a humorous, even grotesque dimension, which Kolnai himself would have much appreciated.

Prophet of Naked Utility

PATRICK J. WALSH

Niccolo's Smile by Maurizio Viroli;
Translated from the Italian by
Antony Shugaar, *New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000. xv + 271 pp.*

MANY ADJECTIVES ARE used to describe Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527). Most of them conjure associations with the devil, the father of lies. Maurizio Viroli's new biography of "Old Nick," however, is an attempt to portray the human side of this controversial figure, and thus to win him a sympathetic hearing. While sometimes elegantly written, Viroli fails to convince us that "Niccolo's smile" is anything but diabolic.

Born in Renaissance Florence, Machiavelli grew up in an Italy of warring city states, principalities, duchies, and corrupt popes. To make matters worse, the warring powers made various alliances with France and Spain, inviting frequent foreign invasion. It was a world in which life was, indeed, nasty, brutish, and short.

Renaissance means "rebirth." But the era was really both a turning back of the clock to a pre-Christian time and the advent of something entirely new. George Santayana described the Renaissance spirit as an exact reversal of one's baptismal vows. The intellectual world was turning from an otherworldly mysticism of dependence and wonder to a new faith in man's independent ability to change the temporal world. While the thinkers of the Renaissance looked back to the pagan authors of antiquity for guidance, their unprecedented faith in the powers of profane man gave birth to our modern world.

Machiavelli's political philosophy emerged from his experience in the government of Florence, where for fourteen years he served with distinction as an ambassador and high secretary to the republic. He was a dedicated, honest, hard-working, and brilliant public servant. But his short career came to an end with Spain's brutal invasion of Florence in 1512. The republic was dissolved, the Medici restored, and Machiavelli became a sort of government in exile for the rest of his life.

He retreated to his study, yet longed to return to public affairs. He sought consolation from what he considered a decadent present by delving into the glorious books of the past, famously confiding to a friend: "I step inside the venerable courts of the ancients. And for hours at a time I forget all my trouble, I do not dread poverty, and am not terrified by death. I absorb myself in them completely." Though he turned to the past, he had no reverence for it beyond the useful lessons it might teach. Such a dismissal of the mystery of things in favor of naked utility was characteristic of the new reasoning.

Machiavelli extolled ancient Rome because of its practical achievements. The Greeks he liked less because their philosophy sought an order and idealism based on natural law. Machiavelli could see no order in nature or in history. His philosophy celebrated an order imposed by human will through the strong and innovative exercise of power. Modern princes were weak, he argued, because of the Christian religion's reliance on humility and grace, and its belief in the ultimate futility of human striving. Machiavelli advocated a dogma of human power, and held that men could

---

PATRICK J. WALSH *is a writer in Quincy, Mass.*

master the world through force. It is the unarmed prophets who fail.

All these ideas are expressed with infamous directness in *The Prince*. (Machiavelli's other great work was the *Discourses on the First Ten Books of the Histories of Titus Livy*.) He dedicated *The Prince* to Lorenzo Medici in an attempt to curry favor with the restored ruler. This book instructs rulers to maintain their realm by "learning not to be good." A new prince must not depart from the good when possible, but he must also know how to do evil when forced by necessity. He must learn how to be a lion and a fox. The prince must learn to master *fortuna*, which Machiavelli compares to a woman who can be vanquished by the kind of man who is not afraid to beat her.

Niccolo's Smile was written by Maurizio Viroli, a professor of politics at Princeton University. The book's cover and a short note by the author promise to reveal the human side of the subject. Viroli tells us that Machiavelli's friends called him *Il Machia*, and that he was not in any way a pretentious person. We are told he had a big heart, loved fun and conversation. Viroli takes great pleasure in mentioning Machiavelli's many affairs with women and prostitutes; indeed, he seems to celebrate his hero's disloyalty to his wife. "Niccolo did not consider her a great love." Viroli presents this as evidence of Machiavelli's good nature, and as a defense against the charge that Machiavelli hated women. In this, the author seems to share with his hero an inability to recognize any higher form of human nature that would enable a man to remain faithful to his wife.

