later to the "teaching originated by modern political philosophy, those heroes of the seventeenth century."<sup>10</sup> Strauss also adverted to the modern dependence on institutions when he conceded that classical political thought, too, relied on them, but not to the extent of modern political thought.<sup>11</sup> Finally, he spoke of the "modern tradition" as having "emancipated the passions and hence 'competition,'" and he asserted that this tradition "came into being through a conscious break with the strict moral demands made by both the Bible and classical philosophy."<sup>12</sup>

An examination of Strauss's writings on modernity suggests the question of what Strauss thought of Voegelin's views on the subject. We may begin by noting Strauss's reference to the "very common notion" that modern thought is a secularized version of biblical faith and, in particular, that it involves the attempt to establish heaven on earth. But, Strauss said, "This is exactly what Plato claims to do in his *Republic*: to bring about the cessation of all evil on earth by purely human means."<sup>13</sup> If we assume that the reference to heaven on earth is a reference to Voegelin's account of modernity, we may say that Voegelin, were he to have answered Strauss, might have asserted that Plato, unlike modern thinkers, did not call for a metastatic change in man and that, indeed, the openness of the soul of the Platonic philosopher to transcendent reality is natural to human beings.

Elsewhere Strauss said that in modern political thought man "is as it were infinitely malleable," since he "is not by nature ordered toward fixed ends." But here Strauss appears to have meant no

more than that, according to some modern thought, a judicious use of force can make a corrupt people incorrupt; he seems not to have had in mind a metastatic change in human nature.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, he said that in modern thought human beings are supposed to possess an unchangeable nature, but here he apparently meant no more than that some modern thinkers believe in natural rights.<sup>15</sup> In certain passages, however, Strauss's views seem very much to resemble Voegelin's. Strauss wrote, for example:

Classical political science took its bearings by man's perfection or by how men ought to live, and it culminated in the description of the best political order. Such an order was meant to be one whose realization was possible without a miraculous or nonmiraculous change in human nature, but its realization was not considered probable, because it was thought to depend on chance.<sup>16</sup>

As for the difference between classical and modern political thought, the classical solution to the problem of the best regime is "utopian in the sense that its actualization is improbable," whereas the modern solution is "utopian in the sense that its actualization is impossible."<sup>17</sup>

Let us turn to Machiavelli and begin by looking at the modern characteristics which Strauss thought him to have possessed. According to Strauss, Machiavelli was the founder of modern political philosophy as a body of thought which rejected the classics as unrealistic. "He tried to effect, and he did effect, a break with the whole tradition of political philosophy."<sup>18</sup> Machiavelli "expresses his intention to break with the whole tradition" in the following passage from the beginning of Chapter 15 of *The Prince*:

. . . [I]magination has created many principalities and republics that have never been or known to have any real existence, for how we live is so different from how we ought to live that he who studies what ought to be done rather than what is done will learn the way to his downfall rather than to his preservation.<sup>19</sup>

Strauss said that the two "characteristical-

ly modern forms of political philosophy" are "natural public law," whose first great proponent was Hobbes, and "reason of state," whose first great proponent was Machiavelli. The origin of the two forms "is the concern with a right or sound order of society whose actualization is probable, if not certain, or does not depend on chance. Accordingly, they deliberately lower the goal of politics. . . ."20

If, moreover, we examine the views which Strauss was quoted in the text above as ascribing to Hobbes and Locke, we find that, in Strauss's judgment, the views were also held by Machiavelli. Thus we find that it was Machiavelli who achieved the decisive turn toward the "notion of philosophy according to which its purpose is to relieve man's estate or to increase man's power or to guide man toward the rational society."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Strauss believed that Machiavelli, as well as Hobbes and Locke, would have relied on institutions, rather than the formation of character, to improve society. Machiavelli in particular would have used "institutions with teeth in them."<sup>22</sup> Then, too, it was Machiavelli who began the emancipation of the passions through a conscious break with biblical and classical morality.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Machiavelli believed that human beings were in a way malleable through the judicious application of force.<sup>24</sup>

