

THE FEW AND THE MANY: MACHIAVELLI, TOCQUEVILLE AND NIETZSCHE ON AUTHORITY AND EQUALITY

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Machiavelli

In Machiavelli's writings the ruling few go under many different names. In the ancient context they are often simply called "the Senate," but he also refers to them as *i grandi*, *gli ottimati*, *la nobiltà* and *i potenti*. The fact that the aristocratic element here appears under a wide variety of names, it could be argued, reflects the open nature of the class structure of early sixteenth century Florence in general, and its ruling class, the *Reggimento*, in particular. It also seems to suggest that Machiavelli considers the ruling elite to be too complex and fleeting a phenomenon to be fixed or contained in a single name.

Machiavelli's account of the relation between the people and the nobles displays a similar complexity. On the one hand, throughout the *Discourses*, he describes the Plebs as gullible and easily deceived and the nobles as shrewd and cunning. But far from condemning the elite's manipulation of the populace's religious beliefs for political ends, Machiavelli praises it and even exhorts his contemporaries to revive it, as he puts it, by reinterpreting Christianity "according to virtue." He contrasts the Roman Senate, which according to him (D.I.38) "always judged things as they should be judged and always took the less bad policy for the better," to the rash, undisciplined and imprudent elites of modern Florence. But on the other hand, it could be argued, Machiavelli endorses an aggressive and ferocious form of popular republicanism in which the general populace, acting as "the guardians of liberty," controls the elites by often harsh and brutal methods. According to Machiavelli, the nobility is in need of this check because of its inherent and unquenchable desire to dominate and its propensity for corruption, while the people are singularly suited for patrolling the nobility because of their love of liberty and their hatred of being dominated.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that Machiavelli does not treat the elite as a uniform or homogeneous class. On several occasions, he distinguishes between the prudent and the imprudent parts of the Roman Senate, and he repeatedly identifies a category of men, whom he alternately describes as prudent (*prudenti*) or wise (*savi*). As a rule, these rare individuals belong to the nobility, but they can also be found among the plebs. Refusing to view prudence as a class distinction, Machiavelli implies that the good and the prudent among the nobles should *use* the people – and their desire not to be dominated – against the

bad nobles, the oligarchs whose desire to dominate poses a constant threat to the liberty of the republic.

From this we may infer that the prudent few – or the *prudenti* – cannot be identified with any of the three recognized constitutional orders, the one, the few or the many. Lacking a constitutionally well-defined role, they base their power and influence on their ability to move their fellow citizens by means of persuasion and other rhetorical stratagems. From a position partly within, and partly outside, the constitution, they manipulate and coordinate the other components, using them as their instruments, forming, maintaining and reforming the shape of the republic to meet and anticipate changing circumstances. They are not of the people, understood as a factional interest, and they should most definitely not be seen as the princely element, at least not in the Roman republican understanding, because their role or position cannot be identified with those of the consuls. In a sense they can be said to be part of the ruling class, the nobility or the few, but properly speaking they exist apart from it, concealing their very existence by hiding within it. Perhaps, it would be more accurate to define them as the fourth, oblique but indispensable element of the Machiavellian regime. Passing themselves off as part of the second element, the great, and needing them as a cloak or as a cover, the prudent few are bound at times to act in the interest of the ruling class. But they will also make provisions against them, as when they use the people and their representatives to counteract or control the oligarchic tendencies of the great. Playing the one order against the other – the people against the nobles and vice versa – the fourth element, the prudent few, it could be argued, is the only part of the republic that acts in the interest of the whole. But it cannot do so openly. In order to avoid becoming embroiled in internal power struggles, it must remain hidden, acting covertly in the indeterminate space left constitutionally undefined between the three recognized orders. Nor can this elite within the elite publicly claim to represent justice or the common good, since such claims are bound to be disputed by the interested parties, and dismissed as just another biased opinion among many. Instead, the prudent few must act through others and let themselves be known solely by the beneficial effects of their manipulations.

Of course, this interpretation needs to be backed up by textual support and made contextually plausible. Here I will have to confine myself to three examples that serve to illustrate the position I have been trying to outline for the *prudenti*. The examples will be drawn from Machiavelli's Florentine history, his *Istorie fiorentine*.