Niccolo's Smile accepts all of Machiavelli's political philosophy without any critical evaluation. The book is full of assertions without evidence. Of *The Prince*, Viroli says that Machiavelli "demolishes conventional wisdom brick by brick with the courage and irreverence that only great thinkers possess." Like Machiavelli, the author identifies the good with what works. At one point Viroli writes, "Machiavelli taught that the end never justifies the means"—but then, at the end of the very same sentence, he writes, "if someone is to achieve a great purpose then he must do what is necessary to achieve the goal." Such a view is a clear break not only from Christian but from pagan virtues. For both civilizations recognized an objective good, and a truth that man must live up to. Machiavelli does not demolish any truth known to pagan or to Christian. He merely encourages the ruler to step nimbly around the truth.

Like much of the new thinking from the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment, Machiavelli nearly shouts: "See, this works!" Utility is then propagated as the truth itself, without addressing the shared wisdom and traditions of the past. Ancient writers did recognize that in the face of necessity something might need to be sacrificed to the interest of good and truth. But this was only in extreme circumstances. What Machiavelli does is to make the extreme situation the norm—and today, our world is constructed around that new "norm."

Viroli frequently mentions Machiavelli's smile. He chose it as the title of his book. While Machiavelli could perceptively analyze the countenance of an ally or an enemy, Viroli never really explains the smile's significance. All we get from him is the declaration: "I believe that his smile represents a great understanding of life, even deeper than his political thought." This romantic notion is never seriously explored.

Viroli claims further that Machiavelli's smile was his way of immersing himself in life. But if we explore the smile, we see not the joyous and open smile of a fun-loving person but the closed smile of a man quite aloof from life. The book's cover has a portrait of Machiavelli from an original painting by Santi di Tito. Machiavelli's so-called smile is really not a smile at all: it is more of a smirk. Niccolo's mouth is closed. He shows no teeth, while his eyes glance sideways. He seems extremely attentive, perceptive, wary, and noncommittal. Although not a peasant, his face is full of guile and deceit. If you unexpectedly hurled a stone at him, you have the impression that he would have dodged it successfully before it even left your fingers.

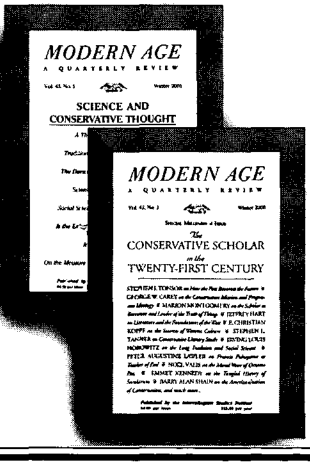
Viroli claims that Machiavelli had a deep poetic appreciation of life. But true poets open their heart to the world. Machiavelli advises the closing and hardening of the heart. The author quotes a verse of Machiavelli's advising against weeping: "To the harsh blows of fortune/ He must turn his face dry of tears." How different is this attitude from the Roman poet Virgil, who understood that all things have their tears: *sunt lacrimae rerum*. With an open heart and teary eyes, Virgil saw clearly and deeply into the nature of man and reality.

Whoever does not account for the tears of things cannot have a full understanding of life. But Machiavelli would have us look only at the appearance of things, at the surface of things. *The Prince* teaches the ruler the importance, especially, of the appearance of power. This is a shadowy half-world. He sees with, but not through, the eye.

Viroli seems surprised when he notes that Machiavelli never wrote a tragedy. He should not be surprised. Tragedy presupposes a universal moral order to which a community adheres. Tragedy occurs when an individual violates this order. Machiavelli recognizes no such moral order. Rather, he was instrumental in demolishing it as irrelevant, impractical. There is also a religious element of piety in tragedy, and an opening up of the person to the sadness of the human condition. Machiavelli's thought is neither pious nor open. Tragedians are interested in a king defeated, powerless on a blasted heath. Machiavelli has nothing but scorn for losers. Ironically, the paradox of the powerful Rome that Machiavelli so admired was that it was founded by a defeated man, Aeneas of Troy. Virgil's epic extols the founder's humility, piety, and reverence for the gods—none of which have a place in Machiavelli's world.