We come now to the question of whether Voegelin regarded Machiavelli as a Gnostic. As far as I know, Voegelin's views on Machiavelli were more ambivalent than his views on any other modern political thinker. In examining his thought on Machiavelli we shall have occasion to look at Voegelin's review of Strauss's *On Tyranny* and at Strauss's "Restatement." Several issues which came up concerning Machiavelli in this encounter will not be dealt with here because they do not bear on whether Machiavelli was a Gnostic in Voegelin's eyes. The issues to be overlooked include the question of whether *The Prince* and the *Hiero* were intended as studies of postconstitutional tyranny, to be imposed when the social conditions neces-

sary for constitutional government have ceased to exist; Machiavelli's failure in *The Prince* to distinguish between king and tyrant; the question of the influence of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* on Machiavelli; and the contempt for the masses shared by Machiavelli with Xenophon's tyrant.

In *The New Science of Politics* Voegelin wrote that Gnosticism, and in particular modern Gnosticism (for there was an ancient Gnosticism, too), originated in the twentieth-century speculation of Joachim of Floris about the forthcoming emergence of a monkish utopia. Joachim predicted that this new epoch would be ushered in by a *dux e Babylone*, a leader out of Babylon. Voegelin went on to say that the idea of a leader who would bring his people out of bondage and into a state of earthly salvation "can be discerned as a component in Machiavelli's *principe*."<sup>25</sup> Thus Voegelin appeared to think Machiavelli was a Gnostic. But in the same work Voegelin wrote that "practically every great political thinker who recognized the structure of reality, from Machiavelli to the present, has been branded as an immoralist by Gnostic intellectuals."<sup>26</sup> Thus Voegelin appeared to consider Machiavelli a non-Gnostic realist.

Clarity was not enhanced by the article "Machiavelli's Prince: Background and Formation," which Voegelin published a year before *The New Science of Politics*. In the article Voegelin sought to show that Machiavelli's ideas on the conduct of politics were not particularly harsh, nor his secularism particularly surprising, when seen against the background of his precursors and contemporaries in the Renaissance. Indeed, Voegelin said, the nationalism of Machiavelli gave his thought an element of idealism absent in the thinking of the other writers.<sup>27</sup> Historically unique "is the genius of Machiavelli as well as the strange disposition of circumstances directing his genius toward the crystallization of the ideas of the age in the symbol of the Prince who, through *fortuna* and *virtu*, will be the savior and restorer of Italy."<sup>28</sup>

Voegelin proceeded to suggest that the

invasion of Italy in 1494 by Charles VIII of France and the ensuing reduction of the Italian states to political impotence had a traumatic effect on Machiavelli.<sup>29</sup> Voegelin continued:

In this aspect a man like Machiavelli, who theorizes on the basis of his stark experience of power, is a healthy and honest figure, most certainly preferable as a man to the contractualists who try to cover the reality of power underneath an established order by the moral, or should we say immoral, swindle of consent.<sup>30</sup>

It needs to be said that this reference to Locke as a swindler—like Strauss's suggestion that governmental respect for the natural rights to life, liberty, and estate amounts to nothing more than the comfortable self-preservation of the people—may betray a trace of Continental Anglophobia.

In any case, having praised Machiavelli for his honesty, Voegelin went on to assert that Machiavelli's "picture of political reality is certainly out of focus."<sup>31</sup> As for the details of that picture, Voegelin elaborated on the content only of Machiavelli's *Vita di Castruccio Castracani*. With regard to the content of Machiavelli's better-known works, Voegelin said only:

Machiavelli has created a myth; this fact must be the basis of interpretation if we wish to avoid the misunderstanding of his theory of politics as the shallow insight that foul means are frequently more helpful than fair ones in acquiring political power. The elaboration of the theory in the *Discorsi* and the *Principe* presupposes the myth of the hero.<sup>32</sup>

Since, however, the article under consideration was but a part of the chapter on Machiavelli in Voegelin's unpublished *History of Political Ideas*, we must entertain the possibility that Voegelin elaborated on Machiavelli's better-known works elsewhere in the chapter.

