PRELUDE TO MACHIAVELLI

BY BENITO MUSSOLINI

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[The following article is the introduction to the thesis submitted by Mussolini to the University of Bologna for his doctor's degree. It was originally published in *Gerachia*, the Milan monthly that he edits. Read in connection with the article entitled 'Socialist Christianity' which appeared in our issue of November 8, it affords an interesting illustration of how Socialist idealists and Fascist realists respectively appraise human nature.]

It chanced that one day I was notified from Imola — by the Black legions of Imola — of the gift of a sword engraved with Machiavelli's saying: 'It is not with words that one maintains governments.'

That ended my hesitation and decided the choice of the thesis I submit to-day to your judgment. I might call it 'A Commentary in the Year 1924 upon the *Prince* of Machiavelli' — upon a book that I am inclined to call *The Statesman's Vade Mecum*. I must hasten to add, in justice to academic candor, that this thesis is supported by a very limited bibliography, as will at once be noticed. I have reread thoughtfully the *Prince* and the other works of the Great Secretary, but I have had neither the time nor the desire to read all that has been written in Italy and elsewhere about Machiavelli. I have wished to put as few intermediaries as possible between Machiavelli and myself, so that I might not lose direct contact between his teachings and my life experience, between his observation and my observation of men and things, between his art of government and my own. What I have the honor to read to you, therefore, is not a cold, scholastic dissertation bristling with citations from other writers. It is rather a drama — if one may, as I believe, regard from a dramatic angle an attempt to throw a bridge of intellectual understanding across the gulf of time and history.

I shall not say anything that is new.

The question is this: After an interval of four centuries, how much of the *Prince* is still of vital significance to-day? Are the teachings of Machiavelli of practical utility in governing a modern State? Was the value of the political system presented in the *Prince* confined to the time when the book was written, and therefore necessarily limited and transitory, or does it remain of universal and contemporary application — particularly contemporary application? My thesis is designed to answer these questions. I affirm that the teaching of Machiavelli is valid to-day after the lapse of four centuries, because, even though the external aspects of our life have changed radically, those changes do not imply fundamental modifications in the mind and character of individuals and peoples.

If politics is the art of governing men — that is, of guiding, utilizing, and evoking their passions, their egoisms, their interests, to serve general ends that almost always transcend the life of the individual because they project themselves into the future —

if politics is that, there is no doubt that the fundamental element of this art is man himself. It is from man that we must set out. What are men in the political system of Machiavelli? What does Machiavelli think of men? Is he an optimist or a pessimist? In saying 'men' should we restrict the definition to the Italians whom Machiavelli knew and studied as his contemporaries, or should we embrace in that term all men, irrespective of time and place — in other words, 'under the aspect of eternity'?

It seems to me that, before proceeding to an analytical examination of Machiavelli's system of politics as it is summarized for us in the *Prince*, we must first establish exactly what Machiavelli's conception of men in general, and perhaps of Italians in particular, actually was. Now even a superficial reading of the *Prince* at once makes evident Machiavelli's bitter pessimism in respect to human nature. Like all those who have had broad and constant relations with their kind, Machiavelli despises men, and loves to present them to us — as I shall point out immediately by my citations — under their most negative and deceitful aspects.

Men, according to Machiavelli, are evil, more attached to material possessions than to their own kin, ever ready to change their sentiments and their convictions. In Chapter Seventeen of the *Prince*, Machiavelli expresses himself thus: —

'For we may say here in general that men are ungrateful, inconstant, deceiving, cowardly in the face of danger, greedy for gain: and as long as you do them favors they are loyal to you and ready to pledge you their blood, their property, their lives, their children — until, as I have said above, they no longer need you; but when that time arrives they are quick to desert you. And the Prince who trusts to their promises, finding himself abandoned, is lost. Men are more ready to offend a person whom they have learned to love than a person whom they have learned to fear; for love is dominated by a tie of obligation which, assuming that men are evil, may cease to be of any selfish profit to them. But fear is dominated by dread of punishment, which persists as long as that fear endures.'

Turning now to human selfishness, I find the following statement in his miscellaneous papers: 'Men complain more of losing a fortune than of losing a brother or a father, for we forget our grief over a death but never over a loss of property. The reason is obvious. Everyone knows that if there is a change of government it will not restore his brother to life, but it may restore a lost estate.' And in the third chapter of his *Discourses:* 'As all those who have written of political affairs have pointed out, and as all history shows by numerous examples, a man who founds a republic and drafts the laws that govern it must assume that all men are evil and prone to indulge their evil impulses whenever they are free to do so. Men never guide their conduct by ideal motives, but by necessity. But wherever liberty abounds and licence is possible, a country is at once filled with confusion and disorder.'

I might multiply similar quotations, but it is not necessary. The citations I have made are sufficient to prove that Machiavelli's low opinion of men is not accidental and occasional, but fundamental in his philosophy of life. It recurs in all his works; it represents the fixed conviction of an experienced and disillusioned mind. We must keep in view this initial and essential fact if we are to follow intelligently the successive development of Machiavelli's thought.

