MACHIAVELLI IN THE MODERN WORLD

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In Castiglione’s The Book of the Courtier written in 1528, Count Ludovico Canossa had this to say about the Renaissance gentleman, who was expected to be both a warrior and a writer: “So, as I believe, what is most important and necessary to the Courtier, in order to speak and write well, is knowledge: because one who is ignorant and has nothing in his mind worth listening to can neither speak nor write well.”\(^1\) Apparently this advice has not stopped many a modern writer who, having read or claimed to have read Machiavelli’s The Prince, and thinking that they have wisdom to impart, have used Machiavelli’s name and his world-wide reputation to sell their books. Had these writers also read Castiglione’s advice manual, they would have taken heed of Canossa’s words as he continued, “And if other occupations or want of study prevent his reaching such perfection as to render his writings worthy of great praise, let him be careful to suppress them so that others may not laugh at him.” Much of what Canossa had to say fits many of the advice manuals now on the market that are cashing in on Machiavelli’s name and reputation, for better or for worse. Fortunately, there are some intelligent and wise writers and thinkers who have applied Machiavelli’s tactics to help us think through today’s problems. Foremost among these is Antony Jay, author of Management and Machiavelli: An Inquiry into the Politics of Corporate Life (Chicago: Prentice Hall Press, 1996).

It is unfortunate, as Jay points out in his thoughtful book, that Machiavelli’s name has become synonymous with sinister and unscrupulous intrigue. It is a name that now becomes attached to any number of books that capitalize on the false assumption that Machiavelli’s method was ruthless. Machiavelli’s often quoted concept that “the ends justify the means” is often taken out of context. One of Machiavelli’s aims was to analyze practices that brought political success in the past and extract from these examples practices for the political success of Florence in

his day and for the benefit of Giuliano de Medici. Instead, Machiavelli today is held up as an advocate of wicked and immoral action, whereas Machiavelli himself and the book he wrote were very much the product of turbulent and uncertain times. In Machiavelli’s time, the struggle between authoritarian rule and participatory government was a concern to all Florentines. In writing *The Prince*, Machiavelli, a statesman who had devoted most of his life to conducting foreign policy and reading history, set out a number of case histories to present to Giuliano de Medici to guide him when he would eventually take over power in Florence.

Jay calls his book *Management and Machiavelli* because it is based on Machiavelli’s method: taking a current problem and examining it in the light of past experiences. Jay looks to *The Prince* because Machiavelli’s book provided a model for empirical and pragmatic examples and was designed to lead to solutions with practical results. Jay, however, focuses on management philosophy rather than political philosophy, but maintains that in both spheres, leadership is important. “Machiavelli called his book *The Prince*, and not something like *The Art of Government*, because he saw success and failure for states as stemming directly from the qualities of the leader. Success and failure for corporations also stem directly from the qualities of their leaders.”

Like Machiavelli, Jay delves into historical examples for his conclusions and ends his book with these words: “If this book has done no more than cut a small channel to link the rising lake of management theory with the broad ocean of history, and let the waters of each flow into the other, then it has done all that was hoped for.” Jay wanted to look at corporations in a new way, and given that there was so much information available, he chose not to supply new information about corporations, but to make sense of the vast information we already have. “The new science of management is in fact only a continuation of the old art of government, and when you study government theory side by side with political theory, and management case histories side by side with political histories, you realize you are studying two very similar branches of the same subject. It was Machiavelli who brought this truth home to me.” Jay goes on to show how management advice from Machiavelli, on colonization for one, holds truth about management styles for teams in factories.

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3 Ibid., 232.
4 Ibid., 3.