At the turn of the fourteenth century, when Florence was on the verge of civil war, following the promulgation of the so called Ordinances of Justice, a group of clergy – “certi religiosi di buona fama” – took upon themselves to act as mediators between the two parties, the nobles and the people. Passing between the camps, they let the nobles know that they had their own haughtiness and evil conduct to blame for their recent loss of honors, and they warned them that if it came to open confrontation, their reputation and fame would count for little in comparison to the factual strength of the people, who were the majority. To the people, they preached that “it is contrary to prudence (*non era prudenza*) to always strive for total victory,” and that they should “bear in mind that it is the nobility that has brought honor to the city in war, wherefore it is neither good nor just to persecute them with such hatred.” They also reminded the people that history gives many examples of a small number of troops having prevailed over a numerically superior force. The mediation bore fruit and the people eventually agreed on modifying the laws to accommodate the interests of the nobles. During this episode – rare, if not unique, in the context of Machiavelli’s *Istorie* – the prudent priests can be said to have acted not only as mediators, but also as a fourth, additional or extra-constitutional element. They were neither princes, nor did they belong to any of the warring parties, the nobles or the people. While it is difficult to portray them as neutral or disinterested – since their actions favored the nobles – it would, on the basis of Machiavelli’s account, appear that their role, their self-assumed and constitutionally undefined role, had been to serve the common good of the emerging republic.

Later in book four of the *Istorie fiorentine*, we are made to witness a series of attempts by the *primi cittadini* to resurrect the waning nobility and to “ripigliare lo stato.” Speaking like a true Machiavellian disciple, Rinaldo degli Albizzi, one of the leaders of the noble faction, here outlines how fraud or force can be used to play the two social orders against each other – the *plebe* against the *grandi* and vice versa. It is part of prudence, Rinaldo claims “to know how to avail oneself of men according to the times.” He then goes on to argue that in the same way as “our fathers (*padri*) had used the plebs to repress the insolence of the great,” it is now,

after the great have become humble, and the plebs insolent, well to restrain the insolence of the latter by the assistance of the former. To conduct this sort of thing one might proceed either by fraud (*inganno*) or by force (*forza*), to which recourse can now easily be taken, since some of us sit on the Council of Ten and could lead forces covertly into the city.

Rinaldo here identifies a category – *i padri* – to whom he assigns a role resembling the one I have begun to outline for the *prudenti*. Rinaldo’s *padri*, we may assume, belonged to the old nobility, but at the same time they acted from a position outside of their class, or party, which allowed them to use “the plebs to repress the insolence of the great.”

As Rinaldo later is seen to adopt a more openly partisan stance, Niccolò da Uzzano, whom Machiavelli describes as one of Florence’s wisest citizens – one of the “più savi” – emerges as the chief proponent of aristocratic prudence. Opposing the plan to banish Cosimo de’ Medici, the leader of the popular faction, on the grounds that the noble party, or its remnants, has become too weak and too internally divided to openly confront the united *popolo*, Uzzano makes a most interesting reflection on the dilemma of the prudent man and his claim to justice:

If you were to say, the justice of our cause should augment our influence and diminish theirs, I answer you that this justice requires to be understood and believed not only by ourselves, but by others as well, but this is not the case; for the cause that moves us is wholly founded upon our suspicion that Cosimo intends to make himself prince of the city. Although we have this suspicion, others have it not; and what is worse, they accuse us of the very same thing of which we accuse him.

So, you might have the common good at heart and your cause might be just, but justice and the general interest will be of little consequence as long as the majority of men, or the stronger party, do not share your perception of things. Therefore, the prudent man should not seek to justify his – or her – policies and strategies by claims to justice or the common good. To serve these lofty aims one has to operate by more indirect means, often disguising oneself as a partisan of either side.

