MACHIAVELLI AND XENOPHON’S CYRUS:
SEARCHING FOR THE MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF MONARCHY

Waller R. Newell

Cyrus the Great haunted the imagination of the ancient Greeks, not only because he was the founder of the empire that almost overwhelmed them, but—more intriguingly—as a model for their own statecraft. It is well known that the classical political philosophers, chiefly represented by Plato and Aristotle, endorsed the neighbourly small republic as their main prescription for virtuous government. Nevertheless, they also display considerable approbation for monarchy, particularly the kind represented by Cyrus. The Platonic Socrates uses the Great King as a paradigm for clear thinking about the art of ruling, and the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws* considers Cyrus’ type of monarchy one of the two mother regime principles along with democracy.¹ Aristotle in his *Politics* defines virtuous kingship as the exercise of the art of household management over “cities and peoples”.²

This passage from Aristotle is sometimes taken to allude to Alexander the Great, but it could also serve as a brief summary of Xenophon’s monarchical utopia, *The Education of Cyrus*. Among the classical writers on statecraft, Xenophon stands out for his interest in the model provided by Cyrus’ monarchy, which he explores in greater depth and to a far greater extent than any of the others. According to an ancient tradition, the *Cyropaedia* was widely regarded as Xenophon’s central treatise on politics, a multi-national monarchical ideal parallelling (and perhaps intended to rival) Plato’s idealised polis in *The Republic*.³

Just as the interpretation of Cyrus teaches us something about how the Greeks evolved their own conceptions of monarchy, the way in which that classical complex of ideas was interpreted by modern thinkers can teach us something about how the modern conception of monarchy differs from its classical antecedents. In both cases, the founder of the Persian Empire

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is central to the debate. In this essay, I will try to show why that paradigmatically modern political thinker Niccolo Machiavelli prefers Xenophon, chronicler of the statecraft of Cyrus, as his chief source among the ancient thinkers, citing him more often in *The Prince* and the *Discourses* than Plato, Aristotle and Cicero combined. As I hope to demonstrate, the reason is that, among the ancient thinkers, Xenophon gives considerably more latitude, through his reflections in *The Education of Cyrus*, to a rational, expansionist, multi-national monarchy premised on the glory-seeking and material enrichment of its individual subjects, and correspondingly downplays the appeal of the small republic with its non-expansionist foreign policy and economic austerity.\(^4\) Xenophon’s idealisation of Cyrus’ monarchy, in other words, is congenial with one major rubric of Machiavelli’s own recommendations for a more realistic art of ruling expressly aimed at the maximisation of power and economic well-being. Since Xenophon was widely admired both during classical antiquity and the Renaissance as one of the best writers on monarchy, it is, I will suggest, rhetorically convenient for Machiavelli to wrap himself in the venerable Socratic’s authority while otherwise undermining the over-all classical preference for the non-expansionist small republic. At the same time, by carefully comparing what Machiavelli terms “the life of Cyrus written by Xenophon” in contradistinction to what Machiavelli would have us understand about the *real* Cyrus and how he rose to power, we will understand what is distinctively modern about Machiavelli’s conception of monarchy, such that he must at the end of the day part ways with even this most congenial of classical precedents.

I

In chapter 6 of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, virtue is defined as the capacity not to rely on *Fortuna* but to assert one’s mastery over it. In contrast with the ancients, who believed that we achieve virtue by reconciling ourselves to nature’s patterns, virtue is now equated with the strength