It is equally obvious that Machiavelli, in forming this opinion of men, was considering not merely the men of his own time — the Florentines, the Tuscans, the Italian cavaliers, of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries — but men without distinction of time and space. Time has passed, but if I may express an opinion of my contemporaries, I cannot extenuate in any respect Machiavelli's judgment. I might perhaps even increase its severity. Machiavelli did not delude himself, and did not delude the Prince. The antithesis between the Prince and the people, between the State and the individual, is vital in Machiavelli's political thinking. What has been called the utilitarianism, the pragmatism, the cynicism of Machiavelli, is the logical consequence of this initial position. The word 'Prince' should be understood to mean the State. In Machiavelli's mind the Prince is the State. While individuals, impelled by their selfish interests, tend toward what I might call social atomism, the State represents organization and limitation. The individual seeks continually to evade restraint. His impulse is to disobey laws, not to pay taxes, not to fight for his country. Rare are the men — the heroes and the saints — who are willing to sacrifice their ego on the altar of the common weal. All others are, *in posse*, in constant rebellion against the State.

The revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sought to remove this conflict, which is basic in all social organization, by making the powers of government proceed from the free will of the people. Thereby they added merely one more fiction, one more illusion, to the existing stock. First of all, 'the people' has never been defined. As a political entity it is a pure abstraction. No one can say precisely where it begins or where it ends. The epithet 'sovereign' applied to a people is a tragic farce. At the most the people may delegate sovereignty — they can never exercise it.

Representative systems of government are mechanical rather than moral contrivances. Even in countries where this mechanism has been generally employed for several centuries there come solemn hours when the people are no longer consulted, because it is felt that their answer would be fatally wrong. The paper crown of sovereignty, pretty enough in ordinary times, is snatched from their brow and they are ordered preëmptorily to accept a revolution or a peace, or to march into the unknown of war. They are given no choice but to utter the monosyllable 'Yes,' and obey.

You see, therefore, that the sovereignty so graciously granted to the people is taken from them the very moment when it might prove of practical importance. The people are allowed to play with sovereignty only so long as it is harmless or thought to be so — that is, during periods of normal administration.

Can you imagine a war declared by referendum? A referendum serves very well for choosing the best site for a village fountain, but when the supreme interests of a nation are at stake even the most democratic governments take good care not to leave them to the decision of the masses.

Therefore, even régimes patterned after the recipe of the *Encyclopédie* — that visionary school which sinned through Rousseau by an inexcusable excess of optimism — still perpetuate the inescapable conflict between the organized force of the State and the incurable separatism of individuals and groups. No such thing as a government by contract ever existed, exists to-day, or will probably ever exist in the future. Long before I

wrote an article which later became famous, 'Force and Consent,' Machiavelli said in the *Prince:* —

'From this it results that all armed prophets have been victorious and all unarmed prophets have been vanquished, because the mind of the people is fickle, and it is easy to persuade them that a thing is right, but exceedingly difficult to keep them steadfast in that conviction. This is why it is necessary to be constantly prepared so that when they no longer assent they may be compelled to assent by force. Moses, Cyrus, Theseus, Romulus, would not have been able to enforce their constitutions for any length of time if they had been disarmed.'

ITALIANS IN AMERICA

BY DE RITIS

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A great surplus of 'intellectuals' exists in every country. These gentlemen have an exaggerated idea of what they call their value; yet they earn with difficulty their daily bread, and with still more difficulty a little additional to go with it.

Except for a few worthy exceptions, these intellectuals are for the most part half-educated people with vague ideas and confused aspirations. They live in a state of constant indignation with conditions in their homeland, and they have no place of refuge abroad. Italy perhaps produces more of them than any other country — thousands and thousands of them; for one of our seven hereditary plagues is literature, although there is no quicker route to oblivion than breaking into print.

Italy has a superficies of mobile passions and attachments — the intellectual, incurably polemical Italy. This Italy presents a striking contrast to the humble, industrious, frugal Italy of history — the Italy that throughout her existence has devoted herself to material production, like an ancient, worthy, tight-fisted husbandman who spends his life in the plodding performance of necessary and useful labor and whose industry and commonsense are expected to repair in moments of disaster the errors and waywardness of his prodigal sons. Our literature represents a compromise between these two Italys, that might impose upon the trusting minds of our fathers, but receives little credit or support from the contemporary generation.

What is to be done? It was seriously discussed and proposed to include in the great currents of labor that were flowing from Italy to foreign shores a liberal quota of intellectuals. But what intellectuals? Only lately the Italian Chamber of Commerce of New York has had to denounce publicly the falsity and the dangers of the new and old illusions that incompetent advisers have recklessly propagated among us. The distinction between educated immigrants and immigrant laborers made in the former three-per-cent law of the