Tocqueville

Whereas Machiavelli’s classical republicanism conceived of the conflict between the great and the people as a permanent feature of social and political life, Alexis de Tocqueville, the great modern liberal, accepted the demise of aristocracy and the ultimate triumph of democracy as an irreversible historical fact. Whereas Machiavellian prudence had involved balancing the interests of the two social classes and preventing either from gaining hegemony, Tocquevillean prudence, operating in a different historical and social context, is aimed at instilling the principles and values of the old aristocracy in the new, emerging democratic

society of the future. Whereas the former had relied on rhetorical manipulation and other deceitful stratagems for its balancing act, the latter seeks to enlighten and discipline the people by means of education and institutional involvement.

However, the historical divide that separates Machiavelli and Tocqueville should not make us blind to the fact that the two thinkers share many philosophical assumptions and political ideals.. Even the most cursory reading makes it clear that the similarities are many and striking. For example, Tocqueville describes the French aristocracy and the French people under the Old Regime in terms closely recalling those used by Machiavelli in the *Discourses* and the *Florentine Histories* when portraying the social classes in ancient Rome and modern Florence. While Tocqueville's nobles are an expansive and warlike element with an appetite for glory (*gloire*) and greatness (*grandeur*), the larger populace are said to be fickle, changeable, oscillating between servility and license, but having an ardent love of liberty and equality. Like his Florentine predecessor, Tocqueville attributes the destructive effects of social conflict to the one-sidedness and partiality displayed by both aristocrats and democrats in their quest for hegemony. Also Tocqueville's insistence that the political man should rise above factions, adopt an impartial position and act as an intermediary between the democratic and the aristocratic principles, balancing their respective interests and demands, bears a close resemblance to Machiavelli's view of the *prudenti*.

However, it is important to acknowledge that aristocratic and democratic prudence operate in very different environments. Under aristocratic regimes power, riches, glory and *l'esprit* are concentrated in the hands of a small number of privileged individuals, who exist "so to speak outside and above the human condition." Historians analyzing the premodern period are therefore partly justified in attributing the outcome of events to "the particular will and the humor of certain men." In comparison democratic societies are agentless. Here equality reigns. The individual is weak and the collective – the State, the nation, the society, the people or the multitude – exceptionally strong. In such a society, which appears to "march on its own moved by the free and spontaneous actions of all its members," the individual tends to disappear into the common obscurity of the masses.

Against this background it is only natural that Tocqueville, hoping to prevent democracy from degenerating into despotism, comes to rely not on individual prudent men, but on institutional and organizational safeguards such as the judiciary system, the free press, civil associations, organized religion and public education. In this connection, the judiciary and the legal profession in general (*les légistes*) take on a particular importance.

Thanks to extant letters, working papers and drafts to *Democracy in America*, we can follow in some detail how Tocqueville's thought on the role of American judges evolved over time. During his visit to America from May 1831 to February 1832, he met with a number of American lawyers, prosecutors and judges, whose views he recorded in his notebooks. They informed him that American judges were "held in very high esteem" but that their independence risked being compromised by political pressures and that, in politically sensitive cases, they tended to bow to public opinion. Nevertheless, Albert Gallatin, the Swiss-born diplomat, senator and opponent of Alexander Hamilton, told Tocqueville during their meeting in June 1831, that he regarded the judges as "the regulators of the irregular movements of our democracy, and as those who maintain the equilibrium of the system." (192) After a similar conversation in September with Jared Sparks, the historian and future president of Harvard University, Tocqueville concluded in his travel diary that "a completely democratic government is so dangerous an instrument that, *even in America*, men have been obliged to take a host of precautions against [its] errors and passions ... The establishment of two chambers, the governor's veto, and above all the establishment of the judges." In December the same year, Salmon P. Chase, the senator from Ohio and future Chief Justice, echoed Gallatin's view: "The judges in America are there to hold the balance between all parties, and their function is particularly to oppose the impetuosity and mistakes of democracy." But like most of Tocqueville's interlocutors, Chase admitted that it was difficult for judges to fulfill this role, since they depended on the democratic society from which they sprang.