We are left with the question of whether Voegelin did or did not think Machiavelli a Gnostic. That in the final analysis he considered him such is suggested by certain passages in Voegelin's review of *On Tyranny*. There Voegelin said, "Luckier

than Xenophon . . . Machiavelli was able to find a name for the new type of ruler which he envisaged. He called it the *profeta armato*, the prophet in arms. . . ."<sup>33</sup> Voegelin said further:

Machiavelli's image of the prince is not quite original in its time; it must be seen . . . against the background of the *Vita Tamerlani* as created by Poggio Bracciolini and standardized by Aeneas Silvio. Machiavelli's complete drawing of the savior prince in the *Vita di Castruccio Castracani* is hardly thinkable without the standardized model of the *Life of Timur*.<sup>34</sup>

During the Renaissance Tamerlane, or Timur, was the subject of a number of portrayals by Italian historians, including the Florentine chancellor Poggio Bracciolini and Aeneas Silvio Piccolomini, who became Pope Pius II. The life of Tamerlane by Aeneas Silvio was the model for an entire genre of *Vitae Tamerlani*. Their significance lies in that Tamerlane had emerged, as it seemed to Europeans, out of nowhere to defeat the Ottoman army at Ankara in 1402 and temporarily to check the Turkish advance into Europe. He thus appeared to be a man of destiny and the avenger of a people's misdeeds. "This new factor," Voegelin said, is to be found "in the *Castruccio* as well as in the apocalyptic aspects of the *profeta armato* in the *Prince*, in particular in the last chapter," where, it might be added, there are four references to the redemption of Italy from the invaders.<sup>35</sup> Finally, Voegelin wrote, "The 'modernity' of Machiavelli's prince has a specific tone through the absorption of such mediaeval-Christian antecedents as the Joachitic *dux*, Dante's *veltro* and the realization of these ideas in the savior-tribunate of Rienzo."<sup>36</sup> We are already familiar with Joachim's idea of the *dux*. Dante speaks in the *Inferno* of the *veltro*, or greyhound, which will save Italy<sup>37</sup>; the passage is sometimes interpreted as referring to a political savior. Cola di Rienzo was a popular leader and political reformer, who in 1347 assumed dictatorial powers in Rome, taking the title of tribune; he predicted the establishment of Rome as capital of a "sacred Italy" which

would bring peace and justice to the world, and he adopted some of the religious symbolism of Joachim. The religious symbolism of Machiavelli's writing and of the men and ideas cited by Voegelin as having influenced it, especially the symbolism of redemption and salvation, plus Voegelin's specific reference to Joachim's *dux e Babylone* in discussing Machiavelli, suggests that Machiavelli was a Gnostic in Voegelin's eyes.

In his "Restatement" Strauss addressed himself to the points which we have just seen Voegelin as having made in his review. Strauss downplayed the influence of the biblical tradition on Machiavelli, maintaining that in the concept of the armed prophet Machiavelli put the emphasis on *armed* rather than *prophet*.<sup>38</sup> Strauss said further that "Voegelin has failed to show any connection between the *Castruccio* and the *Life of Timur*."<sup>39</sup> In fact, an account of the historians' portrayals of Tamerlane and their significance for Machiavelli was included in Voegelin's article on "Machiavelli's Prince."<sup>40</sup> Strauss also said, "The tradition which Machiavelli continues, while radically modifying it, is not, as Voegelin suggests, that represented by Joachim of Floris, for example, but the one which we still call, with pardonable ignorance, the Averroistic tradition."<sup>41</sup> This statement fails to dispel the idea that Machiavelli walked in Joachim's footsteps. Indeed, if we give Strauss's language the kind of careful analysis which Strauss said one should give works of political philosophy, we might ask whether the phrase "with pardonable ignorance" is not an admission that Voegelin might be right. With regard to the Averroistic tradition, what is called Latin Averroism took its name from the twelfth-century Muslim philosopher Averroes; it drew a sharp line between reason and revelation, thereby contributing to the growth in the West of purely secular theories of the state. It is sometimes thought that, by way of Marsilius of Padua, Latin Averroism might have influenced Machiavelli.