Viroli thoroughly dismisses an account by a grandson of Machiavelli's that his grandfather became penitent and confessed his sins to a priest before he died. Viroli will have none of this repentance. He wants his Machiavelli to "love his city more than his soul." "How could we credit the thought of Niccolo retreating to a cloister and exhorting his listeners to penitence?" It is a shame that the author is so opposed to repentance. If Viroli had portrayed a vulnerable, truly human side of Machiavelli, his biography may have succeeded and would have gained the

MODERN AGE:
A Quarterly Review
is distributed by Bernhard DeBoer and Ingram Periodicals to newsstands and bookstores nationwide.


MODERN AGE
A QUARTERLY REVIEW
SCIENCE AND CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT

MODERN AGE
A QUARTERLY REVIEW
The CONSERVATIVE SCHOLAR in the TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

sympathy of the reader. Perhaps Machiavelli had repented and in his waning days realized the great wisdom that the opposite of love is not hate, but power.

There is a simple inscription on a tomb in North Africa that speaks to this wisdom. "I, the captain of a legion of Rome, serving in the desert of Libya, have learnt and pondered this truth: There are in life but two things to be sought, Love and Power, and no one has both."

A Case in Point

CARL GULDAGER

Empire, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. xvii + 478 pp.*

OUT OF HIS EXPERIENCE with the country's political turmoil, the German artist, Gerhard Richter, has come to a keen and critical judgment: "Because Marxist intellectuals refuse to own up to their own disillusionment, it transforms itself into a craving for revenge. And so they turn their own ideological bankruptcy into the utter bankruptcy of the whole world—mainly the capitalist world, of course, which they vilify and poison in their hatred and despair." There is perhaps no better explanation than this for the curious collaboration, *Empire,* by Michael Hardt, a young American academic, and Antonio Negri, an older Italian researcher, university lecturer, and writer.

This odd couple's work has become, according to a lengthy feature article in *The New York Times* (July 7, 2001), one of the current rages of academia. Following the standard journalistic ploy of discerning a dilemma for which their discovery is the news-making answer, the newspaper first describes a panic among professors since other revolutionary theories (Claude Levi-Strauss's structuralism, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, Michel Foucault's poststructuralism, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis) have all become a bit time-worn and, to fill the resulting void, *The Times* suggests *Empire* might just be the next big idea.

The article reports "frissons of excitement" running through campuses around the world, which is probably to be expected since this book has been heralded by some as "the first great new theoretical synthesis of the new millennia" and as "nothing less than a rewriting of 'The Communist Manifesto' for our times." Positioning neo-Marxist theory within the emerging trend of globalization has made the authors, in one reviewer's view, "the Marx and Engels of the Internet age." The success of *Empire* has come not only from professors eager for "the next big idea," but from intellectuals on the left who have described it is "*Das Kapital* of the 21st century" and those anti-globalization militants who demonstrate against the World Bank, the Group of Eight, and World Trade Organization meetings.

Heady stuff indeed, but there is more: while Michael Hardt is a newcomer to the academic stage, the older Antonio Negri has a history. At the time of publication of this book, he was an inmate of Rome's Rebibbia Prison, serving a thirteen-year sentence as, in *The Times'* view, a "suspected terrorist mastermind." Others might put it more accurately by stating he was convicted for inciting violence, which must have been extreme, considering the often chaotic state of Italian politics and the length of the sentence.

All this might have been viewed as titillating in certain intellectual circles before the awful events of September 11,

---

CARL GULDAGER *is a frequent contributor to* Modern Age: A Quarterly Review.