The response to this debate on majority rule, public opinion and judicial independence that Tocqueville offers in the first book of *Democracy in America*, is both brilliant and intriguing. Not only did it inspire him to coin the expression, "the tyranny of the majority," it also brought him to reflect upon how American democracy was being played out in the nation's courtrooms, where jury trials brought together the jury – in Tocqueville's view, the chief expression of the principle of the sovereignty of the people –, and the judge – one of the most important counterweights to democratic excess. To understand the role of the legal profession in American society, Tocqueville argues, one has to realize that it possesses a dual or complex character, embodying aristocratic as well as democratic principles. By interest and birth, he goes on to explain, American judges and lawyers belong to the people, but by habits and tastes (*goûts*) to the aristocracy. They are "like the natural link between the two things, like the chain that unites them." As representatives of a hidden or oblique aristocracy, they stand for such principles as order, form, hierarchy, respect and obedience to principle. At the

same time as the law has imposed rigorous restrictions on their authority, it has entrusted them with the mission and power to act in the interest of the common good. The judge should thus not merely be a good citizen, but also embody the virtues of the classical statesman.

In a couple of uncharacteristically obscure passages, Tocqueville suggests that an invisible, subconscious and almost providential influence is at work in the institutional practice of American judges and lawyers. According to the French author, one finds “hidden at the bottom of the soul of the American lawyers” (*cachée au fond de l’âme des légistes*) not only the tastes and the habits of the aristocracy, but also “a great repugnance to the actions of the multitude, and a secret contempt (*méprisent secrètement*) of the government of the people.” Partly for this reason, Tocqueville goes on to claim, the legal profession constitutes the only reliable counterpoise to the democratic tendency of the American society, capable of “neutralizing the vices inherent in popular government.” Tocqueville likens the American judges and lawyers to a clandestine political party that “extends over the whole community and penetrates into each of its classes.” This party has no name, no published program and no manifest intentions, but it fashions society “in accordance with its desires,” by acting upon it “incessantly and in secret (*la travaille en secret*)”.

As we have begun to see, Tocqueville’s lawyer-statesman bears an intriguing resemblance to Machiavelli’s prudent man. To be able to act in, and on, democratic society, the Tocquevillean wise man must at one and the same time be part of that society, understand its inner mechanisms and value system, and stand outside it, as a representative of a higher principle and balancing ideal. Let it be called justice. In Tocqueville’s liberal theory, however, the prudent man does not operate in the fleeting space between orders. Instead, he has become thoroughly institutionalized and his role constitutionally enshrined. But even though Tocqueville’s *légistes* occupy a publicly recognized position and are expected to fulfill their constitutional function without venturing outside their respective “circles (*cercles*)” or “spheres (*sphères*)” of competence, the aristocratic counter-principle they serve remains hidden from view. As Tocqueville’s argument suggests, it has been absorbed into the system and become part of a continuous self-regulating process, balancing equality with hierarchy, innovation with respect for tradition, and expansionism with the defense of liberty. Viewed from this perspective, Tocqueville’s liberal theory could be construed, at least in part, as an adaptation of Machiavelli’s republican teaching to the new historical circumstances brought about by the advent of modern democracy.

Nietzsche

Nietzsche's writings invite comparison with those of Machiavelli and Tocqueville for a number of reasons. Like them, he offers, especially in *The Genealogy of Morals*, a general outline of the history of Western morality, at least indirectly centered around the classical distinction between aristocracy, rooted in a belief in "an elite humanity and higher caste," and democracy, premised on the egalitarian notion of "equality of men." As a firsthand witness to the democratic revolution and the steady advance of equality, Nietzsche shared Tocqueville's preoccupation with the general leveling of European society and the fact that Europeans were becoming increasingly similar to each other in their needs, demands and abilities – or lack thereof. But while Tocqueville viewed the gradual and progressive development toward social equality in terms of progress and, perhaps, providential design, Nietzsche sided with the aristocratic reaction, in regarding it as both a cause and a symptom of decadence. With horrified eyes he observed how the mass of uprooted and indistinguishable men were seeking to reduce society to complete conformity by imposing on it a single, monolithic herd morality, designed to tame, domesticate and train men for a life in comfort and stultifying mediocrity.