It is interesting to note that Voegelin

dealt with Latin Averroism in 1944 in an article on the thirteenth-century Averroist Siger of Brabant. Here Voegelin discussed the disassociation of reason from revelation, although he did not relate it to Machiavelli; he also discussed Siger's idea that all human beings share a single rational soul. According to Voegelin, from the idea of a single soul common to all mankind there emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the ideas of collective souls drawn along the lines of nations, races, and classes. Thus Voegelin saw Averroism, like the philosophy of history of Joachim of Floris, as having led ultimately to twentieth-century totalitarianism.<sup>42</sup>

In conclusion, let us deal with a question which may have troubled the reader. How can both Strauss and Voegelin be right about modern political thought? How can a body of thought have lower standards for human behavior than the thought which preceded it and at the same time be morally perfectionistic? The answer lies in the nature of the moral perfectionism of modern Gnostics. They tend to see the evil in the world as rooted in a particular phenomenon—the abject condition of a nation (in the instance of Machiavelli); civil war (in the instance of Hobbes); a race; a class; or something else, so that the phenomenon assumes the role of original sin in traditional theology and so that it is believed that, by removing the phenomenon, a state of bliss can be achieved on earth. The ordinary person, and perhaps even the Gnostics themselves, may not think that life under a Machiavellian prince or a Hobbesian absolute monarch (not to speak of life in a twentieth-century totalitarian state preoccupied with races or classes) is very pleasant, but the Gnostics think that such an existence is necessary if the golden age is to be attained. We may conclude, therefore, that Machiavelli was indeed the first great modern political thinker in both the Straussian and the Voegelinian sense.

<sup>1</sup>*On Tyranny* was originally published by Political Science Classics (New York, 1948). Voegelin's review

appeared in the *Review of Politics*, 11 (April 1949), 241-44. Strauss's "Restatement" appeared in Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* (New York, 1959), Chapter 4; it was reprinted in Strauss, *On Tyranny Revised and Enlarged* (Ithaca, 1968), pp. 189-226. <sup>2</sup>See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, 1952), Chapters 4-6, and Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago, 1968), Part II. <sup>3</sup>See Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, p. 2; Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution* (Baton Rouge, 1981), pp. 41-42; and, especially, Voegelin, *Anamnesis* (Gerhart Niemeyer, trans.) (Notre Dame, 1978), pp. 196-97. <sup>4</sup>Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 40; Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, 1953), pp. 190-91. <sup>5</sup>Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York, 1968), p. 225. <sup>6</sup>Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 3-4. <sup>7</sup>Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, p. 225. <sup>8</sup>Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, Ill., 1958), p. 296. <sup>9</sup>Strauss, "Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Our Time," in George J. Graham, Jr., and George W. Carey (eds.), *The Post-Behavioral Era* (New York, 1972), p. 221. <sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 223. In the chapter of Machiavelli which he wrote for Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (eds.), *History of Political Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1981), Strauss said of Hobbes and Locke: "The moral law or the natural law is understood [by Hobbes] as derivative from the right of nature, the right of self-preservation; the fundamental moral fact is a right, not a duty. This new spirit became the spirit of the modern era, including our own age. . . . Locke enlarged self-preservation to comfortable self-preservation and thus laid the theoretical foundation for the acquisitive society" (p. 273). <sup>11</sup>Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 193. <sup>12</sup>Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 111 (Strauss, *On Tyranny Revised and Enlarged*, p. 205). <sup>13</sup>Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in Hilaire Gildin (ed.), *Political Philosophy* (Indianapolis, 1975), p. 82. <sup>14</sup>Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 297. *Cf.* Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?* p. 43: "The shift from formation of character to the trust in institutions is the characteristic corollary of the belief in the almost infinite malleability of man." <sup>15</sup>Strauss, "Political Philosophy and the Crisis of Our Time," p. 224. <sup>16</sup>Strauss, *On Tyranny Revised and Enlarged*, note 5, p. 110. <sup>17</sup>Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 132 (Strauss, *On Tyranny Revised and Enlarged*, p. 225). <sup>18</sup>Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 40. See also Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 178. <sup>19</sup>Strauss, *On Tyranny Revised and Enlarged*, note 3, p. 110; Niccolò Machiavelli, *The*

