

Book Review

Christopher Lynch: *Machiavelli on War*. (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2023. Pp. ix, 367.)

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Perhaps there is no thinker in the canon of political philosophy who devoted as much thought to warfare and arms as Machiavelli did. In *Machiavelli on War* Christopher Lynch takes up this central aspect of the Florentine's thought and investigates the historical, philosophical, and political iterations of warfare in Machiavelli's corpus. Starting from Machiavelli's dictum that "a prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but that of war and its orders and discipline," Lynch analyzes the centrality of being armed, both literally, in the battlefield and in the city, and figuratively, in spiritual and philosophical struggles.

In the context of a detailed historical analysis of warfare, the role of *fortuna* in human affairs, and the immoralism that warfare and *fortuna* entail, the book presents Machiavelli as committed to reason and rational conduct. In fact, what necessitates the knowledge and practice of warfare is the Florentine's commitment to reason in human affairs. One central problem that shapes Machiavelli's perspective on warfare is "how to conceive, describe, and justify an activity that is, at its core, thinking, but is not vulnerable to assimilation to the humble and the deprecation of the human" (259). If, as Lynch notes, good and rational human beings who are committed to "thinking" are not to be crushed by "the many who are not good" (144), the former need to arm themselves, both literally and epistemologically. As such, Machiavelli's "immoralisms" in politics and warfare "amount to the assertion of the primacy of reason as the knowledge of the necessary cause-and-effect relationships among human passions" (257). Those who are committed to *vita contemplativa* should, precisely to honor the power of reason, engage in a life of activity and struggle.

In Part I, Lynch focuses on Machiavelli's context and his personal experience with warfare as the secretary of the Second Chancery and of the Ten of War during the 14 years between 1498 and 1512, a period of time that saw the defeat at Prato and ensuing collapse of the republic. In 1506, Machiavelli finally receives approval for recruiting militia from the countryside (*contadini*), personally training the youth, as he simultaneously tries to mitigate the worries of Florentine *ottimati* about a possible tyrannical takeover by Piero Soderini, the head of the republic. In addition to arguing for the existential import of arming oneself, Lynch offers historical and psychological

reasons for doing so through an insightful reading of Machiavelli's poems, *Decennials*, which are addressed to the Florentines. First, due to its dependence on others' arms, Florence is repeatedly humiliated by its failed attempts at conquering Pisa. Reminding his citizens of this ongoing humiliation, Machiavelli exhorts them to take up their own arms. Second, Machiavelli witnesses the changing military technologies and the scope of warfare, as well as the superiority of the powers such as the French army in Italian Wars, depicted in his *Decennials*. To survive and retain its freedom in a chaotic world, Florence thus needs to catch up with the latest innovations in the military realm. All those reasons, existential, psychological, and technological, dictate that a militia army is indispensable if Florence wants to live free, proud, and independent. Although Machiavelli's newly founded militia was defeated at Prato, marking the fall of the republic, Lynch points to the conquest of Pisa in 1509 under Machiavelli's supervision as a sign of Machiavelli's knowledge and acumen in military technique.

Part II builds on an important insight of Part I, namely the fact that, in Machiavelli's universe, political affairs external to the city are foundational for domestic politics. Turning to another understudied text by Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, Lynch shows how the fight between Guelphs and Ghibellines brought Florence under the influence of papal power and mercenaries, and destroyed the conditions for a genuine nobility. The Guelph victory over the pro-Holy Roman Empire Ghibellines in the early fifteenth century invited papal involvement in Florence, which coincided with the rise of Medici and the mercenaries. Florence's history as a commercial city and the Medicis' disregard for the military in favor of commerce perpetuated the city's dependence on external powers, both spiritual and temporal. Lynch contrasts this unarmed dependency of Florence with Machiavelli's approval of the armed independence of the mercenary captain Francesco Sforza, who also appears in *The Prince* as one of the exemplary military leaders.

To confront the priority of the foreign over the domestic, and to establish the conditions for Florence as a free and armed republic, the only remedy is to found a well-ordered army, which is the task of the prince. Turning to *Art of War* and the necessity of the prince to become a captain and thus to discipline and motivate his army, Lynch focuses on the subtle balance of power within the army. The captain-prince should maintain a balance of power between the different constituents of the army such as the infantry and the cavalry. For, as Machiavelli reminds his readers in *Art of War*, the civil and the military are tightly interwoven and the power balance in civilian life reflects the power balance in the army (265). Building on that realist analysis of power dynamics within the army, Lynch accurately criticizes the civic humanist readings that assume selfless dedication to the common good in Machiavelli's conception of the military. Instead, turning to the mechanisms of rewards and punishments, Lynch emphasizes the roles of power and interest in a well-ordered army (41, 50, 83, 242). To found an army that would repel foreign influence and sustain a balance between the different sections of society, the prince

should submit himself “entirely to the profession of arms, being a *professo* and no longer a *novizio*” (144). This submission requires, at the same time, an epistemological struggle of submitting only to one’s own opinions and judgments, instead of others’ “doctrines” (89).

The concluding part expands on the natural confluence of military and philosophical battles. Just as the prince ought to be a captain, shape the malleable nature of the people, and defend the city against foreign intruders, so too does Machiavelli venture into fighting against the classical tradition and shaping the opinions of his readers. Lynch captures that fight against the classical tradition elegantly in his analysis of *Life of Castruccio Castracani*. The sayings of Castruccio, a warrior of military and philosophical battles, exclude any reference to Plato and Aristotle, due to their emphasis on moral virtue—an emphasis that has been distracting the would-be princes from founding “a civil way of life” in deed (266). As such, the path of the warrior converges with the path of the seeker of knowledge, for acquiring the knowledge necessary for freedom and excellence requires that one is ready to fight against the dogmas of one’s time, as much as it requires fighting against real, physical enemies.

Written with philosophical insight and rigor, as well as with attention to historical context, *Machiavelli on War* is a welcome contribution to a central yet understudied aspect of Machiavelli’s thought. It is a book not only for Machiavelli specialists or scholars of the history of political thought, but also for students of military history and of the comparative politics of civil–military relations. While this brief review could not exhaust the details and subtleties of Lynch’s analysis, I believe that *Machiavelli on War* will become a crucial reference for understanding the intricate relation between warfare, philosophy, and politics in Machiavelli.

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