Nietzsche's characterization of the herd and its slave morality is well-known and need not detain us here. However, to understand his fierce critique of democracy, we need to place it in the wider context of his rejection of the doctrine of human equality. For Nietzsche, humanity is not one and undivided. At times he even doubts that it exists at all, as he in Darwinist language prefers to classify living beings – be it men or animals – in a rank of order based on whether and to what extent they embody growth or decay, ascending or descending life. The herd instinct and the slave morality are two of the most advanced expressions of declining life. Based on *ressentiment*, and the hunger for revenge that the sick, the degenerate and the ugly harbor toward the healthy, the flourishing and the spiritually less limited, they are driven by pure negativity. They negate values without creating new ones. In themselves, the herd is simply nothing, a "sum of zeroes – where every zero has 'equal rights.'" To conceal this daunting fact, from others and themselves, the herd has cunningly concocted the idea of all men being created equal. Like many other so-called democratic 'values' this "the greatest of all lies", "the most dangerous of all possible evaluations" and the most poisonous of poisons can be traced back to Christian dogma; in this case, the doctrine of the equality of all men before God. Nietzsche writes:

... men, not noble enough to see the abysmally different order of rank, chasm of rank, between man and man – *such* men have so far held sway over the fate of Europe, with their ‘equal before God,’ until finally a smaller, almost ridiculous type, a herd animal, something eager to please, sickly, and mediocre has been bred, the European of today.

Christianity here reveals itself to be “the counter-principle,” or *Gegenlehre*, to the aristocratic principle of *selection*. But with the imminent, or ongoing, death of God – caused by the weakening of the herd’s will and its diminishing ability to believe – this whole edifice is destined to come tumbling down. It will then become clear that men, stripped of their ideological clothing, are *not* equal by nature, and “the unique and incomparable” will yet again be able to “raise its head” and to reclaim its right to affirm, to create values, to make distinctions and to rule.

Nietzsche’s categoric rejection of equality also goes a long way to explain his lack of appreciation for the mixed republic that we have seen being endorsed by Machiavelli and Tocqueville. Whereas Machiavelli’s *prudenti* and Tocqueville’s *légistes* were expected to serve justice and the common good within republics that combined and balanced these two interests, Nietzsche has nothing but ridicule for these traditional republican values. For him the common good is a contradiction in terms, since “whatever can be common always has little value”. He exhorts his select readers, the philosophers of the future, to beware of the levelers (die *Nivellirer*) who, spurred on by the rallying cries of “equality of rights” and “sympathy for all that suffers,” set out to achieve “the universal green-pasture happiness of the herd, with security, lack of danger, comfort and an easier life for everyone.” Against this, Nietzsche musters his own aristocratic counter-teaching, based on noble values such as “the power of commanding; the sense of reverence, subservience, ability to keep silent; great passion, the great task, tragedy, cheerfulness.”

On occasion, Nietzsche argues that the partiality of the higher men and their disregard for the lower contains a “*necessary* injustice ... inseparable from life,” which itself is “*conditioned* by the sense of perspective and its injustice.” At other times, he defines justice as the selfish pursuit and elevated egoism of “the noble soul”. While justice is a meaningful concept between elevated individuals of equal rank, *inter pares*, the herd or the many, who are nothing and whose value is naught, have simply no part or place in justice. Since they have no weight, they cannot enter into a balancing relationship with other forces or elements.

But Nietzsche’s frontal attack on the democratic principle that Machiavelli and Tocqueville had understood to accommodate in their respective republican theories, does not stop here. Nietzsche’s imagined ruling caste – “the strong and independent who are prepared

and predestined to command and in whom the reason and art of governing race become incarnate” – are to rule for their own sake and not for that of the community at large. Nothing should be negotiated downward, no obligation should bind the ruling few to the many, and there should most definitely be no question of “the higher species ... leading the lower”. Above all, the higher should watch out for the traps set by the herd, who, we are warned, deceitfully will seek to persuade “the stronger, more powerful, wiser, and more fruitful” to assume “the role of guardians, herdsman, watchmen, [and] to become its *first servants*”. Turning the traditional analogy of the statesman as physician on its head, Nietzsche argues that the healthy should *not* act as physicians of the sick. “That the sick should *not* make the healthy sick,” he writes, “should surely be our supreme concern on earth; but this requires above all that the healthy should be *segregated* from the sick”. The higher should thus not adapt to the lower, or serve them, but the other way around. In Nietzsche’s ruling class, there is – and must be – no sense of service, no gratitude towards those who have made their greatness possible, only the hard-nosed awareness that the lower must be maintained, because they are the “base upon which higher species performs its *own* tasks – upon which alone it can stand.”