*Prince* (Thomas G. Bergin trans.) (New York, 1947), p. 44. *Cf.* Strauss and Cropsey, p. 274. <sup>20</sup>Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 190-91. See also Strauss, *On Tyranny Revised and Enlarged*, note 5, pp. 110-11. <sup>21</sup>Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, p. 296. <sup>22</sup>Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 43. <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111 (Strauss, *On Tyranny Revised and Enlarged*, p. 205). <sup>24</sup>Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, pp. 279, 297; Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 43. <sup>25</sup>Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, pp. 111-12. <sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 170. <sup>27</sup>Voegelin, "Machiavelli's Prince: Background and Formation," *Review of Politics*, 13 (April 1951), 142-53, 161. <sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 142. <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 142-47. Voegelin said, "As far as the history of political ideas is concerned, the year 1494 would perhaps be best honored as the opening year of the modern period" (*Ibid.*, pp. 142-43). <sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 147. <sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 148. <sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 165-55. <sup>33</sup>Voegelin, review of *On Tyranny*, p. 242. Machiavelli referred to armed prophets in Chapter 6 of *The Prince* (p. 15 in the Bergin translation). <sup>34</sup>Voegelin, review of *On Tyranny*, p. 243. <sup>35</sup>*Ibid.* *Cf.* Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, which argues that Machiavelli "did not regard the practical proposal with which he concluded the *Prince* as practicable," and that the last chapter "must not be taken literally or too seriously" (p. 72). <sup>36</sup>Voegelin, review of *On Tyranny*, p. 243. <sup>37</sup>Canto I, ll. 100-11. <sup>38</sup>Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 102 (Strauss, *On Tyranny Revised and Enlarged*, p. 196). <sup>39</sup>Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 103 (Strauss, *On Tyranny Revised and Enlarged*, p. 197). <sup>40</sup>Pp. 151-164. Already in 1937 Voegelin had published an article on the portrayals of Tamerlane by the Italian historians. The article was reprinted in the original edition of Voegelin's *Anamnesis* (Munich, 1966), pp. 153-78. In the foreword to this book Voegelin said that the influence of the Tamerlane myth is detectable in Machiavelli's conception of the *principe* (p. 10). *Cf.* Sandoz, pp. 41-42. <sup>41</sup>Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, p. 102 (Strauss, *On Tyranny Revised and Enlarged*, p. 196). <sup>42</sup>Voegelin, "Siger de Brabant," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 4 (June 1944), 519-20. *Cf.* Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2: *Mediaeval Philosophy*, Part 2: *Albert the Great to Duns Scotus* (Garden City, N.Y., 1962), Chapter 42; William Havard, *The Recovery of Political Theory* (Baton Rouge, 1984), pp. 15-16; Sandoz, pp. 62-63; Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, p. 99. In an ironical coincidence, Dante placed both Siger and Joachim in Paradise; see Copleston, p. 160.