Here I will not go into the wide range of strategies Nietzsche devises for how the few should establish their rule, how they should stay aloof, how they should widen and maintain the gap between themselves and the herd below, even though this is a dimension of his work that should give pause to those who wish to see him as a proto-liberal thinker or insist on reading him as an anti-political philosopher.

Instead I want to conclude with a few brief remarks on the role of the aristocratic principle in Nietzsche’s work. As we have come to see, Nietzsche’s deep-seated contempt for the masses, and his dreams about a society, or an order of things, where a natural hierarchy is universally acknowledged, where the Higher man rules by a perceived natural right and where the philosopher is free to experiment with his life above and aloof from the multitude, contrast sharply with Machiavelli’s and Tocqueville’s advocacy of a broadly based and well-balanced republic. On the basis of these observations, it could be tempting to dismiss Nietzsche’s political philosophy as “unsound,” “crude” or “uninteresting” as has all too often been done. However, a more constructive approach might be to ask what, if anything, we can learn from Nietzsche and from radical political thought in general. For one, Nietzsche reminds us of the shaping force of principle which is easily denied or overlooked in a political culture characterized by concessions and trade-offs, compromises and consensus. For here we are

confronted with someone who conceives of the world in terms of principle and counter-principle, *Lehre* and *Gegenlehre*, and who has fully committed himself to *one* of these principles – in Nietzsche’s case, aristocracy at the expense of democracy – and allowed himself to be shaped by it. But why would this personal subordination to principle be so important, you may ask. Part of the answer, I believe, has been suggested previously in connection to Tocqueville. For while the aristocratic principle we encounter in Tocqueville’s analysis is largely depersonalized, disembodied, institutionalized and almost hidden from view, the one we see surface in Nietzsche’s writings is deeply personal, passionate, somatic and uncompromisingly candid. In Nietzsche, we seem to experience the aristocratic principle resurge, unchecked and energized by the passions with which it traditionally has been associated – pride, arrogance, aloofness, contempt, thirst for glory and greatness, instinctiveness, courage, certitude, cruelty and pitilessness, etc. It is perhaps paradoxical that the aristocratic principle in this its most personalized and radical form should seem to dissolve and transform itself into a set of aggressively inscribed character traits, erratic and frustratingly contradictory in their expression. Aristocracy, it could be argued, is the sign or the star under which Nietzsche writes, and the generative principle that gives unity, coherence and force to his otherwise fragmentary and conceptually confounding work. From his exclusively aristocratic and radically one-sided perspective it is only natural and inevitable that democratic notions such as solidarity, pity, public opinion, equal rights and social justice should come to appear as completely devoid of meaning and merit. What is at stake in reading Nietzsche is thus the value of the aristocratic principle itself, and how we view his work, I would argue, is intimately linked to how we look upon this principle and all that it represents. Some might say that it is only for the better that the old nobility and all that it stood for have disappeared, or at least is in the process of doing so: “We simply cannot have too much of democracy or of equality, Nietzsche’s radical aristocratism is monstrous and the egalitarian principle is in any case and under all circumstances superior and the one to be preferred.” But that position, in my view, is not only openly contradictory but also fundamentally flawed and mistaken. For as Tocqueville has emphatically shown, the aristocratic principle is not to be confused with, and does not necessarily presuppose, an aristocratic class or a caste society. Instead of substituting the monopoly of one principle and one set of values for the other, we should give serious consideration to the more complex approaches outlined by Machiavelli and Tocqueville. In this case, the question should not be democracy *or* aristocracy, but, from a modern republican perspective, how to deal with the aristocratic challenge that Nietzsche’s work poses, how to contain it, articulate it, restrain it, cultivate it, etc. Because Nietzsche not

only reminds us of the personal and individualistic dimensions of this principle, but also of the dire consequences that could result if it is allowed to go unchecked and uncontested.